POLICY BRIEF

Skill-based education to achieve justice and sustainable livelihoods for girls and women in post-conflict northern Uganda

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

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Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the educational experiences and livelihood aspirations of girls ages 15 to 24 in post-conflict northern Uganda in an effort to ascertain the structural barriers to their empowerment pathways. While girls exhibited resilience and demonstrated ambitions to pursue professional careers, start their own businesses, and lead in their communities, factors such as poverty, early pregnancy, gender norms, and poor inter-institutional coordination continue to derail the realization of their aspirations.

The government of Uganda, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, has made deliberate efforts to promote girls' education by putting in place progressive, gender-responsive, skills-oriented policies aimed at broadening access, equity, and employability. However, while almost 100% gross enrollment rates have been achieved at the primary level across the country, evidence from northern Uganda shows a looming gap between enrollments and completion, as well as transition to secondary and tertiary institutions. Besides, examinations as a measure of success in formal education do not align with the empowerment needs of adolescents. Vocational education and training (VET) remain gender-stereotyped and puts adolescent mothers who wish to participate in education under stigma, due to uneven implementation of re-entry policies.

The findings inform recommendations that call for a justice-oriented, skills-based education model, focused on meeting three sets of integrated needs:

- Practical needs, which are key for girls' immediate survival, including school participation and retention.

- Strategic needs that promote girls' agency, confidence, and leadership.
- Systemic reforms that align policy implementation, financing, and accountability with post-conflict realities.

In the context of northern Uganda, this model is fundamental to rebuilding resilient communities and fostering just development.

Introduction

Education is recognized globally as a key driver of gender equality and economic transformation, particularly for marginalized groups, and it is central to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 on inclusive, equitable, quality education and gender equality (Kuteesa et al., 2024; United Nations, 2015). Yet global policy actors increasingly acknowledge that expanding access alone is insufficient, calling instead for education systems that foster critical thinking, equity, empowerment, and structural transformation (UNESCO, n.d.; UNGEI, UNICEF, and Plan International, 2021; Hosseini, 2024). These actors reflect a growing call for a more justice-oriented education, an approach that goes beyond enrollment and completion to address the structural, gendered, and economic barriers shaping girls' life chances. Justice-oriented education strengthens girls' agency, builds livelihood-relevant capabilities, and transforms the systemic conditions that constrain their participation and economic independence (see Box 1).

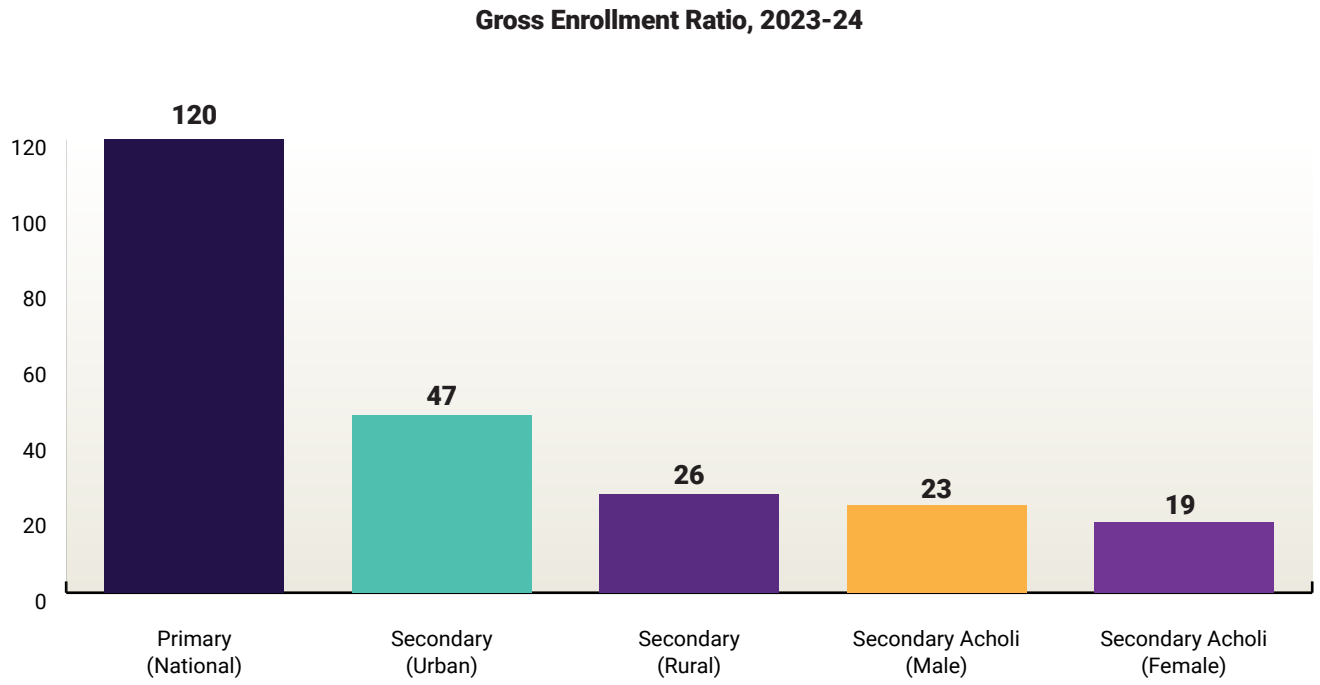
BOX 1
Justice-oriented education

Justice-oriented education (JOE) addresses power relations and structural inequalities shaping girls' educational experiences and opportunities, treating education as both a right and a site for transforming unequal power relations (UNGEI, UNICEF, and Plan International, 2021). Grounded in human rights, gender equality, and social justice principles, JOE combines relevant skill development with psychosocial support, mentorship, and protection, while actively confronting social norms, stigma, and policy implementation gaps that limit girls' participation. JOE centers the lived realities and agency of girls in post-conflict settings, linking learning to dignity, economic independence, and long-term transformation rather than short-term survival alone.

