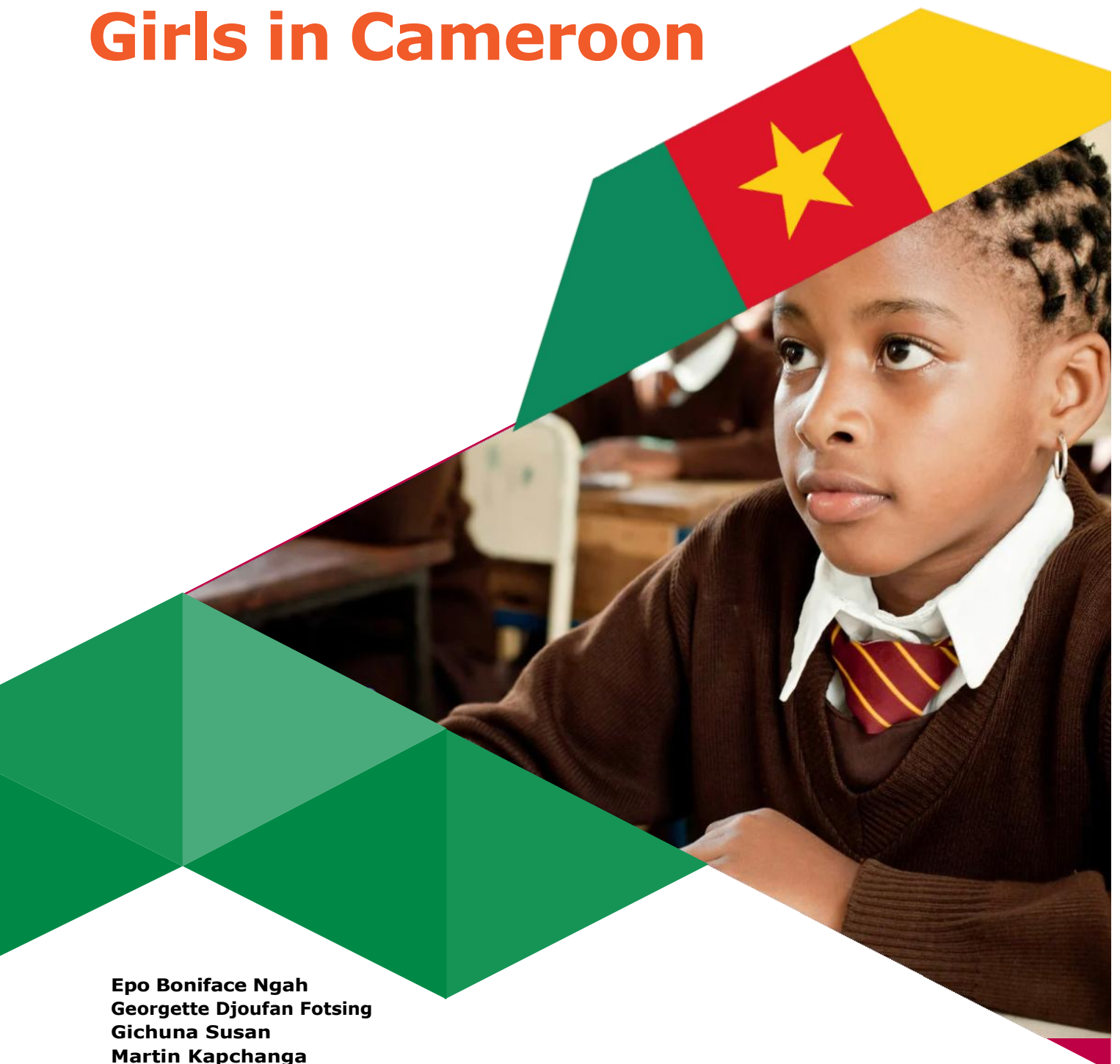


Advancing Inclusive Education for Adolescent Girls in Cameroon



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Project Framework

This brief is part of the IGNITE (Inspiring Girls and Grassroots Networks for Inclusive and Transformative Education) project in Cameroon, supported by Agence Française de Développement (AFD), and implemented by a consortium of IRC, PASGR, UAF-A, and RMF. The findings are drawn from a Political Economy Analysis (PEA) of the education sector with a focus on the role of feminist civil society organizations (CSOs) and policy stakeholders in promoting girls' education.

