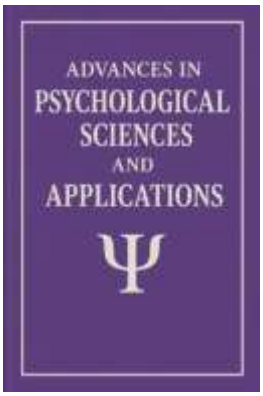
ADVANCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES AND APPLICATIONS

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Beyond Enrolment Parity: A Secondary-Data Analysis of Girls' Progression and Completion in Ugandan Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

Uganda's recent education statistics show near gender parity in aggregate enrolment, but parity in school counts does not demonstrate timely progression or completion. This study analyzes secondary data from the 2025 Baseline Education Census, national and international reports, and program monitoring to examine girls' movement into and through secondary education. The census recorded 2,008,133 secondary learners, including 1,069,855 girls (53.3%) and 938,278 boys. However, complementary evidence indicates that 69% of adolescent girls have never attended secondary school, only 37% of enrolled lower-secondary-age girls are actually placed in lower secondary, and about 30% of secondary students leave before completion. Approximately 24% of girls aged 10–19 have experienced pregnancy, a major risk for interruption under conditions of stigma, care responsibilities, and weak re-entry support. Aggregate national parity also conceals geographic differences. Illustrative BEC district data show female shares of secondary enrolment ranging from 59.6% in Mbarara to 40.9% in Nebbi. Program evidence suggests that bundled responses are promising. Girls Empowering Girls reported that 95% of participants completing primary school transitioned to secondary and 76% of former dropouts returned, while the 2025–2028 CashPlus program targets 5,000 vulnerable girls across seven northern districts. A concentric protection-to-progression model is proposed, combining financial protection with safe and inclusive schools, re-entry and reproductive-health support, mentoring, community engagement, and data-enabled early warning. Because the evidence is aggregate and program monitoring is not equivalent to causal evaluation, results should not be interpreted as national impact estimates. Uganda should complement gender-parity indicators with age-appropriate progression, attendance, interruption, re-entry, and completion measures.

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Introduction

Education can delay early marriage and childbearing, increase earnings, strengthen agency, and improve health across generations [1]–[4]. Yet girls' educational disadvantage is not always visible in aggregate enrolment. A system may enroll equal numbers of girls and boys while girls enter late, remain in lower grades beyond the official age, attend irregularly, interrupt schooling because of pregnancy or costs, and fail to complete secondary education. Gender parity and gender equality are therefore distinct.

Uganda has expanded access through Universal Primary and Universal Secondary Education, but progression remains constrained by fees and associated costs, distance, safety, school quality, menstrual-health needs, pregnancy, early marriage, disability, refugee status, and gendered household labor [5]–[9]. These barriers accumulate. A household facing financial stress may reduce expenditure on a daughter; a long journey can increase absence and exposure to violence; missed lessons can lower achievement; and pregnancy can become permanent exclusion when re-entry support is weak.

The 2025 Baseline Education Census provides a current national count of learners and institutions. Girls constituted 50.3% of primary enrolment and 53.3% of secondary enrolment [10]. These figures are encouraging but incomplete. Reports on adolescent girls indicate low secondary participation, age-grade mismatch, and high dropout [11], while recent programs increasingly combine cash transfers with mentoring, school grants, disability support, and community engagement [12]–[14].

This article asks: What do available quantitative indicators reveal beyond aggregate gender parity? How do participation patterns differ geographically? Which barriers should be treated as interacting rather than isolated? What conceptual model can guide integrated interventions and evaluation? The aim is to convert fragmented secondary evidence into a progression-focused policy framework without overstating causal claims.

Methods

A descriptive secondary-data analysis was combined with an integrative literature review. The principal source was Uganda's Baseline Education Census 2025, which recorded 88,242 education institutions and 13,575,145 learners across 146 districts [10]. National gender totals were extracted for primary, secondary, and non-tertiary education. Illustrative district

secondary-enrolment data were reconstructed for Mbarara, Isingiro, Wakiso, Kween, Mbale, Koboko, and Nebbi because their public dashboard records provided sex-disaggregated counts [15]–[21]. These districts illustrate variation; they are not a probability sample or ranking of all districts.