Photo credit: Betty Akullo

In Uganda, government initiatives such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), and a handful of the government-aided skill-based education initiatives introduced since 1997, have significantly expanded access to schooling for both boys and girls. Enrollment in primary education in particular has risen steadily, and gender parity has largely been achieved at this level (UBOS, 2024). These national gains reflect a strong commitment to education; however, they also conceal persistent disparities by level, gender, and region, which are especially stark in post-conflict northern Uganda and other rural areas (Ngoobi et al., 2026; see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.
Despite progress, education disparities persist



Sources: UBOS, 2025; United Nations, 2022.

Although Gross Enrollment Rates (GER) and Gender Parity Indices (GPI) in Uganda suggest near parity, they obscure a deeper challenge: high enrollment does not translate into completion or meaningful post-school transitions, particularly in post-conflict northern Uganda (UBOS, 2024). Substantial attrition occurs between enrollment and completion, narrowing progression into secondary education, vocational and skills pathways, and sustainable livelihoods. Girls are especially disadvantaged, accounting for only about 37% of vocational and technical enrollment, lower literacy rates (72% versus 81% for males), and limited participation in science-related fields (United Nations, 2022).

Exam-oriented schooling and weak school-to-work linkages constrain both girls and boys in Uganda (JEPA Africa, 2026). Girls face additional gender-specific structural barriers that undermine the transformative potential of education. In northern Uganda, the impact of conflict intersects with entrenched gender norms, poverty, and weak enforcement of re-entry policies for teenage mothers, increasing girls' risks of dropout, early marriages,

gender-based violence, and long-term engagement in low-skilled informal work (World Bank, 2017; Woldetsadik et al., 2022). These outcomes reflect intersecting structural constraints, not individual failure. Teenage pregnancy, child marriage, gender-based violence, unpaid domestic labor, and inadequate gender-responsive school infrastructure, exacerbated by conflict-related destruction of schools and livelihoods, systematically limit girls' access, completion, and transition opportunities (UNDP, 2021 ; UNGEI, UNICEF, and Plan International, 2021). Together, these dynamics highlight how social norms, institutional gaps, and economic challenges shape girls' educational pathways beyond enrollment statistics.

In response to persistent gender inequalities in education, the government of Uganda has adopted several skills-oriented and gender-responsive policies aimed at expanding equitable access, strengthening girls' retention and completion, promoting girls' agency by equipping them with livelihood-related skills, and enhancing their transition into sustainable livelihoods and economic independence. These efforts demonstrate a strong national commitment (Brookings Institution, n.d.; UNESCO, 2022a). However, their impact in post-conflict northern Uganda remains limited in geographical coverage, focused narrowly on technical skills while neglecting girls' agency, rights, and long-term empowerment (Presidential Initiatives for Skilling a Girl Child [PISGC], n.d.).

This brief explores how a justice-oriented approach to skills-based education could bridge these gaps. Grounded in post-conflict northern Uganda, this approach positions education as a pathway for advancing girls' rights and achieving gender-transformative change, particularly in post-conflict contexts where historical injustices persist, by linking learning to dignity, economic agency, and accountability.

Context

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF GIRLS IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Life for adolescent girls in post-conflict northern Uganda is shaped by both resilience and constraint, a daily negotiation between survival, aspiration, and structural inequality. Growing up in communities still recovering from decades of armed conflict, many girls assume adult responsibilities early, caring for siblings, contributing to household incomes, and engaging in small-scale farming to support their families (Oosterom, Namuggala, and Szyp, 2022). Amid these hardships, girls continue to dream of becoming teachers, nurses, journalists, and businesswomen, drawing strength from supportive networks of family members, peers, and teachers who encourage them to persist. However, translating these aspirations into reality remains an uphill struggle.

Girls' educational experiences in northern Uganda are profoundly influenced by the intersecting effects of poverty, gender inequality, and the enduring legacies of conflict. Schooling is frequently disrupted by early pregnancy, stigma, and rigid gender norms, compounded by limited access to practical, livelihood-relevant skills. As seen in the experiences of Ayaa and Akello, a critical divide remains between girls still in school, who pursue long-term ambitions, and those out of school, who focus on immediate survival and caregiving (see Box 2).

BOX 2.
Girls' lived experiences and aspirations

Ayaa, 16 (out of school, Lamwo District)

Ayaa wakes before sunrise to fetch water, cook, and work in her mother's garden. She once dreamed of becoming a teacher, but her father's death and lack of school fees forced her to drop out in Primary Six. Later, when she became pregnant, her community labeled her "spoiled." "People said my education was over," she recalls.

Today, Ayaa farms a small plot and sells vegetables to save for vocational training in tailoring or catering. "When I sit with other girls in our savings group, I feel hopeful again," she says, "If I could go back to school, I'd study to change my life and my family's too, as well as tell the stories of girls like me."

Akello, 15 (Kitgum District)

Akello is still in school and aspires to become a lawyer. "I want to defend girls who are mistreated," she says. Despite walking long distances to school and lacking basic materials, she remains optimistic, drawing strength from her teachers and friends.

This contrast underscores the need for justice-oriented education that responds to girls' lived experiences, equips them with relevant skills, restores hope, and transforms aspirations into attainable dreams (UNESCO, 2022b; UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

BARRIERS AND REALITIES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN POST-CONFLICT NORTHERN UGANDA

Poverty is pronounced in northern Uganda, as families struggle to afford basic school needs such as uniforms, textbooks, and development fees (UNICEF Uganda, 2025). In the Acholi sub-region, approximately 20.5% of the population lives below the national poverty line, surviving on less than $1.90 per day, highlighting persistent economic vulnerabilities despite overall national progress (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2025: UBOS UNHS 2023/24; UBOS, 2021. NHS 2019/2020). Limited education is a major driver of household poverty in northern Uganda, where educational disruption has been widespread,[1] and girls' needs remain largely unmet. Strengthening girls' access to meaningful, skill-based education is therefore critical, not only for their personal empowerment but also for mitigating household poverty, breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation, and promoting equitable development.

