**KSD Working Paper 14**

**RECENT TRENDS IN FEMALE AND MALE EDUCATION INEQUALITY**

**IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN**

**PAUL BENNELL**

**Senior Partner, Knowledge and Skills for Development, Brighton, UK**

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1. **Introduction**

A key Sustainable Development Goal target is to ‘eliminate gender disparities in education’ by 2030. The prevailing consensus is that considerable progress has been made in reducing gender schooling inequality during the last two decades. As the 2020 UNESCO Global Gender Education Monitoring Report notes that ‘there has been a generational leap in access to education for girls over the past 25 years (2020: 1). However, it is also widely recognised that ‘despite significant gains in recent years, education outcomes for girls in developing countries continue to lag behind those of boys’ (GPE, 2018:2).

The purpose of this research note[[1]](#footnote-1) is to review the most recent enrolment and household data on female and male education in SSA in order to provide an up-to-date assessment of the extent of gender inequality for each of the three main education levels namely primary and secondary schooling and higher education. The main focus is on analysing primary and secondary school completion rates for girls and boys in around 35 mainland countries in the continent. Completion rates are a more accurate measure of schooling attainment than gross enrolment rates (which are generally relied upon when analysing schooling gender inequality) given high drop-out rates in many countries in SSA at both the primary and secondary school levels.

**2. Methodology and data sources**

Two main sources of data have been drawn upon for this analysis; (i) National school census enrolment data collated by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics;

(ii) Household survey data from national Demographic Health Surveys and Multi-Indicator Cluster surveys in 28 countries in SSA.

UIS estimates primary and secondary school completion rates for most countries in SSA. However, these are likely to be less accurate than completion rates based on household survey data mainly because of the well-known challenges of collecting accurate enrolment data (including repetition and drop-outs) and because the relevant school-age population (the denominator in the completion rate) is derived from projected population estimates based on data from the most recent national population. For this reason, primary reliance is placed on DHS and MICS household survey microdata in order to compute primary school completion rates for the 15-19 age cohort and for secondary schooling among the 20-24 age cohort. However, in the minority of countries where recent household survey completion rate estimates are not available, UIS estimates have been used. In the absence of attainment/completion survey data for higher education, ever-attended rates for this level of education are computed for the 20-24 age group.

Only DHS and MICS household surveys completed since 2015 have been included in this analysis. UIS enrolment data and thus completion rate estimates are available for most countries in SSA for the period 2015-2018.

Household survey or UIS completion rate estimates are unavailable in four countries (Angola, Gabon, Somalia, South Sudan). The analysis only covers mainland Africa and thus the five island states of Cap Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles and Sao Tome Principe have been excluded.

The main measures of completion rate gender inequality are the gender parity index (female completion rate/male completion rate) and the percentage point difference between female and male completion rates[[2]](#footnote-2).

***3. Primary education***

Primary school completion rates for females and males are available from 28 DHS and MICS household surveys which have been completed since 2015. These have been supplemented with UIS enrolment-based data for another eight countries where recent DHS or MICS household surveys are not available giving a total of 36 countries.

*Female inequality*: Two decades ago, there were only eight countries where the completion rate GPI for primary schooling was greater than 0.97 and where, therefore, female gender equality in primary schooling attainment existed. By the late 2010s, this figure had increased by over threefold to 25 (see figure 1 and table 1). Similarly, there are only 11 countries where the male primary completion rate is greater than five percentage points higher than for females (see table 2). Serious female gender completion rate inequality persists in only a relatively small number of mainly very poor, Francophone, and predominantly Muslim countries in West and Central Africa which account for less than 10% of the primary school age population in SSA. Moreover, almost all of the countries in this group have made rapid progress in reducing primary schooling gender inequalities during the last 20 years (see below).

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Ranking countries by the change in their completion rate GPIs[[3]](#footnote-3) since 2000 shows that the change in favour of girls has been exceptionally high (i.e. over 0.25) in 16 of the 36 countries (see Table 3). The performance of Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Senegal is particularly noticeable. Clearly, the scope for change is much less in countries which had already eliminated sizeable primary school enrolment gender disparities during the early 2000s.

