

Extensiveness of Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project on Ensuring Girls' Access to Secondary Education in Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres in Mwanza Region, Tanzania

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Abstract

Girls' access to secondary education remains a global challenge, especially in developing countries where socio-economic and cultural barriers persist. This study assessed the reach of the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) in providing girls with access to secondary education through Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres (AEPLCs) in Mwanza Region, Tanzania. Guided by the CIPP Model developed by Daniel Stufflebeam (1971), the evaluation used a convergent mixed-methods design, allowing for the simultaneous collection and integration of qualitative and quantitative data. The target population comprised 531 individuals from eight district councils, with a total sample of 304 participants selected through a combination of probability and non-probability sampling methods. Data were gathered using questionnaires and interviews, with instruments validated by three education assessment and evaluation experts. Reliability coefficients for the questionnaires were .914 for students and .715 for project facilitators. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 27, employing descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings indicated that, to a significant extent, SEQUIP improved girls' access to AEPLCs through fee abolition and community sensitisation, with grand mean scores of 3.46 for students and 3.70 for facilitators. The study concluded that

SEQUIP enhanced girls' enrolment opportunities, although ongoing challenges such as the limited number of learning centres in some wards and geographical barriers remain. The evaluation recommends that the government, through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and partners, intensify awareness campaigns and invest in facilities and transport to improve access to a very high extent.

Keywords: Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project; Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres; girls' education; girls' access to secondary education

1. Introduction

Education is recognised as a fundamental human right that is vital in lifting individuals out of poverty and promoting sustainable development. Globally, approximately 21 million teenage girls aged 15 to 19 give birth each year, with most residing in low and middle-income countries (UN, 2020). The primary barriers these girls encounter in accessing formal education include economic constraints, long distances to school, and gender social norms leading to early marriage and motherhood. Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Education Success (STAGES) involves school management councils (school shuras), renovation of schools and classrooms, as well as the provision of school equipment, facilities, learning resources, and remedial support for struggling students. The second phase of the project targeted out-of-school girls who could not access government schools, including those in remote areas, girls with disabilities, and girls who did not speak the language of instruction. The project offered opportunities for education through a CBE model (Aga Khan Foundation, 2021).

Various African countries have responded to this global concern by establishing targeted programs. For example, the AGE Africa CHATS program, founded in 2005 in Malawi, aims to address social, cultural, and economic barriers to girls' secondary education (UNICEF, 2021). In Tanzania, the government acknowledged these challenges and launched the Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) with phases from 2002 to 2009 and from 2010 onwards, aiming to enhance access, equity, quality, and management reforms. The government also established the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) in collaboration with the World Bank and under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, with implementation entrusted to the Institute of Adult Education.

SEQUIP is planned for a five-year period from 2021 to 2026, aiming to reach 12,000 girls aged 13 to 21 years who have dropped out of secondary school due to factors such as teenage pregnancy, low family income, and cultural barriers. The objectives of SEQUIP include:

- Ensuring girls' students have access to secondary education
- Enhancing girls' students' completion of secondary education
- Providing a responsive learning environment for girls

Under this study the evaluator focused on one objective: Ensuring girls' students have access to secondary education.

To uphold the right to education for all girls, the Tanzanian government introduced a re-entry policy allowing students who dropped out to return to secondary education through Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres (AEPLCs) (URT, 2020).

Despite these efforts, monitoring and evaluation show that while SEQUIP's overall implementation progress is 'Moderately Satisfactory', the performance on environmental and social standards remains 'Moderately Unsatisfactory', indicating gaps in safeguard implementation that affect vulnerable groups, including girls. Although monitoring reports

assess progress and compliance, they offer limited evidence on the effectiveness, quality, and fairness of interventions aimed at girls' secondary education (World Bank, 2024).

2. Research Objective and Question

This formative assessment investigated how the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) has enhanced girls' access to secondary education through Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres (AEPLCs) in Mwanza Region, Tanzania. The emphasis was on girls' enrolment, transition, and retention in secondary schooling.

Research Question: To what extent does the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project ensure girls' students' access to Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres in Mwanza Region, Tanzania?

Hypothesis: H_1 : There is a significant difference in the mean score ratings on girls' access to secondary education in AEPLC through SEQUIP among project facilitators based on their working experience.