The impact of early marriage, pregnancy, and gender-based violence in the region is particularly severe. Conflict disrupted traditional protection mechanisms and intensified vulnerabilities as households often see their daughters as a source of wealth, leaving many girls exposed to sexual exploitation and early unions (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2021). In northern Uganda, once pregnant, most girls drop out of school permanently despite Uganda's 2020 re-entry policy. For instance, around 24% of girls ages 15 to 19 years have begun childbearing, with teenage pregnancy significantly higher in rural areas (25% versus 21% in urban areas; Nakazi, 2025). Yet an estimated 70% of girls do not return to school after giving birth. Based on the Acholi philosophy of wang oo, or communal upbringing, in my own decades of work in the community, I have seen that local leaders, senior women teachers, and mothers' groups play key roles as cultural and communal enablers, encouraging re-entry, offering mentorship, and linking girls to skilling programs.

Gendered expectations and household practices in northern Uganda continue to limit girls' educational opportunities. Domestic work, caregiving, and unpaid labor reduce study time and reinforce beliefs about a woman's role in the home (Ngoobi et al., 2026), and even girls who complete primary school often lack employable skills due to a highly theoretical curriculum (Ntale et al., 2025; Nakazi, 2025), perpetuating dependence and vulnerability. Boys are frequently prioritized for education, reflecting entrenched gender norms (Nabunya et al., 2021), and these challenges are compounded by the lingering effects of war, displacement, trauma, and fragile infrastructure. Consequently, conflict-affected districts such as Kitgum and Lamwo continue to experience low secondary enrollment, with only about five girls enrolling for every ten boys (International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2018).

THE CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT: SKILLS, GENDER, AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

In response to numerous challenges that girls face, there has been a major shift in the policy framework for education and skilling since 1997. A variety of policies now promote skill development for girls, including the UPE policy (1997), USE policy (2007), the Presidential Initiative for Skilling a Girl Child (2017), the TVET Policy (2019), the Teenage Mothers' Re-entry policy (2020), the Girls' Education Strategy (2022–2026), and the Gender in Education Policy (2023). Collectively, these policies signal a strong formal commitment by the Government of Uganda to advancing equitable education opportunities and empowering girls to achieve both personal and economic development (See Table 1).

1 The poverty rate for households where the head has only incomplete or lower primary schooling (35%) is nearly 30 times that of households led by degree holders (1.2%; United Nations, 2022).

TABLE 1.

Timeline, aim, impact, and gaps in the current education policies

TIMELINE	1997	2007	2017	2019	2020	2022	2023
Policies	UPE policy	USE policy	Presidential Initiative for Skilling the Girl Child (PISGC)	TVET Policy	Teenage Mothers' Re-entry Policy	Girls' Education Strategy (2022-2026)	Gender in Education Policy
Aim	Free primary education for all children	Expand access to secondary education	Equip out-of-school disadvantaged girls with vocational and entrepreneurship skills	Shift education from exam-based to skills-based learning	Developed to support adolescent mothers to return to school after childbirth.	Aims to ensure equitable access, retention, and completion for girls in education	Seeks to mainstream gender equality across education systems,
Impact	Rise in enrollment and literacy UBOS, 2023).	It removed tuition barriers.	Improved employability for some youth in urban areas.	Promoting employability.	Promoting gender equality and affirmative action in education.	Promoting the right to education.	Promoting inclusive learning.
Gaps	Quality gaps, overcrowding, and persistent gender disparities continue to hinder its full impact.	Inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and hidden costs still exclude many girls, especially in rural areas.	Remains urban-biased with limited reach in rural areas, including northern Uganda.	Gender stereotypes confine girls in feminized courses, limited funding, and weak rural access constrain inclusiveness.	Stigma, poor awareness, and lack of facilities continue to undermine implementation (Ahikire, 2022).	Implementation remains weak in conflict-affected regions, with minimal focus on practical skills development.	Lacks a clear implementation plan and funding to translate commitments into practice.
Reach in northern Uganda	Low completion and transition rates are driven by poverty and persistent gender norms. Increased enrollment has not translated into comparable learning outcomes or secondary school progression.	Secondary participation remains low, especially in rural/northern districts; costs beyond fees (uniforms, transport) continue to exclude many girls. Gendered norms and domestic burdens limit girls' retention.	Coverage remains limited in northern Uganda; centers are fewer and often concentrated around Kampala/urban areas, reducing access for rural girls. Integration with formal education and market pathways remains weak.	Implementation challenges include a lack of gender-responsive reforms, insufficient advocacy and coordination, and low enrollment of girls in TVET due to stereotypes and limited career guidance.	Weak implementation on the ground: stigma, lack of daycare/child care in schools, lack of rollout funding and community awareness, and inconsistent enforcement hinder girls' re-entry and retention.	Implementation remains patchy; gaps include limited resources, weak local coordination, and a lack of gender equity capacity among school leaders. Policy impact is not yet fully realized, especially in post-conflict settings.	Awareness and operationalization at the district/school level are limited; regional disparities persist, and policy has yet to significantly shift gendered outcomes in northern Uganda.

Sources: Author's analysis with data from Ngoobi et al., 2026; UBOS, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2025; and U.N., 2022.

While the above education policies signal a strong commitment to access, equity, and skills development, as seen in Table 1, persistent poverty, fragile livelihoods, gender norms, and weak institutional coordination constrain their impact in post-conflict northern Uganda. For instance, expanded enrollment under UPE and USE has not translated into sustained completion, where girls face caregiving burdens and economic constraints (Ngoobi et al., 2026). On the other hand, skills initiatives such as TVET remain limited in contexts lacking start-up capital, mentorship, and trauma-informed support (Presidential Initiative for Skilling a Girl Child [PISGC], n.d.). The government of Uganda, through partnership with NGO-led programs, including youth employment and skills development projects, has complemented these education initiatives for girls in the post-conflict northern Uganda (Ministry of Education and Sports, Republic of Uganda, 2022). However, while these programs have expanded training opportunities, many are short-term, fragmented, and unevenly distributed geographically, with limited presence in rural and post-conflict districts, such as those in the Acholi region of Uganda (Akullo, 2025).