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| Table 1: Percentage distribution of completion rate GPIs by education level, late 2010s | | | | | | |
| (rounded %) | |  |  |  |  |
|  | <0.6 | 0.6-0.79 | 0.8-0.96 | 0.97-1.03 | 1.05 > |
| Primary | 0 | 9 | 31 | 17 | 43 |
| Secondary | 12 | 41 | 32 | 0 | 15 |
| Higher | 20 | 32 | 32 | 4 | 12 |
| Source: DHS, MICS and UIS | | |  |  |  |

Virtually all gender-related education research to date has focused on the effectiveness of specific interventions in reducing female gender schooling inequality. These include scholarships for girls, other financial incentives, changes in teaching practice and curricula and girl-friendly school facilities etc. Most of these interventions have been quite limited with respect to the numbers of schools and children targeted and many have been experiments/ randomised control trials (see Unterhalter et al. 2014; Sperling and Winthrop, 2015). What has not been investigated in any systematic fashion is the overall effectiveness/impact of national policy and practice with regard to eliminating

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| Table 2: Percentage point difference in female and male primary school completion rates | | | | | |
| for countries in SSA, late 2010s. | | |  |  |  |
|  | Female Inequality |  |  | Male Inequality |  |
| minus >10 | minus 5-10 | minus <5 | plus <5 | plus 5.0 - 10.0 | plus >10 |
| Benin | Angola | Cameroon | Botswana\* | Burundi\* | Lesotho |
| CAR | Eritrea\* | DRC | Eswatini\* | Burkina Faso\* | Namibia |
| Chad | Mali | Guinea Bissau | Ethiopia | Congo\* | Rwanda |
| Cote d'Ivoire | Niger\* | Nigeria | Gambia | Liberia | Tanzania |
| Guinea | Togo |  | Ghana |  |  |
| Mozambique\* |  |  | Kenya |  |  |
|  |  |  | Madagascar |  |  |
|  |  |  | Malawi |  |  |
|  |  |  | Senegal |  |  |
|  |  |  | Sierra Leone |  |  |
|  |  |  | South Africa |  |  |
|  |  |  | Uganda |  |  |
|  |  |  | Zambia |  |  |
| Source: DHS and MICS household surveys and UIS enrolment data (countries with \*) | | | | | |

education gender inequality along with other relevant wider political, economic and social factors across a wide range of countries which would provide the basis for an in-depth understanding of why some countries have performed so much better than others. As Evans and Yan (2018) point out, while not all these policies are necessarily gender-specific, they can still have an equal if not greater impact than gender-specific policies in reducing gender inequality in the schooling system.

The abolition of school fees for primary education coupled with increased enrolment capacity (more schools and classrooms) and the introduction of compulsory schooling legislation are likely to have had the greatest impact in reducing gender primary schooling inequality in the majority of countries in SSA.