3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this evaluation lies in offering valuable insights into girls' education in Tanzania by unveiling barriers to their access and completion of secondary education, including early pregnancies, cultural expectations, and financial difficulties. Using the CIPP model, this assessment identified these challenges and suggested context-specific solutions at each stage of the educational journey.

4. Theoretical Framework

This assessment was guided by the CIPP Model developed by Daniel Stufflebeam (1971), a comprehensive evaluation framework focusing on four key areas: Context, Input, Process, and Product. The aim of project evaluation is not to prove but to improve, and evaluation should provide information to enhance decisions.

4.1 CIPP Model Components

Context Evaluation: Examined community needs, identifying key barriers faced by girls such as poverty, early marriage, and stigma, which hinder their access and completion of secondary education.

Input Stage: Confirmed the availability of resources, including skilled personnel, adequate funding, donor support, and teaching materials tailored to girls' needs and motivations.

Process Stage: Central to this evaluation, assessed how interventions were implemented across AEPLCs, examining how girls were enrolled and retained, how facilitators delivered learning through inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Product Stage: Evaluated the short- and long-term outcomes of SEQUIP's interventions, particularly the increase in female enrolment, completion rates, and awareness of educational pathways.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Global Perspectives on Girls' Education Access

Empirical studies worldwide have documented various methods for supporting girls' access to education. Said (2023) examined a conditional cash assistance programme for girls in Pakistan, finding that programme exposure increased annual enrolment and completion rates for secondary education while decreasing early marriage. However, this study focused solely on conditional cash assistance, limiting the variety of information gathered.

Tajammal et al. (2023) examined the Girl Stipend Programme in Pakistan, observing short-term effects on girls' increased enrolment while highlighting unresolved issues related to physical safety, transition to secondary schools, and the quality of education.

5.2 Regional Studies in Africa

In East Africa, Kindiki et al. (2024) examined how awareness of the re-entry policy influences the academic performance of re-admitted teenage mothers in Kenya, discovering that policy awareness impacts academic results, although some members of society opposed the re-admission of adolescent mothers.

Hassan (2023) evaluated a policy to enrol teenage mothers in the formal secondary education system in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, revealing that although information was provided to society, the lack of specific legal frameworks hampered implementation and teenage mothers faced difficulties balancing school with parental responsibilities.

5.3 Research Gaps

These studies highlight knowledge gaps because previous research has focused narrowly on individual interventions, conditional cash assistance programmes, or specific populations such as adolescent mothers. To address these gaps, this evaluation emphasised direct educational support and used mixed methods to investigate a wider range of SEQUIP interventions.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study adopted a convergent evaluation design, enabling simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data and merging them during discussion. This design promoted triangulation, addressing the limitations of each approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

6.2 Population and Sample

Target Population: 531 individuals comprising:

- 390 girls students
- 14 counsellors
- 14 project facilitators
- 1 resident tutor
- 14 learning centres from eight district councils

Sample Size: 304 participants selected through combined probability and non-probability sampling techniques.

6.3 Data Collection Instruments

- **Questionnaires:** Five-point Likert scale questionnaires for project facilitators and girl students
- **Interview Guides:** Semi-structured interviews for project coordinators, counsellors, and regional resident tutor

6.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity: Instruments were validated by three education assessment and evaluation experts from the Faculty of Education at Mwenge Catholic University.

Reliability: Cronbach's Alpha coefficients:

- Girls' students: .914
- Project facilitators: .715

6.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: SPSS version 27 with descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis

Mean Score Interpretation Scale:

- Very Low Extent = 1.00-1.79
- Low Extent = 1.80-2.59
- Moderate Extent = 2.60-3.39
- High Extent = 3.40-4.19
- Very High Extent = 4.20-5.00

7. Results

7.1 Extent to which SEQUIP ensures Girls' Access to AEPLCs

Table 1: Girl Students and Facilitators' Responses on Project's Effectiveness in Ensuring Access (n=186 students, n=78 facilitators)

