Women's empowerment starts with breaking down barriers to girls' education

The World Economic Forum says it will take 102 years to close the gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa at the current rate of progress. It is therefore important to ensure girls have equal opportunities not only in the workplace but in school to accelerate closing the gender gap.

Source: Unsplash

Unfortunately, however, girls in South African schools are disproportionally affected by barriers and disruptions to their education such as cost, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), teen pregnancy, menstruation, and patriarchal socio-cultural norms, amongst others.

Considering that the theme of this year's Women's Month is Accelerating Socio-Economic Opportunities for Women's Empowerment, Prudence Louw, chief information officer at Idea, says that women's empowerment can only happen by breaking down barriers to ensure girls receive the same education as their male counterparts.

Cash-strapped families prioritise boys

The latest General Household Survey reveals that 23% of South African girls between the ages of seven and 18 are kept out of school due to a lack of funds compared to 16% of boys. "This highlights that families are disproportionately investing in the education of their sons rather than that of their daughters," shares Louw.

"With the cost of education rising as both government and private schools continue to hike their fees, the situation will likely worsen, especially given the current cost-of-living crisis," she points out. "Digital education, on the other hand, is more affordable since it eliminates a lot of the cost associated with finding, traveling and paying for a top tier school - enabling families to invest in the education of all of their children."

Gender-based violence is slanted toward girls

"With an estimated 22.2% of school children being victims of violence and girls being more vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment, both from teachers and classmates, families fearing for their safety might opt to keep them out of school. "This is where digital education could help to ensure that girls are not only kept safe but can also continue their education - even if they have the responsibility of caring for a child or their families."

She adds that the use of digital education could also help to mitigate learning losses among the seven million South African girls who miss out on approximately 25% of their schooling each year due to being absent every month as they lack menstrual management materials.

Gender stereotypes are rife

"Another factor inhibiting the educational attainment of girls is the perpetuation of historical gender bias in the country's schools," highlights Louw. According to the Human Sciences Research Council, this not only impacts the quality of girls' learning experiences, but also sees them being discouraged from pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects, which often results in them underachieving or even leaving school altogether.

"Fortunately, technology doesn't discriminate. It isn't aware of whether the user is male or female, allowing for education to be delivered to anyone who wants to learn," she says. "Moreover, it makes typically male-dominated STEM subjects more accessible to girls, preparing them to perform jobs of the future while also diminishing the disproportionate female unemployment rate."

Louw concludes by saying, "Access to quality education for all is the only way that South Africa will be able to 'create more opportunities for women's inclusion and empowerment'. And while the barriers standing in the way of girls' educational attainment have been long entrenched in our society, we now have the tools to circumnavigate these and, in doing so, 'accelerate socio-economic opportunities' for the women of tomorrow."

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