Progression and barrier indicators were triangulated from the Ministry of Education and Sports, UNICEF's mapping of cash-plus programs, the Gender for Development Uganda program, Uganda Demographic and Health Survey evidence, UNESCO, World Bank, and peer-reviewed research. Program monitoring from Girls Empowering Girls was used as implementation evidence, not as a counterfactual impact estimate. Sources were retained when they reported Uganda-specific quantities, explained mechanisms of girls' dropout or re-entry, or evaluated relevant interventions. Twenty-nine references were included.

Analysis used counts, percentages, reconstructed female shares, and descriptive contrasts. No regression or significance testing was attempted because complete learner-level longitudinal data, school identifiers, household covariates, and comparable denominators were unavailable. Indicators come from different years and populations and should not be combined as if they describe one cohort. The analytical unit and source are stated with every chart. Interpretations emphasize patterns and intervention hypotheses rather than causal attribution.

Table I. Data Sources And Analytical Use

Source	Coverage	Indicators used	Limitation
Baseline Education Census 2025	National institutions and learners; district dashboards	Sex-disaggregated enrolment and geographic variation	Cross-sectional enrolment, not individual progression
Cash-plus mapping and G4DU reports	Adolescent girls and selected northern districts	Access barriers, target groups, program package and reach	Program documents; not national outcome estimates
Girls Empowering Girls monitoring	More than 4,150 girls in Kampala informal settlements	Transition and return-to-school proportions	No randomized counterfactual; selected beneficiaries
Household, demographic and international statistics	Girls, adolescents and households	Pregnancy, marriage, expenditure and participation context	Years, definitions and denominators vary
Peer-reviewed literature	Uganda and comparable settings	Mechanisms and intervention evidence	Transferability and study quality vary

Results

A. Aggregate Enrolment Approaches Parity

Uganda's 2025 census counted 9,118,314 primary learners, of whom 4,586,970 were girls, and 2,008,133 secondary learners, of whom 1,069,855 were girls. Female shares were therefore 50.3% and 53.3%. At non-tertiary level, women and girls represented approximately 47.4% of 74,024 learners. The secondary female majority should not be interpreted automatically as

superior progression because the numerator includes students of different ages and grades, while many adolescents remain outside secondary education.

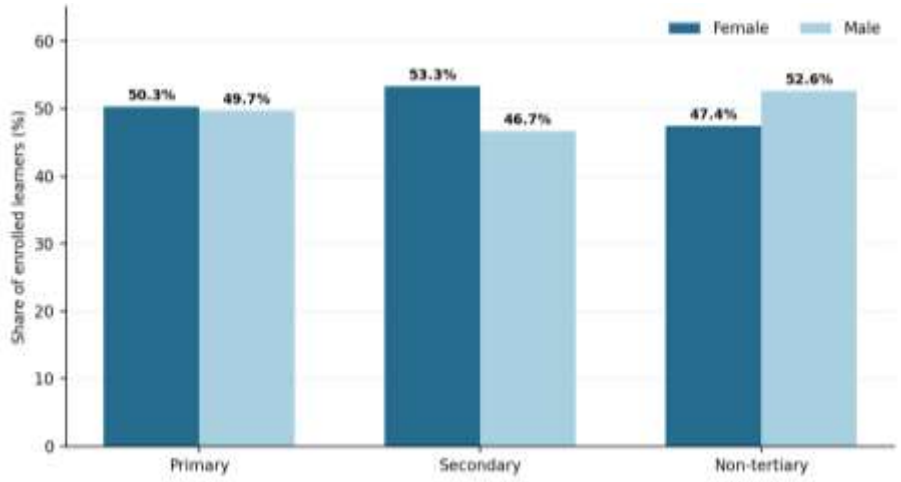


Fig. 1. Sex Composition of Enrolment By Education Level

Source: author's calculation from Uganda Baseline Education Census 2025 [10]. Non-tertiary education includes a different institutional population and is not a direct continuation rate.