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| Table 3: Change in completion rate GPIs between 2000 and 2018 | | | | | |
| for primary schooling in countries in SSA. | |  |  |  |  |
| Country | GPI2000 | GPI2018 | Change |  |  |
| Senegal | 0.73 | 1.21 | 0.48 |  |  |
| Burkina Faso | 0.70 | 1.12 | 0.42 |  |  |
| Ethiopia | 0.55 | 0.96 | 0.41 |  |  |
| Benin | 0.53 | 0.90 | 0.38 |  |  |
| Togo | 0.59 | 0.95 | 0.36 |  |  |
| Burundi | 0.83 | 1.19 | 0.35 |  |  |
| Gambia, The | 0.82 | 1.14 | 0.32 |  |  |
| Chad | 0.40 | 0.71 | 0.31 |  |  |
| Guinea | 0.45 | 0.75 | 0.31 |  |  |
| Rwanda | 0.85 | 1.15 | 0.30 |  |  |
| Cote d'Ivoire | 0.63 | 0.91 | 0.28 |  |  |
| Mali | 0.63 | 0.91 | 0.27 |  |  |
| Malawi | 0.87 | 1.12 | 0.25 |  |  |
| Uganda | 0.80 | 1.04 | 0.25 |  |  |
| Sierra Leone | 0.76 | 1.01 | 0.25 |  |  |
| Mozambique | 0.63 | 0.88 | 0.25 |  |  |
| Niger | 0.66 | 0.85 | 0.20 |  |  |
| Guinea-Bissau | 0.55 | 0.74 | 0.19 |  |  |
| Congo, Dem. Rep. | 0.86 | 1.01 | 0.15 |  |  |
| Ghana | 0.88 | 1.02 | 0.13 |  |  |
| Congo, Rep. | 1.04 | 1.13 | 0.09 |  |  |
| Zambia | 0.83 | 0.92 | 0.09 |  |  |
| Tanzania | 1.03 | 1.12 | 0.09 |  |  |
| Zimbabwe | 0.94 | 1.02 | 0.08 |  |  |
| Liberia | 0.84 | 0.92 | 0.08 |  |  |
| Madagascar | 1.01 | 1.08 | 0.07 |  |  |
| Eritrea | 0.82 | 0.88 | 0.05 |  |  |
| Kenya | 0.96 | 1.01 | 0.05 |  |  |
| Cameroon | 0.87 | 0.91 | 0.04 |  |  |
| South Africa | 1.03 | 1.04 | 0.01 |  |  |
| Botswana | 1.05 | 1.03 | -0.02 |  |  |
| Eswatini | 1.05 | 1.02 | -0.03 |  |  |
| Namibia | 1.12 | 1.07 | -0.05 |  |  |
| Nigeria | 0.82 | 0.77 | -0.05 |  |  |
| Central African Republic | 0.58 | 0.57 | -0.10 |  |  |
| Lesotho | 1.37 | 1.20 | -0.17 |  |  |
| Source: UIS |  |  |  |  |  |

Male inequality: In nearly 60% of countries in SSA (which collectively account for 46% of the total population) female completion rates for primary schooling are now higher than for males compared with just 20% of countries two decades ago. Male inequality with regard to primary schooling attainment is not only growing quite rapidly but is appreciable in a significant minority of countries; the UIS computed completion rate GPI is now over 1.05 in 11 countries (see table 3). The switch from serious female primary school attainment inequality in 2000 to serious male inequality is particularly marked in seven countries, namely Burkina Faso, Burundi, Gambia, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal and Uganda[[4]](#footnote-4). In another three countries (Congo, Madagascar and Tanzania) where gender equality largely prevailed in 2000, male inequality has also increased appreciably since then. In only two countries (Lesotho and Namibia) has there been an appreciable reduction in male inequality.

This significant shift in the profile of gender inequality for primary schooling in SSA has been largely obscured by the continued preoccupation with addressing female gender inequality among all key stakeholders including governments, donors and NGOs. It should, however, be a major concern just as it is in other countries, both developed and developing, where girls are increasingly outperforming girls with respect to both schooling completion and learning outcomes. A comprehensive research programme needs to investigate the reasons for the emergence of significant male inequality in primary schooling in SSA particularly in those countries where the gender inequality switch has been particularly large.

***4. Secondary education***

In marked contrast to primary schooling, a high degree of female completion rate inequality in secondary education remains the norm in much of SSA. This is particularly concerning since successful completion of the full secondary schooling cycle[[5]](#footnote-5) increasingly determines a young person’s overall life chances in SSA particularly with regard to accessing higher education as well as obtaining increasingly scarce employment in the formal sector. Figure 2 shows that the secondary school completion rate GPI is below 0.8 in 18 (52%) of the 34 countries where either household survey or school-based enrolment data is available. Nearly three-quarters of these countries are in Francophone and Lusophone Africa. Another 11 countries (almost one-third of the total) have less marked gender inequality with completion rate GPIs in the region of 0.8 and 0.97. The remaining five countries all have completion rate GPIs higher than 1.05 where, therefore, significantly more girls complete the full cycle of secondary school than boys. Surprisingly, there is not one country in mainland SSA with complete gender equality in secondary education (with completion rate GPIs in the range of 0.97 and 1.03).