Statement	Respondent	VLE	LE	ME	HE	VHE	Mean
		f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	
SEQUIP established AEPLC closer to homes	Students	10 (5.4)	26 (14.0)	64 (34.4)	66 (35.5)	20 (10.8)	3.32
	Facilitators	7 (9.0)	4 (5.1)	12 (15.4)	38 (48.7)	17 (21.8)	3.69
Tuition fee exemption encouraged access	Students	31 (16.7)	17 (9.1)	28 (15.1)	75 (40.3)	35 (18.8)	3.35
	Facilitators	9 (11.5)	7 (9.0)	10 (12.8)	33 (42.3)	19 (24.4)	3.59
Community awareness encourages access	Students	19 (10.2)	24 (12.9)	33 (17.7)	82 (44.1)	28 (15.1)	3.41
	Facilitators	6 (7.7)	5 (6.4)	11 (14.1)	32 (41.0)	24 (30.8)	3.81
Addressed social/cultural barriers	Students	10 (5.4)	20 (10.8)	55 (29.6)	77 (41.4)	24 (12.9)	3.46

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Statement	Respondent	VLE	LE	ME	HE	VHE	Mean
Flexible schedule motivates access	Facilitators	6 (7.7)	3 (3.8)	9 (11.5)	40 (51.3)	20 (25.6)	3.83
	Students	14 (7.5)	14 (7.5)	30 (16.1)	97 (52.2)	31 (16.7)	3.63
Good infrastructure motivates access	Facilitators	12 (15.4)	4 (5.1)	12 (15.4)	33 (42.3)	17 (21.8)	3.50
	Students	10 (5.4)	16 (8.6)	58 (31.2)	78 (41.9)	24 (12.9)	3.48
Teaching materials motivate access	Facilitators	6 (7.7)	7 (9.0)	15 (19.2)	33 (42.3)	17 (21.8)	3.62
	Students	19 (10.2)	17 (9.1)	38 (20.4)	78 (41.9)	34 (18.3)	3.49
Life skills subjects motivate access	Facilitators	7 (9.0)	5 (6.4)	15 (19.2)	40 (51.3)	11 (14.1)	3.55
	Students	15 (8.1)	28 (15.1)	23 (12.4)	63 (33.9)	57 (30.6)	3.64
Female mentors encourage access	Facilitators	5 (6.4)	5 (6.4)	19 (24.4)	33 (42.3)	16 (20.5)	3.64
	Students	22 (11.8)	22 (11.8)	34 (18.3)	85 (45.7)	23 (12.4)	3.35
Positive peer groups motivate access	Facilitators	4 (5.1)	3 (3.8)	15 (19.2)	37 (47.4)	19 (24.4)	3.82
	Students	12 (6.5)	33 (17.7)	40 (21.5)	61 (32.8)	40 (21.5)	3.45
	Facilitators	4 (5.1)	3 (3.8)	9 (11.5)	40 (51.3)	22 (28.2)	3.94
Grand Mean	Students						3.46
	Facilitators						3.70

Note: VLE = Very Low Extent; LE = Low Extent; ME = Moderate Extent; HE = High Extent; VHE = Very High Extent

7.2 Key Findings by Intervention Area

7.2.1 Tuition Fee Exemption

Data indicated that a majority of girl students (59.1%) and a high majority of project facilitators (66.7%) maintained that SEQUIP's exemption of tuition fees, to a high extent, encouraged girls' access to AEPLCs. The mean scores of 3.35 for girl students and 3.59 for project facilitators indicated high extent effectiveness. Also, during the interview, the Project Counselling officer 8 commented that:

The project pays tuition fees for all girls' students in our learning centre. When they come here, they do not pay even a cent. So when a student or guardian receives that information and understands the value of education, they are encouraged to bring the child to the project (Interview with Project Counselling Officer 8, 25th of February, 2025).

Also, the Project Counselling Officer 13 commented:

Indeed, SEQUIP has ensured that all girls in our learning centres do not pay tuition fees. This has reduced one of the major financial barriers and has motivated many guardians to allow their daughters to join and continue with secondary education. However, while tuition is covered, there remain other pressing needs such as transportation costs, food, and uniforms (Interview with Project Counselling Officer 13, 13th of March, 2025).

Likewise, Project Coordinator 8 reported that, *"The girl students do not contribute any costs to get secondary education at our learning centres except for their personal expenses, which is why students are delighted to join in our learning centre"* (Interview with the Project Coordinator 8, 27th of February, 2025).

Also, the Project Coordinator 12 said, *"SEQUIP has greatly helped parents by removing school fees, which made many bring their daughters to study. This support gives parents confidence that their children can learn. Because of this, more and more girls are joining our learning centre"* (Interview with the Project Coordinator, 12th of March, 2025).