Enrolment shares can be affected by male labor migration, boys' dropout, grade repetition, age distribution, and sex-specific participation patterns. They provide no direct information on attendance, learning, interruption, re-entry, or completion. For gender-responsive planning, parity should be retained but reported alongside cohort transition and completion indicators.

B. The Progression Deficit

Complementary evidence presents a less favorable picture. UNICEF's Uganda cash-plus mapping reports that 69% of adolescent girls have never attended secondary school. Among enrolled girls of lower-secondary age, only 37% are actually in lower secondary, with many remaining in upper primary. Approximately 30% of secondary students drop out before completion, and nearly 3.1 million adolescents aged 13–18 are out of school [11]. These measures have different denominators but converge on delayed or interrupted progression.

Financial constraints are the most frequently cited barrier. Household expenditure reportedly accounts for 62% of secondary-education financing, and schools continue to charge fees or associated costs for uniforms, materials, meals, transport, and development contributions [11]. These costs interact with perceptions of returns, household shocks, and gender norms. Removing tuition alone may therefore be insufficient.

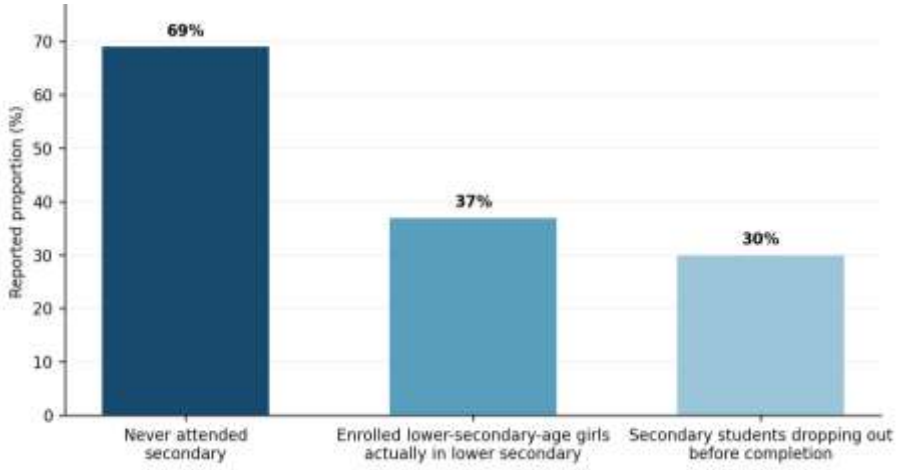


Fig. 2. Selected Indicators of Secondary Access and Progression

Source: UNICEF Uganda mapping of cash-plus programs [11]. Bars use different denominators and are displayed for diagnosis, not addition.

C. Pregnancy, Marriage, and Re-entry

Approximately 24% of Ugandan girls aged 10–19 have experienced pregnancy, according to recent national advocacy drawing on government and partner evidence [22]. Pregnancy can interrupt schooling through health needs, stigma, childcare, exclusionary practice, or financial pressure. Early marriage is both a cause and consequence of dropout. Policy recognition of continuation and re-entry is necessary but must be translated into school-level procedures, confidentiality, flexible scheduling, childcare referral, protection from discrimination, and academic catch-up [6], [23], [24].

A pregnancy statistic should not be interpreted as the proportion caused by schooling conditions, nor should pregnant adolescents be framed as individually responsible for system failure. Prevention requires comprehensive sexuality education, access to adolescent-responsive health services, protection from violence and exploitation, and economic opportunity. Re-entry safeguards are required simultaneously because prevention alone does not protect girls who are already pregnant or parenting.

D. Geographic Variation

The national female majority conceals local differences. Reconstructed BEC dashboard data show girls representing about 59.6% of secondary learners in Mbarara, 56.4% in Isingiro, 55.7% in Wakiso, 53.1% in Kween, and 52.6% in Mbale. The corresponding shares were 44.6% in Koboko and 40.9% in Nebbi. These differences may reflect migration, refugee populations, school supply, boarding patterns, poverty, and male or female dropout; they cannot be explained by gender norms alone.