From a justice-oriented perspective, the landscape of education policies and programs for girls in northern Uganda reflects a systemic gap: They expand access but insufficiently address the structural conditions required to convert participation into durable agency, economic independence, and social transformation.

JUSTICE-ORIENTED EDUCATION AND RELEVANCE TO A GIRL CHILD IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

This study uses justice-oriented education (JOE; see Box 1) as an analytical lens to explore how education and skills respond to girls' lived realities in post-conflict northern Uganda. JOE focuses on developing learners' critical thinking, agency, and capacity to challenge inequality. This approach explicitly integrates curriculum, pedagogy, teacher practice, and other elements of education systems and girls' lived experiences, directing attention to the structural causes of marginalization rather than framing challenges as individual deficits (Hosseini et al., 2024).

Practically, JOE aims to move beyond teaching discrete skills or facts to equip learners with the ability to recognize and question injustice and the skills and relationships needed to act. Therefore, in this brief, a justice-oriented lens has been used to organize findings around three interrelated dimensions: girls' capacity to meet their needs and pursue goals, the relational and social conditions that shape their participation, and the institutional commitments that enable or constrain the exercise of their rights.

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Methodology

This brief presents results from qualitative research conducted from July to August 2025 with girls and key education actors in Lamwo and Kitgum districts in post-conflict northern Uganda.[2] The research explored the educational experiences and pathways of girls and young women ages 15 to 24, to inform justice-oriented, skill-based education. It sought to understand girls' aspirations and needs, the social and structural barriers they encounter to education and skills training, and the forms of support they receive from families, communities, and institutions. The study also identified the skills that girls consider essential for empowerment, independence, and justice.

Data were collected through focus group discussions with a total of 28 girls, both in-school and out-of-school, including 14 adolescent mothers, and key informant interviews with 16 key stakeholders from their schools and communities. These included teachers, education officials, community leaders, parents, and NGO practitioners. Discussions were conducted in the Acholi language to capture rich, contextual insights into girls' experiences, aspirations, and barriers (Milligan and Adamson, 2022). Stakeholder interviews complemented these perspectives, providing an in-depth understanding of structural, social, and cultural factors shaping education and the potential for skill-based, gender-responsive reforms to promote livelihoods and gender equality (see Table 2 and Appendix 1).

2 These two districts were the epicenter of conflicts, and continue to grapple with social and economic inequalities affecting girls' education and empowerment.

TABLE 2.

Research participants

CATEGORY OF PARTICIPANTS	SETTING	METHOD	SAMPLE/NUMBER
In school girls aged 15-24 from selected secondary schools and TVET centers	Lamwo district	FGDs	1 FGD of 7 participants
	Kitgum, district	FGDs	1 FGD of 7 participants
Out-of-school girls aged 15-24 (including teenage mothers)	Lamwo district	FGDs	1 FGD of 7 participants
	Kitgum, district	FGDs	1 FGD of 7 participants
		Subtotal	4 FGDs (28 Girls)
Key stakeholders (School administrators, teachers, Education officials, and education-oriented NGOs' staff	Lamwo district	KII interviews	8 (6 Females and 2 Males)
	Kitgum, district	KII interviews	8 (5 Females and 3 Males)
		Subtotal	16 KIIs
Total			44 participants

Findings

Using a justice-oriented lens, this section explores girls' educational experiences across four interrelated dimensions: their aspirations; the practical, strategic, and systemic needs that shape their ability to pursue those aspirations; the barriers that limit their realization within existing education and skills training systems; and the supports provided by families, communities, and institutions. Together, these sections highlight how girls' capacity, relationships, and institutional commitments interact to shape educational participation and outcomes.

GIRLS' ASPIRATIONS: FOR THEMSELVES, THEIR COMMUNITIES, AND JUSTICE

In post-conflict northern Uganda, girls' aspirations encompass personal livelihood and economic independence, the well-being of their families and communities, and broader social justice, reflecting both their lived experiences and determination to contribute to rebuilding a more equitable society (see Table 3).

TABLE 3.
Aspirations of girls in post-conflict northern Uganda

LIVELIHOODS AND ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE	FAMILY AND COMMUNITY UPLIFT	COLLECTIVE JUSTICE
"I hope to farm and sell produce to pay for my studies." — 24-year-old girl, Kitgum District	"I dream of becoming a nurse and providing care for mothers and babies."— 17-year-old girl, Kitgum District	"I dream of returning to school and completing my studies so I can be a lawyer who defends girls' rights." — 18-year-old girl, Kitgum District
"I want to start a tailoring business and become independent so I can support my family."— 20-year-old girl, Lamwo District	"I want to open a tailoring shop and employ other girls." — 23-year-old girl, Lamwo District	"I dream of being a leader in the future, even an MP, to help girls stay in school." — 15-year-old girl, Kitgum District
	"I want to teach other children so they can have the chances I didn't have." — 15-year-old girl, Lamwo District	"I want to defend girls' rights and speak for those who are silent." — 19-year-old girl, Lamwo District
		"I want to be a journalist and tell the stories of girls in my community." — 16-year-old girl, Lamwo District

» Livelihoods and economic independence

Many girls framed their dreams around personal growth, for instance, gaining practical skills and stable income sources. Many aspired to become entrepreneurs, a profession that symbolizes empowerment and economic independence. The girls spoke of wanting to become tailors, nurses, journalists, caterers, or hairdressers, linking education directly to self-reliance and survival. Girls both in and out of school consistently expressed that "a good life" meant having the capacity to earn a living and care for their families. However, several lamented that schooling had not equipped them with usable skills: "Even after reaching Senior Three, I don't know anything practical that can help me survive." Teachers and community leaders echoed this, noting that exam-oriented education often leaves girls "book-smart but life-poor." Importantly, for girls in this study, economic aspirations were not merely about employment; they were about dignity, security, and breaking cycles of dependence created by war and poverty.