Similarly, the information was supported by the Regional Residence Tutor, who said:

Girls do not contribute anything to the school fee. This is free education through the alternative education pathway for all girls. SEQUIP covers school fees and all exam costs. Their responsibility is to attend school and get an education free of charge. This has motivated girls in our region to attend school, as SEQUIP addressed the financial barrier. However, others fail to participate in AEPLC because most come from low-income families. Therefore, they often struggle to cover basic needs, such as buying shoes and other items that the project does not address (Interview with Regional Resident Tutor, 4th of February, 2025). The information from Project Coordinators, Counselling Officers, and Regional Residence Tutor indicates that SEQUIP ensures exemption from tuition fees for girl students by covering all costs as tuition fees and national exams.

7.2.2 Community Awareness

Results showed that a majority of girl students (59.2%) and a high majority of project facilitators (71.8%) believed that SEQUIP's community awareness initiatives encouraged access to AEPLCs to a high extent, with mean scores of 3.41 and 3.81 respectively. The information concurs with information obtained from coordinator 10 during the interview, who explained that, *"We advertise the educational opportunity through the use of media,*

particularly social media like WhatsApp, Instagram, and even the short SMS, so that whoever gets the information about SEQUIP will share the information” (Interview with Project Coordinator. 10, on the 6th of March, 2025).

Correspondingly, Coordinator 1 reported that, “Village leaders also help communicate with the village members, distribute flyers, and announce the SEQUIP. Local leaders also attempted to educate the community about SEQUIP, though reaching the community as a whole and understanding it proved expensive” (Project Coordinator 1, interview on the 5th of February, 2025).

The Counselling Officer 1, when interviewed on the same issue, commented that: We send the announcement to the village executive officers so that they can inform the village members. We also used to make announcements to the regular students so they could tell their relatives. We also use these girl students to educate their fellows and relatives about SEQUIP, but we fail to reach people from the interior (Interview with the Project Counselling Officer 1, on 5th of February 2025).

Counsellor Officer 2 reported that:

Through SEQUIP, we have successfully disseminated information to village leaders, students, and, in particular, girls. This strategy has generated strong community awareness, and many parents are now motivated to send their daughters to our centres. Even in remote areas, our efforts continue to inspire families to value girls’ education (Interview with Project counselling Officer. 2, on the 7th of Feb, 2025).

Also, the Regional Residence Tutor had this to say about SEQUIP's efforts to ensure community awareness:

We post announcements about our project (SEQUIP) in different areas. That is, announcements on major roads that many people use. Areas with heavy human traffic, like marketplaces. But we also create flyers and distribute them to the churches, Mosques, and other public places. Through announcements, many people have become aware and brought their children to our learning centre (Interview with the Regional Resident Tutor, on the 4th of February, 2025).

The opinions of Project Coordinators, Counselling Officers, and the Regional Resident Tutor indicate that SEQUIP raises community awareness through announcements by local leaders, Social media channels such as WhatsApp, and flyers posted in various parts of the community. However, in remote areas, these efforts often fail to reach the intended audience, delaying the community's access to information.

7.2.3 Flexible Timetables

Data revealed that a high majority of girl students (68.9%) and project facilitators (64.1%) stated that SEQUIP's flexible scheduling facilitated girls' access to AEPLCs to a high extent (means: 3.63 and 3.50).

During the interviews with the coordinator 11 on the contribution of a flexible schedule for girls’ access to AEPLC, he expressed that:

SEQUIP has been a dynamic timetable for girl students. They come here when they can and go back home to care for their children. This has also motivated them to come to our learning centre. As they have time to return home, they continue with their home responsibilities, including taking care of their children (Interview with Project Coordinator 11, on the 10th of February, 2025).

On the same regard, the Coordinator 12 also stated that:

In our learning centre, the study timetable is in the evening. However, it allows others to meet their daily responsibilities in the morning and attend class in the evening, which is not enough for daily studying. The timetable may be adjusted if necessary, after it is agreed upon with the students. Additionally, students with babies often have insufficient time for private study due to their home responsibilities (Interview with Project Coordinator 12, on the 12th of Feb, 2025).

Also, the Project Counselling Officer 2 said that:

The flexible timetable under SEQUIP allows girls to balance learning with their daily responsibilities at home. This arrangement has reduced absenteeism since students know they can study without neglecting their family duties. SEQUIP has created a supportive environment where girls feel encouraged to continue their education (Interview with the Project Coordinator, 2, on the 7th of Feb, 2025).