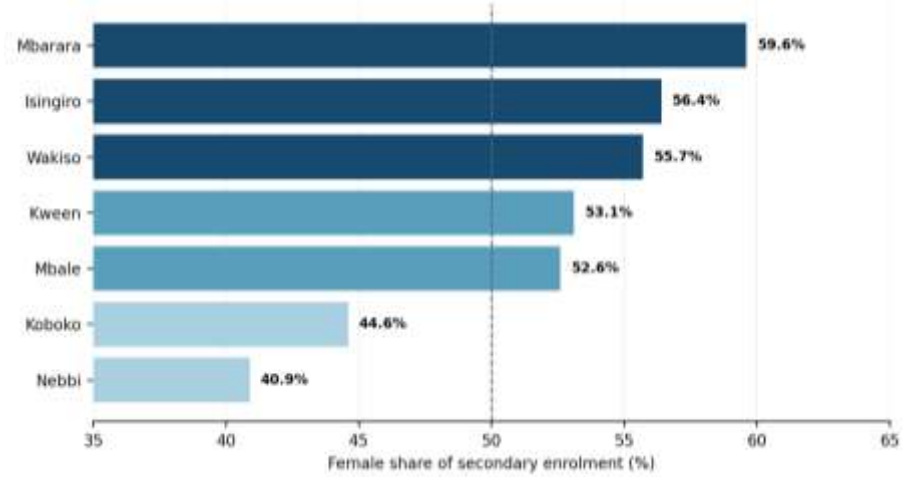


Fig. 3. Illustrative District Variation in Female Secondary Enrolment

Source: author's calculation from BEC 2025 district dashboards [15]–[21]. The selected districts illustrate variation and are not nationally representative.

District-level targeting should use population denominators and progression indicators rather than female enrolment share alone. A low share can identify potential exclusion, but a high share may coexist with low overall coverage if both girls and boys have weak access. Travel time, household poverty, school type, disability, refugee status, pregnancy, and completion should be analyzed jointly.

E. Emerging Program Evidence

Uganda's current programs increasingly use bundled support. CashPlus targets 5,000 vulnerable national and refugee girls in seven districts from 2025 to 2028, combining termly household support, mentorship, parental engagement, school grants, disability supplements, and referrals [12]–[14]. The Girls Empowering Girls program reached more than 4,150 girls in Kampala informal settlements and reported that 95% of participants who completed primary school moved to secondary, while 76% of former dropouts returned [25].

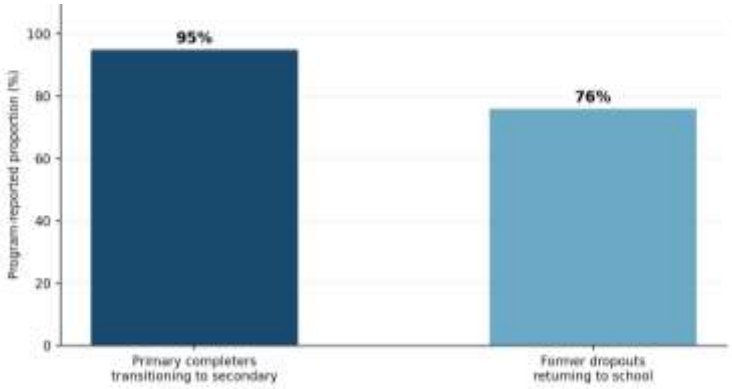


Fig. 4. Program-Reported Transition and Return Outcomes

Source: Girls Empowering Girls close-out reporting [25]. These values describe monitored participants and are not causal national estimates.