The median country increase in the completion rate GPI for secondary education during the last 15-20 years has been just 0.13 (compared to 0.20 for primary schooling). Only around one-third of countries in SSA have made appreciable progress (i.e. where the completion rate GPI has increased by more than 0.25) in reducing female gender inequality in secondary education (see Table 4). Progress has been negligible in over half of all countries in SSA. Interestingly, there is a considerable degree of overlap between countries that have achieved the greatest progress gender in equality in both primary and secondary education with Senegal, Ethiopia, Gambia and Guinea being the most consistent standout performers. However, as with primary education, no research has been undertaken which comprehensively investigates the key explanatory factors with regard to the relative progress countries have been made in reducing gender inequality in secondary education.

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| Table 4: Change in completion rate GPIs for senior secondary | | | | |
| schooling between 2000 and 2018 | |  |  |  |
| Country | GPI 2000 | GPI 2018 | change |  |
| Senegal | 0.30 | 0.95 | 0.65 |  |
| Guinea | 0.30 | 0.82 | 0.52 |  |
| Ethiopia | 0.70 | 1.11 | 0.41 |  |
| Benin | 0.31 | 0.72 | 0.41 |  |
| Tanzania | 0.52 | 0.92 | 0.40 |  |
| Guinea Bissau | 0.31 | 0.62 | 0.31 |  |
| Gambia | 0.63 | 0.93 | 0.30 |  |
| Zambia | 0.50 | 0.81 | 0.30 |  |
| Mozambique | 0.30 | 0.60 | 0.30 |  |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 0.54 | 0.80 | 0.26 |  |
| Cameroon | 0.62 | 0.87 | 0.25 |  |
| Congo | 0.46 | 0.70 | 0.24 |  |
| Eswatini | 0.89 | 1.07 | 0.18 |  |
| South Africa | 1.01 | 1.16 | 0.15 |  |
| Zimbabwe | 0.71 | 0.84 | 0.14 |  |
| Mali | 0.46 | 0.60 | 0.14 |  |
| Togo | 0.32 | 0.45 | 0.13 |  |
| Chad | 0.22 | 0.34 | 0.12 |  |
| Niger | 0.19 | 0.30 | 0.11 |  |
| DRC | 0.61 | 0.72 | 0.11 |  |
| Central African Republic | 0.47 | 0.54 | 0.07 |  |
| Ghana | 0.77 | 0.84 | 0.07 |  |
| Burundi | 0.74 | 0.77 | 0.03 |  |
| Uganda | 0.72 | 0.73 | 0.01 |  |
| Kenya | 0.85 | 0.85 | 0.00 |  |
| Sierra Leone | 0.65 | 0.62 | -0.02 |  |
| Malawi | 0.76 | 0.71 | -0.05 |  |
| Rwanda | 0.94 | 0.88 | -0.06 |  |
| Nigeria | 0.84 | 0.77 | -0.07 |  |
| Namibia | 1.24 | 1.11 | -0.13 |  |
| Liberia | 0.94 | 0.74 | -0.20 |  |
| Madagascar | 1.36 | 1.10 | -0.26 |  |
| Lesotho | 1.42 | 0.82 | -0.60 |  |
| Source: DHS, MICS and UIS | |  |  |  |