Furthermore, the Project Counselling Officer 1 reported that:

The morning and afternoon sessions have helped many girls attend classes regularly because they respect their home situations. Parents support this system because their daughters can study while contributing to the family's needs. This has increased community trust in SEQUIP's learning centres (Interview with Project counselling Officer, 1, on the 5th of February, 2025).

The information from Project Coordinators, Regional Resident Tutors, and Counselling Officers indicates that SEQUIP ensures the timetable is flexible after being agreed upon by girl students to ensure that all attend the classes. Although the timetable is flexible, the results show that time is limited, as other learning centres have only one evening session and lack extra time for studying.

7.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test whether project facilitators' working experience influenced their ratings of SEQUIP's effectiveness. Results indicated no statistically significant difference in mean scores across experience groups: $F(2,75) = 0.018$, $p = .982$ ($\alpha = .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

7.4 Descriptive Statistics by Experience:

- ≤ 1 year experience (n=11): $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.29$
- 2-3 years experience (n=34): $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.37$
- ≥ 4 years experience (n=33): $M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.48$

8. Discussion

This evaluation found that SEQUIP enhanced girls' access to AEPLCs to a high extent through multiple interconnected interventions. The grand mean scores ($M = 3.46$ for students and M

= 3.70 for facilitators) confirmed this conclusion.

8.1 Financial Barriers Reduction

The removal of tuition fees emerged as a critical intervention, with mean scores of 3.35-3.59 indicating high agreement among both students and facilitators that fee exemption encouraged access. This finding aligns with Said (2023) and Tajammal et al. (2023), who found similar positive impacts of financial support programs in Pakistan.

8.2 Community Engagement Effectiveness

Community sensitisation efforts proved to be quite effective (scores: 3.41-3.81) in raising awareness about AEPLC opportunities. The multi-channel approach employing social media, local leaders, and religious gatherings demonstrated comprehensive community engagement, although challenges persisted in reaching remote areas.

8.3 Flexibility and Accessibility

The provision of flexible timetables (means: 3.50-3.63) supported girls' ability to balance education with home responsibilities. This finding aligns with Nganza (2023), who highlighted the importance of flexible scheduling for teenage mothers.

8.4 Persistent Challenges

Despite achievements, persistent challenges limit universal access:

- Geographical barriers in certain wards
- Insufficient communication channels in remote areas
- Limited parental involvement in some communities
- Shortages of learning centres in certain wards
- Unaddressed secondary barriers (transportation, food, uniforms)

9. Conclusions

This formative evaluation concludes that the Secondary Education Quality Improvement Project (SEQUIP) enhanced girls' access to Alternative Education Pathway Learning Centres to a **high extent** in Mwanza Region, Tanzania. This achievement resulted from multiple complementary interventions including:

1. **Removal of study costs** through tuition fee exemption
2. **Targeted community sensitisation** to counter harmful cultural norms
3. **Provision of flexible timetables** accommodating girls' home responsibilities
4. **Counselling services** and mentorship programs
5. **Establishment of learning centres** closer to communities

The evaluation found that community leaders played a vital role in disseminating information about AEPLCs, contributing to increased enrolment and enabling many girls, including teenage mothers, to re-enter secondary education.

10. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following evidence-based recommendations are offered to strengthen SEQUIP's effectiveness:

10.1 Policy and Strategic Recommendations

1. Intensify Awareness Campaigns: The government, through MoEST and PO-RALG, should strengthen awareness campaigns by utilising diverse communication channels to reach remote areas where current methods have proven insufficient.
2. Investment in infrastructure and transport: The government and partners should fund hostels, sanitation facilities, and safe transportation systems to ensure girls in remote areas can access and stay in AEPLCs.
3. Establish Feedback Systems: MoEST, PO-RALG, and district education officers should develop feedback systems to monitor enrolment, attendance, and retention patterns for evidence-based planning.

10.2 Implementation Recommendations

4. Address Secondary Barriers: SEQUIP should broaden support beyond tuition fees to tackle remaining obstacles, such as transportation costs, provision of meals, uniforms, and childcare support.
5. Expand Geographic Coverage: Government and partners should prioritise the expansion of AEPLC availability to all wards currently without learning centres, addressing uneven geographical distribution.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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