Table 2. Quantitative Diagnostic Summary

Indicator	Reported value	Interpretation	Caution
Female share of primary enrolment	50.3%	Numerical parity at primary level	Does not measure completion
Female share of secondary enrolment	53.3%	Girls are a slight majority among those enrolled	Does not include girls who never entered secondary
Girls never attending secondary	69%	Large access deficit among adolescent girls	Source population differs from BEC enrolment totals
Age-appropriate lower-secondary placement	37%	Many enrolled girls remain in upper primary	Not a cohort transition rate
Secondary dropout before completion	30%	Retention remains weak	Reported for students, not exclusively girls
Girls aged 10–19 experiencing pregnancy	24%	Pregnancy-related support is systemically relevant	Not a direct estimate of school dropout causation
CashPlus target	5,000 girls in seven districts	Large bundled intervention with national and refugee beneficiaries	Outcome evaluation is still required

Discussion

A. Why Parity Can Mislead

The coexistence of a 53.3% female share in secondary enrolment and severe reported access deficits illustrates a denominator problem. Enrolment composition asks who is inside school; participation asks how many eligible girls are inside; progression asks whether they reach the correct level on time; and completion asks whether they remain to the endpoint. These indicators answer different questions. A parity-only dashboard can improve while the majority of girls remain excluded.

Monitoring should therefore follow a progression cascade: completion of Primary 7, transition into Senior 1, attendance, age-grade alignment, progression by grade, interruption, pregnancy or marriage-related absence, re-entry, completion of Senior 4 and Senior 6, and movement into training or employment. Each stage should be disaggregated by district, poverty, disability, refugee status, school ownership, and rurality. Unique but privacy-protective learner identifiers could reduce loss between administrative systems.

B. A Concentric Protection-to-Progression Model

Fig. 5 uses concentric protection layers rather than a linear pathway. Completion is placed at the center because no single intervention delivers it. The immediate layer combines cash, mentorship, re-entry, and referral. The school layer provides safe sanitation, protection, accessible teaching, and attendance response. The outer enabling system supplies financing, policy, data, social protection, and supportive community norms. External intervention arrows

cross the layers, illustrating that effective support must connect household, school, health, and system functions.

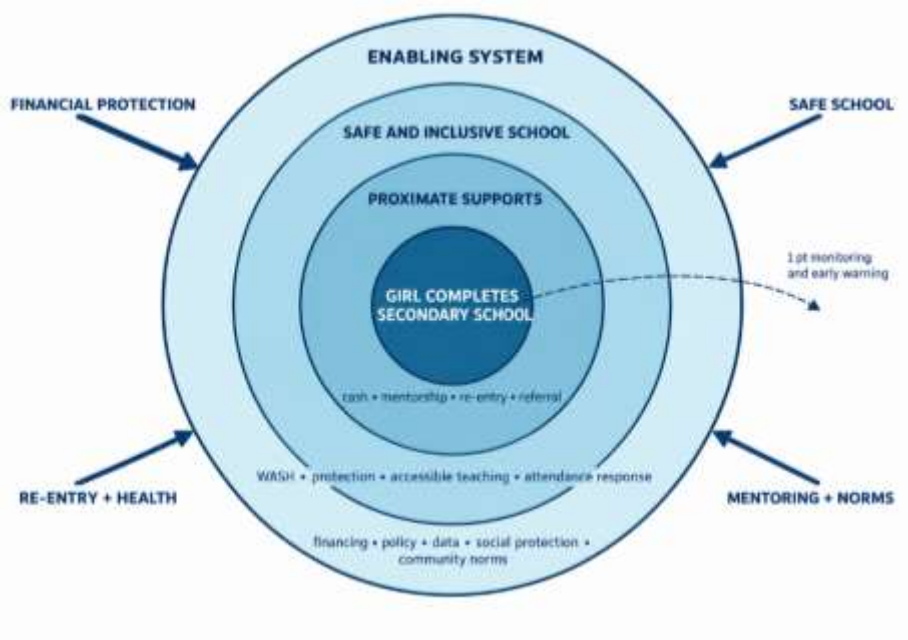


Fig. 5. Concentric Protection-To-Progression Model

The blue gradient represents nested protective layers. Arrow widths are interpretive: 3 pt for core financial protection, 2–2.5 pt for complementary school, health, re-entry and mentoring supports, and 1 pt for monitoring and early warning.

The strongest arrow is assigned to financial protection because available Uganda evidence repeatedly identifies cost as a primary barrier and current cash-plus programs place predictable assistance at their core. This does not mean cash is sufficient. Evidence from cash-transfer research shows that schooling effects depend on transfer design and complementary services [26], [27]. Safe schools, WASH, reproductive health, re-entry, mentorship, disability inclusion, and community engagement convert financial opportunity into continued participation. The thin feedback arrow represents early warning and case management, not a weakly valued activity; its width distinguishes the information loop from resource-intensive interventions.