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| Table 5: Rural and urban completion rates and GPIs by gender for upper secondary | | | | | | |
| schooling for selected countries in SSA, late 2010s | | | |  |  |  |
|  | Rural | | Urban | | GPI 2018 | |
| Country | Female | Male | Female | Male | Rural | Urban |
| CAR | 0.2 | 0.6 | 15.9 | 24.6 | 0.33 | 0.65 |
| Chad | 0.9 | 5.9 | 16.7 | 32 | 0.15 | 0.52 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 1.3 | 3.4 | 18.5 | 23.1 | 0.38 | 0.80 |
| Guinea | 2.4 | 7.4 | 27.3 | 35.8 | 0.32 | 0.76 |
| Guinea Bissau | 3.3 | 10.1 | 28.7 | 35.9 | 0.33 | 0.80 |
| Togo | 3.8 | 14.7 | 24.1 | 44.4 | 0.26 | 0.54 |
| Sierra Leone | 4.2 | 10.3 | 28.9 | 39.9 | 0.41 | 0.72 |
| Zimbabwe | 5.7 | 7.1 | 26.1 | 37.1 | 0.80 | 0.70 |
| Gambia | 8.2 | 12.3 | 37.6 | 36 | 0.67 | 1.04 |
| Madagascar | 9.9 | 9.9 | 33.8 | 29.6 | 1.00 | 1.14 |
| DRC | 11.1 | 27.9 | 53.6 | 63.9 | 0.40 | 0.84 |
| Ghana | 21.8 | 31.8 | 53.1 | 59.4 | 0.69 | 0.89 |
| Nigeria | 26.7 | 40.1 | 68.6 | 74.7 | 0.67 | 0.92 |
| Lesotho | 29.8 | 17.2 | 53.9 | 56.6 | 1.73 | 0.95 |
| Source: MICS 6 |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Gender inequality in secondary education in SSA is most acute in rural areas where completion rates for girls remain extremely low, both in absolute terms and in relation to completion rates for both boys and girls in urban areas (see Table 5). The median country increase in the completion rate GPI during the last 15-20 years among the 13 countries with recent MICS surveys is only 0.15 in both rural and urban areas. A range of both demand and supply factors account for these marked spatial gender inequalities, in particular, the presence of relatively few schools in rural areas, the persistence of very early (mainly mid-late adolescent) marriage, the much higher incidence of female adolescent ‘child labour’, and limited wage employment opportunities especially for young women. Tackling these gender inequality secondary schooling completion barriers will require far more concerted action than has been the case with regard to primary schooling.

***5. Higher education***

The pattern of gender inequality in higher education is broadly similar to secondary education. Slightly more than half of the 25 countries for which data is available have an ever-attended GPI of less than 0.8 and only one country, Zambia, has achieved full gender equality with regard to both females and males (see Figure 3). Mainly Francophone countries with very low attendance GPIs in

the early 2000s have generally made the greatest progress in reducing higher education gender enrolment inequality (see Table 6). Malawi and Sierra Leone have also made major strides. Elsewhere, however, GPI attendance rates have increased very little and, in some countries, most notably Guinea and Nigeria, they have fallen. As with secondary education, attendance rates among females in rural areas are negligible with still extremely high gender inequality. By contrast, gender enrolment equality in higher education has improved considerably in urban areas. In all but two of the 13 countries which have recent MICS surveys, the higher education ever attended GPI in urban areas is over 0.8.

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| Table 6: Change in higher education ever attended | | | |
| GPIs between 2000 and 2018 in countries in SSA. | | |  |
| Country | GPI 2000 | GPI 2018 | Change |
| Guinea Bissau | 0.11 | 0.86 | 0.75 |
| Malawi | 0.20 | 0.91 | 0.71 |
| Sierra Leone | 0.22 | 0.71 | 0.50 |
| Central African Republic | 0.20 | 0.68 | 0.48 |
| Mali | 0.22 | 0.50 | 0.28 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 0.58 | 0.86 | 0.27 |
| Chad | 0.17 | 0.44 | 0.27 |
| Cameroon | 0.68 | 0.94 | 0.26 |
| Gambia | 0.59 | 0.81 | 0.22 |
| Zimbabwe | 0.89 | 1.04 | 0.15 |
| Togo | 0.33 | 0.47 | 0.14 |
| Benin | 0.26 | 0.39 | 0.14 |
| DRC | 0.71 | 0.78 | 0.07 |
| Rwanda | 0.50 | 0.52 | 0.02 |
| Lesotho | 1.36 | 1.38 | 0.02 |
| Ghana | 0.85 | 0.85 | 0.00 |
| Uganda | 0.84 | 0.81 | -0.03 |
| Guinea | 0.88 | 0.69 | -0.19 |
| Zambia | 1.28 | 1.00 | -0.28 |
| Nigeria | 1.05 | 0.65 | -0.40 |
| Source: DHS and MICS |  |  |  |

the early 2000s have generally made the greatest progress in reducing higher education gender enrolment inequality (see Table 6). Malawi and Sierra Leone have also made major strides. Elsewhere, however, GPI attendance rates have increased very little and, in some countries, most notably Guinea and Nigeria, they have fallen. As with secondary education, attendance rates among females in rural areas are negligible with still extremely high gender inequality. By contrast, gender enrolment equality in higher education has improved considerably in urban areas. In all but two of the 13 countries which have recent MICS surveys, the higher education ever attended GPI in urban areas is over 0.8.