» Family and community uplift

Many girls linked their aspirations not only to securing a better future for themselves but also to uplifting their families and communities. "I want to study hard and support my mother because she suffered during the war," shared a 17-year-old from Lamwo. Such dreams reflect the Acholi philosophy of wang oo (communal upbringing), where success is collective and measured by one's contribution to others' well-being. Beyond individual advancement, many girls expressed a strong sense of social responsibility; they envisioned becoming role models and mentors: "I want to inspire girls in my community to be confident and not fear dreaming big." These aspirations demonstrate an inherent understanding of empowerment as shared and transformative rather than individualistic.

» Collective justice

Many girls aspired to challenge the injustices that have limited them, their families, and their communities. Several expressed a desire to become advocates, lawyers, and leaders to "speak for girls who have no voice." One participant who wanted to become a lawyer added, "Because I saw my mother being mistreated." For these girls, their aspirations were both personal and collective, reflecting a justice-seeking impulse born from their lived experiences of gender-based violence, stigma, and exclusion. Interviews with local leaders confirmed that girls' activist orientations are often sparked by exposure to supportive teachers or mentors, suggesting that when education fosters confidence and rights awareness, it can become transformative. These aspirations for justice highlight that empowerment, for many girls, is not only about individual success but about correcting social inequities that have endured since the conflict and advocating for gender equality.

Across focus group discussions, girls articulated what a justice-oriented education would look like: one that equips them with relevant, practical skills, nurtures self-confidence and voice, and connects learning to livelihoods, community well-being, and justice. "We need an education that teaches us to survive, to lead, and to help others," summarized one participant.

GIRLS' PRACTICAL, STRATEGIC, AND SYSTEMIC NEEDS REMAIN LARGELY UNMET

Girls' educational aspirations are shaped by practical, strategic, and systemic needs (see Table 4). Meeting practical needs was described as reducing immediate vulnerability, while meeting strategic needs strengthened girls' capacity to navigate the systems that create vulnerability. On the other hand, systemic needs must be met to address the underlying causes of that vulnerability itself.

TABLE 4.
Girls' practical, strategic, and systemic needs

TYPE OF NEED	PRACTICAL NEEDS	STRATEGIC NEEDS	SYSTEMIC NEEDS
Definition	Immediate, survival-driven supports that are necessary for day-to-day participation in education and training.	Longer-term, empowerment-focused supports that enable girls to progress toward their aspirations and strengthen agency, confidence, and independence.	Structural and institutional conditions that shape and sustain girls' ability to navigate systems and convert opportunities into viable, long-term pathways.
Examples mentioned by girls	Money for school fees and uniforms, menstrual hygiene supplies, safe learning environments, transportation, child care, and small income-generating activities for daily survival.	Mentorship, life skills and leadership development, rights awareness, gender-responsive curricula, market-relevant vocational and digital skills, and psychosocial support.	Enforcement of re-entry policies for young mothers, gender-transformative curricula and teacher training, accredited training linked to apprenticeships and markets, fair selection processes, institutional accountability, coordinated financing, and stigma reduction initiatives.
In girls' voices	"I still dream of going back to school to become a journalist, but I can't even afford pads or books."	"We need lessons that teach us about life, our rights, and how to solve problems."	"When there is a project for girls, the leaders choose their relatives first."
What happens when needs are not met?	Girls miss classes, disengage, or drop out of school or training entirely.	Girls remain in low-confidence, low-skill pathways, limiting leadership, economic mobility, and decisionmaking power.	Inequities persist, exclusion deepens, trust in institutions erodes, and girls' aspirations fail to translate into sustainable livelihoods.

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A. Practical needs: Enablers of immediate participation and survival

Girls in northern Uganda repeatedly emphasized the need for menstrual hygiene supplies, safe changing rooms, and adequate WASH facilities, noting that the lack of pads and private spaces often forces them to miss school. "We need sanitary pads so we can focus on class". Many also highlighted the importance of food, school materials, and financial support for fees and transport, since families' inability to cover these costs frequently was said to lead to dropout. Young mothers further called for child care services and flexible learning schedules to balance caregiving with education: "I want to go back, but who will look after my baby?" For many, such basic needs determined whether they could attend school or training at all. The absence of child care and flexible learning options, for example, was said to exclude many adolescent mothers from education, reinforcing gendered barriers to participation.

B. Strategic needs: Shifts that enable girls to navigate systems in pursuit of their aspirations

Beyond day-to-day necessities, girls in northern Uganda articulated strategic needs that promoted skills, knowledge, mindsets, and relationships that would support their agency, identity, and ability to successfully navigate the systems around them.

Girls identified a broad range of skills that they needed to work toward their aspirations (see Box 3), yet they described current formal education and training opportunities as largely irrelevant. Across focus group discussions, girls described school as "mostly about passing exams," with little connection to their everyday realities. The curriculum's strong theoretical focus was said to leave them without practical or life skills. As one girl said, "Most of the subjects we were learning were just theory, not things I can use to survive." Even those who completed secondary education felt unprepared for independent life or employment after dropping out. Beyond curriculum, girls noted that overcrowded classrooms and teacher absenteeism limited opportunities to develop needed skills, knowledge, and mindsets. A key informant from a local NGO added that "schools rarely teach girls to see themselves as problem solvers; they teach them to memorize answers."