Table 3. Progression-Focused Intervention and Evaluation Framework

Barrier layer	Integrated response	Indicators	Evaluation question
Household costs and shocks	Predictable cash; fee and material support; disability supplement; social-protection referral	Attendance, payment continuity, household education cost, dropout	Does financial protection improve retention beyond beneficiary selection?
School safety and inclusion	Gender-responsive WASH; safeguarding; accessible teaching; transport and boarding safety	Absence, safety reports, functional WASH, disability access, travel time	Which school conditions mediate attendance and completion?

Barrier layer	Integrated response	Indicators	Evaluation question
Pregnancy and parenting	Confidential re-entry, catch-up, health referral, flexible learning, childcare linkage	Interruption, re-entry, time to return, grade progression, completion	Are pregnant and parenting learners retained without stigma?
Mentoring and norms	Peer mentors, caregiver engagement, career guidance, violence-prevention referral	Self-efficacy, caregiver support, early marriage, referral completion	What added value does mentoring provide alongside cash?
System monitoring	Progression dashboard, privacy-protective early warning, case management and district review	Transition, attendance, age-grade alignment, re-entry, completion	Can risk be identified early without punitive surveillance?

C. Policy and Research Implications

First, Uganda should treat aggregate parity as a starting indicator rather than the endpoint. District planning requires population-based transition and completion rates and longitudinal linkage across grades. Dashboards should show both sexes, because boys may also be excluded, while retaining girl-specific indicators for pregnancy, safety, menstrual health, and child marriage. Publishing definitions and denominators is essential.

Second, the current CashPlus rollout creates an opportunity for rigorous evaluation. A phased or matched comparison could estimate effects on attendance, grade progression, re-entry, and completion, with cost-effectiveness analysis and subgroup effects for refugees and girls with disabilities. Evaluators should document transfer reliability, household use, school fees, mentor contact, referrals, and school grants to distinguish implementation failure from theory failure.

Third, program governance should prevent harm. Beneficiary identification can stigmatize girls or expose sensitive information. Digital early-warning systems should collect only necessary data, restrict access, document referral responsibility, and prohibit automated punitive action. Pregnant and parenting learners require informed, confidential support rather than public labeling. Community participation should include girls themselves and should not allow local norms to override education rights [23], [28].

Finally, complementary investments must be sustained beyond projects. Cash transfers lose value when schools lack space, teachers, WASH, safety, or re-entry capacity. Conversely, better facilities will not overcome unaffordable costs or early marriage. Budgeting should therefore combine household protection, school grants, teacher development, health and protection referral, and district case management, with explicit post-donor ownership [12], [29].

Limitations

The study combines aggregate sources with different years, definitions, and denominators. The BEC is cross-sectional and cannot identify individual transitions or dropout. The district examples are purposively selected because dashboard data were available and are

not nationally representative. Program monitoring may reflect beneficiary selection, implementation intensity, and missing follow-up; it is not equivalent to causal impact. Pregnancy estimates do not demonstrate that pregnancy caused every interruption. The conceptual arrow weights communicate intervention priority, not statistical effect size. These limitations support investment in longitudinal, privacy-protective learner data and independent evaluation.

Conclusion

Uganda has achieved approximate gender parity among learners currently enrolled, including a 53.3% female share at secondary level. Yet complementary indicators reveal a major progression challenge: many girls have never entered secondary school, age-appropriate placement is weak, dropout remains substantial, and pregnancy, costs, distance, safety, and social norms interact. District variation further demonstrates why a national female share cannot diagnose local exclusion.

The appropriate response is not a single intervention. A concentric protection model combines predictable financial support with safe and inclusive schools, re-entry and reproductive-health services, mentoring, community engagement, and data-enabled early warning. Current Ugandan programs provide promising implementation examples, but their effects and costs require rigorous evaluation. Future accountability should measure transition, attendance, interruption, re-entry, and completion—not enrolment parity alone.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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