**6. Conclusion**

Four main conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of the most recent data on female and male education attainment inequality in SSA.

Firstly, very significant progress has been made in eliminating completion rate female inequality in primary schooling in SSA. However, a growing concern is the increase in male completion rate inequality in a significant number of countries.

Secondly, progress in reducing high levels of gender completion/enrolment rate inequality secondary schooling and higher education in SSA has been generally limited which will require, therefore, far more concerted action in order to redress effectively over the next 10-20 years.

Thirdly, the conceptual framework for analysing gender education inequality in SSA needs to be broader and more holistic.Most research to date has been too narrowly focused on education policies and practices and, in particular, specific gender-related interventions. However, there are a wide range of broader social, economic and factors which are also likely to have a major influence in determining the extent of female and male participation and performance throughout the education system. Three obvious areas are the degree of urbanisation, labour force participation and other employment conditions for women, the overall level of empowerment of women in society.

Urbanisation: The level of urbanisation has increased appreciably in the large majority of countries. For SSA as a whole, the share of the total population living in urban areas has increased from 27% in 1990 to 40% in the late 2010s. Urbanisation is profoundly changing the social and economic position of women which is a major reason why gender equality in education is so much less in urban areas.

Labour market conditions. Virtually no analysis has been undertaken on the impact that changes in the overall economy and employment conditions are impacting on the labour force participation of women in SSA and the knock-on effects this may have on female enrolment in schools and higher education institutions. Moreover, more educated women are themselves more likely to seek out productive employment outside of the household. ILO estimates[[6]](#footnote-6) indicate that female labour force participation rates have, in fact, declined in the majority of countries in SSA during the last two decades as has the share of women in wage employment in the formal and informal sectors. However, it also the case that most African economies are also becoming more services-oriented with key growth sectors including health, education, hospitality and tourism, and finance, which tend to employ relatively high proportions of educated women. Only a detailed analysis of the gender occupational profile of all key economic sectors can establish how changes in employment conditions for women are likely to be affecting gender equality in education. Unfortunately, the necessary data to do this is unavailable in virtually all countries in SSA.

Women empowerment: Prevailing levels of gender inequality in education can only be properly analysed in the overall context of the changing position of women in society as a whole. This includes government gender policy and the impact of the social mobilisation activities of civil society organisations.

And fourthly, *c*losely linked to the adoption of a broader theoretical framework, is the need to assess progress in redressing gender inequality at the country level. As noted earlier, almost all research to date has been on assessing the efficacy of usually quite small scale interventions which while valuable, offers relatively few insights into why some countries have done so much better than others in reducing gender inequality in education. This requires a series of comprehensive, multi-disciplinary case studies across a relatively large number of countries in SSA which, collectively, can enable key lessons to be drawn from national experiences on the most effective strategies and practices that need to be adopted to achieve both female and male gender equality in education by 2030.

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1. A separate research note will look at gender differences in learning and examination outcomes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is particularly useful indicator where GPIs are generally close to 1 as is the case with primary schooling. It is much less useful where completion rates are generally low as is the case with secondary schooling and higher education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Have used UIS completion rate estimates because the coverage of DHS and MICS household surveys in and around 2000 is quite patchy whereas UIS estimates are generally available. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. DHS survey data indicates that sizeable switches also occurred in Ethiopia (0.73 to 1.07), Liberia (0.88 to 1.12) and Tanzania (0.93 to 1.18) (see annex table 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The full secondary cycle typically comprises the 3-5 year lower education cycle and 2-3 year senior education cycle. UIS survey data for lower secondary education is unavailable for the majority of countries in SSA so reliance has been played on completion of the senior secondary cycle where the availability of country data is much greater. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Data on actual labour force participation rates based on national labour force and other household surveys is extremely patchy in most of SSA. The annual simulated estimates derived by the ILO are likely, therefore, to be subject to very wide margins of error. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)