Box 3.
Strategic skills identified by girls

The girls in this research envisioned a form of education that goes beyond exams and trades. They identified a range of interconnected skills they believe are essential for empowerment, independence, and justice. These included:

- life skills: critical thinking, problem-solving, and time management
- career skills: tailoring, catering, agribusiness, math, and English
- health and well-being skills: menstrual hygiene management
- leadership and civic skills: confidence, decision making, public speaking
- protection skills: knowing their rights, where to seek help, how to protect themselves from violence and exploitation

Several girls aspired to leadership and advocacy roles. However, both girls and key informants agreed that the current education system does little to cultivate leadership or rights awareness. As one girl in a focus group noted, "We want teachers to teach us skills that help us think for ourselves, not just prepare for exams. We need to learn about our rights and how to stand up for them." Girls were often inspired by female role models such as women MPs and teachers, and they expressed a strong desire for mentorship to help them realize their ambitions.

Many also underscored the need for trauma-informed and psychosocial support programs to address post-conflict trauma, build resilience, and strengthen learning capacity across both formal and vocational education. "I need encouragement and guidance to rebuild self-esteem," one participant emphasized, underscoring that empowerment requires more than technical competence; it demands agency and recognition. Teachers and district education officers echoed girls' concerns, observing that schools remained heavily exam-focused, with limited mentorship or psychosocial support. As one female teacher noted, "We prepare girls to pass exams, not to lead or innovate."

Vocational graduates also underscored the need for strategic resources and relationships to support transitions from education to work. They pointed to the importance of startup capital, tools, and apprenticeships, explaining that completing training without essential equipment, workspace, or market linkages rendered their newly acquired skills ineffective for improving their livelihoods. "I finished tailoring training, but I don't have a machine or a place to work," one participant shared. Local NGO staff echoed this concern, observing that, "We train girls, but most leave without start-up kits or market connections." These testimonies highlight a persistent implementation gap: Existing education and skilling programs often end at training, without addressing the strategic needs girls have as they make the critical transition to employment and sustainable livelihoods.

C. Systemic needs: Enabling conditions that shape and sustain girls' aspirations and agency

Girls' aspirations to become teachers, lawyers, nurses, entrepreneurs, or community leaders reflect a pursuit of dignity, recognition, and agency in contexts of scarcity and uncertainty. Yet, as Honwana's Time of Youth (2012) reminds us, formal employment opportunities remain limited in many rural African settings, including post-conflict northern Uganda. This does not render girls' aspirations unrealistic. Instead, it underscores the need for education systems that respond honestly to economic realities while expanding girls' capabilities, choices, and pathways across formal and informal livelihoods.

Systemic needs refer to the institutional, cultural, and structural conditions that determine whether girls' practical and strategic needs can be met and sustained. While Uganda's education system, both formal schooling and vocational training, has expanded access, the voices of girls and the community revealed that these systems still fail to nurture the capabilities, confidence, and practical competencies girls need to fulfill their aspirations. Their testimonies highlight three interrelated barriers at the systemic level: the mismatch of formal schooling to the livelihood realities, the gendered and limited nature of vocational programs, and the social and institutional exclusion of adolescent mothers and out-of-school girls (see Table 5).

Girls' aspirations to become teachers, lawyers, nurses, entrepreneurs, or community leaders reflect a pursuit of dignity, recognition, and agency in contexts of scarcity and uncertainty.

TABLE 5.

Barriers to meeting girls' needs in the current education system

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	IN GIRLS' VOICES	IMPACT
Mismatch of formal schooling to livelihoods	Formal education is heavily exam-focused and disconnected from girls' lived realities and economic contexts. Overcrowded classrooms, teacher absenteeism, and limited mentorship weaken critical thinking, practical competence, and self-confidence (Ntale et al., 2025).	Girls consistently called for education reforms that move beyond exam-oriented learning toward gender-transformative curricula and teacher training that promote critical thinking. "Most of the subjects we were learning were just theory, not things I can use to survive." FGD "Schools rarely teach girls to see themselves as problem solvers; they teach them to memorize answers." KII	Girls complete schooling without livelihood market-relevant skills, confidence, or livelihood pathways, leading to frustration, disengagement, or transition into precarious informal work.
Gendered and limited vocational training	Training programs often channel girls into low-return courses by limiting income potential, reinforcing stereotypically "feminine" courses and providing limited follow-up, mentorship, certification, or psychosocial support.	Girls exposed systemic gaps in the available vocational training. They reiterated that such institutions continue to reproduce inequality rather than challenge it. "I was trained in tailoring because that's what was being given to girls, but when I finish, there are too many of us doing the same thing and no real income." "We study courses that are meant for girls, but they don't pay enough to change our lives." "We enrolled for courses, not because we loved them but because that's what was available."	Skills do not translate into sustainable income. Gender hierarchies are reinforced, and girls remain economically vulnerable despite training.
Social and institutional exclusion	Adolescent mothers and out-of-school girls face stigma, rigid school structures, lack of child care, weak enforcement of re-entry policies, and favoritism in program selection, which were said to routinely block access into the education system by those in need.	Girls described systemic exclusion of adolescent mothers and out-of-school girls that kept them from realizing their aspirations. They also reported a lack of trust in institutions, which deepens cycles of dropout and dependency, as they described many being pushed into informal and low-skilled work. "I want to go back to school, but people laugh and say I am spoiled."	Exclusion deepens, trust in institutions erodes, and girls are pushed further into isolation, dropout, and long-term economic marginalization.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT FROM FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND INSTITUTIONS

Girls in Lamwo and Kitgum reported relying on a variety of informal support networks that helped them navigate daily challenges, meet their practical and strategic needs, and sustain their aspirations. These supports, rooted in family, community, and institutions such as schools and religious centers, were said to be critical for their resilience but remain fragile, inconsistent, and dependent on social ties rather than structured systems.