Background and Context

Cameroon has over 3.3 million adolescent girls, accounting for approximately 12% of the population. However, girls face systemic and structural barriers to their educational attainment. Transition rates from primary to lower secondary school remain low for girls, particularly among rural and low-income populations. The gender gap is widening, with only 35% of girls completing lower secondary school (UNESCO, 2024).

Key drivers of exclusion include:

- Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy (29.8% married before 18; 122 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19).
- Disproportionate burden of unpaid care work borne by women and girls.
- Sociocultural norms prioritizing boys' education.
- Limited visibility of female role models in education and leadership.
- Structural issues such as centralized governance, weak enforcement of gender-sensitive policies, and corruption in the education system further exacerbate disparities. Conflicts in the northwestern and southwestern regions have also disrupted access to education.

Specific Issues Impacting Adolescent Girls' Education

■ Centralized Governance

Education remains highly centralized in Cameroon, limiting the ability of local governments to design and implement community-responsive policies. The dropout rates exceeded 50% in several rural and conflict-affected areas. Policy reform is needed to enhance local autonomy and enable adaptive education planning.

■ Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Bias

Deeply entrenched norms undervalue girls' education. In Northern Cameroon, early marriage and gender-based violence are especially prevalent. The lack of female educators and role models further discourages retention. CSOs can be key drivers in challenging and transforming these narratives.

■ Financial and Infrastructure Barriers

Financial constraints prevent girls from staying at school. 61% of households cited cost as a key factor. Moreover, inadequate sanitation facilities disproportionately affect girls, particularly during menstruation. Only 42% of rural schools have proper sanitation and 30% lack separate toilets for girls. This is an urgent call for targeted investments by both public authorities and donors.

■ Conflict and Displacement

The Anglophone crisis led to the closure of more than 80% of schools in the affected regions. Girls in these zones face greater risks of violence, exploitation, and long-term educational disruptions. Emergency education strategies must prioritize gender-sensitive solutions.

■ Corruption and Accountability Issues

Around 35% of funds earmarked for gender equity do not reach the target communities. Corruption and nepotism in teacher appointments and examination processes compromises the quality of education. Sexual harassment, the abuse of girls for grades, and digital exploitation further impact girls' educational journeys. Accountability systems must be strengthened through CSO participation in oversight.

Policy Recommendations For Stakeholders and CSOs

Strengthen Decentralization and Community Engagement

- Policymakers should support legislative reforms that empower regional authorities in educational planning.
- CSOs can lead community consultations and engage local leaders in co-developing and monitoring educational policies.

Challenge Harmful Cultural Norms

- Launch joint campaigns between ministries and feminist CSOs shift attitudes toward early marriage and girls' education.
- Highlight the success stories of female educators and leaders through public media.
- Foster cross-sector partnerships with religious and traditional authorities.

Enhance Gender-Sensitive Infrastructure

- The government should invest in WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities and ensure that every school has separate toilets for girls.
- CSOs can mobilize data through school assessments to advocate for an inclusive infrastructure.
- Policy actors must ensure participatory planning that includes adolescent girls.

Support Girls in Conflict Zones

- Develop gender-responsive emergency education plans.
- CSOs and humanitarian partners should establish mobile and community-based learning centers.
- Policymakers must ensure trauma-informed curriculum and psychosocial support.

Expand Financial Support and Vocational Options

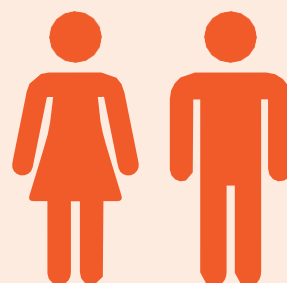
- Introduce national scholarship and fee waiver programs.
- Encourage donor-supported subsidies for transport, materials, and vocational programs for girls.
- CSOs can pilot and scale income-generation programs to reduce household dependency on girls' labor.

Improve Accountability and Digital Safety

- Institutionalize school-based reporting systems with clear accountability protocols.
- Create partnerships between government agencies and CSOs to run digital literacy and online safety workshops.
- Strengthen budget transparency through participatory audits led by community-based organizations.

Conclusion

To close the gender gap in adolescent education, both government and civil society actors must act urgently and collaboratively. Policymakers are encouraged to lead on reforming governance structures and ensuring gender-responsive budgeting. CSOs are instrumental in grassroots mobilization, advocacy, and service delivery. A coordinated and sustained effort will ensure that all girls in Cameroon receive the education they deserve.



Further Reading

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