» Family support

Families, especially mothers, uncles, and siblings, remain the girls' primary safety net. They provide daily care, financial assistance, and emotional encouragement. One girl shared, "My mother takes care of my baby so that I can attend my hairdressing training with ease." Another added, "My elder brother, who pays my school fees, is the one who advises me." Such support sustains girls' efforts to re-enter school, start petty businesses, or pursue vocational training. However, not all girls have access to this care, as orphans and those in child-headed households are often left without consistent guidance or financial support.

» Community support

Outside the family, communities such as neighbors and local leaders play a mentoring and motivational role, and they provide practical linkages to opportunities. Teachers, especially Senior Woman Teachers (SWT)[3], played a crucial bridging role, mentoring girls, mediating re-entry for young mothers, and fostering safe school environments. As one girl explained, "[the SWT] talks to us every time, and also the head teacher and our teachers encourage us." Local councils and influential leaders, such as Members of Parliament, occasionally connect girls to NGO training programs or provide startup kits, while neighbors and peers help reinforce values like respect and confidence. Due to a lack of accessibility to formal banking systems, community-based initiatives such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and mobile money-related loans were also described as providing some girls with startup capital, although these are often very small and have limited impact.

» Institutional support

NGOs, schools, and government programs were described as providing vital but sporadic assistance through skill training, start-up kits, and counseling, especially by faith-based NGOs (UNESCO, 2023). For example, some girls reported receiving sewing machines and training through CARE International projects, while others benefited from Parish Development Model (PDM) funds. Yet, these interventions are often short-term, urban-centered, lack coordination with schools or local government systems, and are highly dependent on donor and philanthropy funding.

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3 The role of Senior Women Teachers (SWTs) and Senior Men Teachers (SMTs) in Uganda in line with the MoES guidelines are mandated with the task of promoting learners' emotional, social, and physical well-being, helping girls and boys respectively to navigate challenges that impede their education outcomes (MoE, 2020).

Despite these diverse sources of support, the evidence points out that access remains shaped by structural inequities. Girls and practitioners noted that selection for training or resources often depends on family connections, local power dynamics, or the presence of NGOs in particular communities. As one NGO practitioner observed, "Sometimes, only the relatives of local leaders are selected for training opportunities." Such reliance on informal networks produces uneven access and reinforces vulnerability and exclusion among girls with limited social capital.

A justice-oriented education system must therefore move beyond temporary assistance to institutionalize practical, strategic, and systemic responses to girls' needs. In practice, it should guarantee sustained access to skills training, psychosocial support, and basic enablers that help girls remain engaged in learning. Strategically, it must strengthen girls' agency through gender-responsive curricula, mentorship, and rights awareness. Systemically, it requires coherent policy implementation, dedicated financing, and institutional accountability that link family, community, and education systems. Together, these aligned supports can transform education into a reliable pathway to empowerment and justice for all girls, rather than a privilege available only to the well-connected.

Photo credit: i_am_zews/Shutterstock

Policy recommendations by level of responsibility

The study reveals that girls ages 15 to 24 in post-conflict northern Uganda are resilient agents with clear aspirations for leadership, teaching, health care, entrepreneurship, and community service. Yet, they face intersecting social, cultural, and structural barriers and weak institutional support that undermine their ability to meet their needs and pursue their aspirations. Their journeys highlight both the failures and possibilities within Uganda's education system. The current exam-driven and gender-stereotyped approaches in both formal schooling and vocational training remain disconnected from girls' lived realities and aspirations. However, family, community, and institutional supports, though fragmented, show that pathways for change exist.

Advancing a justice-oriented, skill-based education model oriented toward meeting girls' practical, strategic, and systemic needs offers a transformative opportunity. Such an approach links learning to gender justice, economic independence, and active citizenship, positioning girls as central agents in rebuilding post-conflict northern Uganda and shaping a more equitable future.

The following recommendations, therefore, seek to operationalize justice-oriented education by aligning skills, rights, and psychosocial support with girls' lived realities, expanding their capabilities, dignity, and livelihood options while strengthening community cohesion and institutional accountability in post-conflict northern Uganda.

TABLE 6.
Recommendations

LEVEL	PRIORITY FOCUS	KEY ACTIONS	PRIMARY RESPONSIBLE ACTORS
MACRO (central government)	Strengthen policy coherence and systems	• Integrate practical life skills, vocational, financial, and digital literacy into the formal curriculum to complement exam-oriented learning. • Embed gender equality, rights, and psychosocial support within national education and skills policies, including flexible pathways for adolescent mothers. • Strengthen national monitoring systems using gender- and region-disaggregated data to track enrollment, completion, and transitions.	Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES); Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD); Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS)
MESO (NGOs, faith-based organizations, development partners)	Translate policy into scalable programs	• Deliver market-aligned, gender-responsive skills training linked to local economies. • Provide mentorship, apprenticeships, and psychosocial support aligned with national policies. • Support coordinated, longer-term programming rather than fragmented short-term projects. • Support stigma reduction and school re-entry through trusted social networks.	NGOs; faith-based organizations; development partners
MICRO (communities, schools, religious and cultural institutions)	Shift norms and sustain participation	• Lead community and faith-based dialogues to reduce stigma around teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and school re-entry. • Strengthen family and community support for girls' education. • Promote safe and inclusive learning environments through local protection mechanisms, girls' clubs, and peer networks.	Local government; religious institutions; cultural leaders; school management committees; community-based organizations

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Appendix A. Research Design

SUB-RESEARCH QUESTION AND LOGIC GUIDING INQUIRY	EVIDENCE	METHODS	TOOLS	SOURCE(S)/ PARTICIPANT	SETTING	TIMING
1. What are the practical and strategic needs of women and girls aged 15-24 in post-conflict Northern Uganda?	Qualitative narratives on aspirations, livelihood challenges, and daily struggles.	Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Semi-structured FGDs guides	Girls aged 15-24 (in-school and out-of-school); parents/ caregivers; community leaders	Lamwo and Kitgum, districts	July-August 2025
2. To what extent does the formal education system address gender-specific and strategic needs of girls and young women?	Education policy documents, teacher and learner experiences, and institutional practices.	Key Informant Interviews (KIIs); Document Review	Interview guide; policy and document review matrix	School administrators, teachers, Ministry of Education and Sports officials, and NGO education staff	Selected secondary schools and TVET centers across the 2 districts	July-August 2025
3. What structural, social, and cultural barriers and enabling factors affect girls' ability to exercise agency within and beyond educational settings?	Testimonies from girls; insights from leaders; examples of support systems and exclusion patterns.	FGDs; IDIs; Participatory Workshops	FGD and participatory facilitation guides	Girls aged 15-24; local leaders; NGO staff; peer mentors	Community centers and safe spaces near selected schools and TVET centers	July-August 2025
4. What skills do girls aged 15-24 consider essential for empowerment, independence, and social transformation?	Girls' perspectives; NGO and TVET data on skills training and employability outcomes.	FGDs; Participatory Ranking Exercises; Observational Site Visits	Ranking tools; FGD guide; observation checklist	Girls aged 15-24; TVET instructors; NGO program officers	Vocational training centers, schools, and NGO program sites	July-August 2025

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Specializing in gender mainstreaming and peacebuilding, Betty leads programs addressing gender-based violence, economic empowerment, and reproductive health. Her work supports women affected by conflict, incarceration, and displacement. Recognized as a national gender champion by the President of Uganda, Betty has mobilized women into leadership roles. She serves on several boards, including the Association for Rehabilitation and Reorientation of Women for Development (TERREWODE), and represents women's interests in international forums, dedicated to dismantling systemic inequality.

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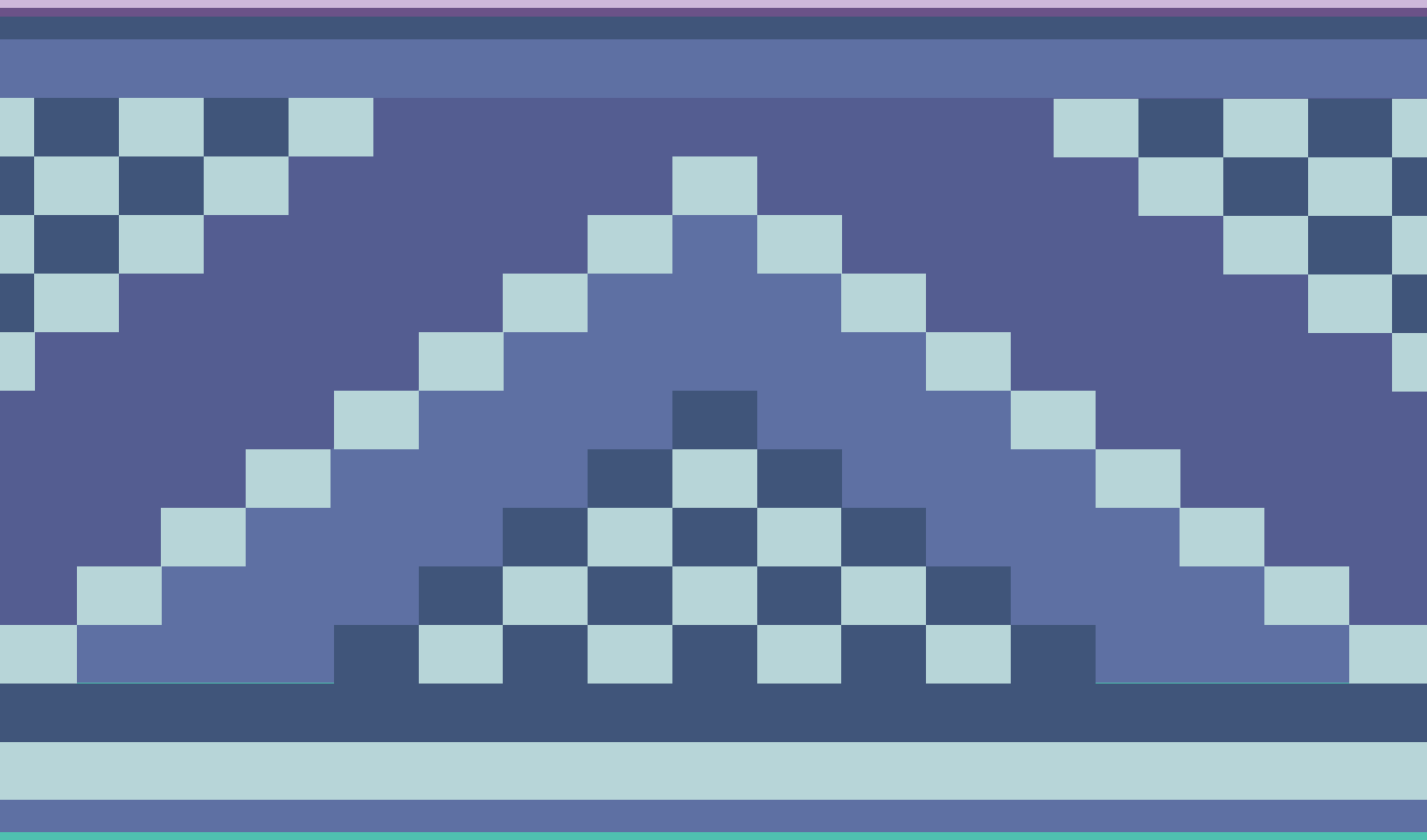
ABOUT THE ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The Echidna Global Scholars Program at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings seeks to catalyze and amplify the impact of local leaders working to advance gender equality in and through education across the Global South.

During a six-month fellowship, Echidna Global Scholars conduct individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming people, develop their leadership and evidence-based policy skills, build substantive knowledge on gender and global education issues, and expand their pathways for impact. Upon completion of the fellowship, scholars transition to the Echidna Alumni Network, a growing community of practice aimed at promoting their significant, sustained, and collective influence on gender-transformative education globally and locally.



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