



Beyond Access: Achieving Gender-Transformative Education in Post-COVID-19 Djibouti

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Executive Summary

This policy brief argues that while the Republic of Djibouti has made commendable progress in expanding educational access since independence, its policies have consistently failed to be transformative. The analysis reveals that policies have primarily focused on quantitative access, failing to dismantle the deep-rooted socio-economic and patriarchal barriers that systematically disadvantage girls and women. These gaps, starkly exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, include the gendered impact of poverty, safety concerns, a digital divide, and a vocational training system that does not lead to economic empowerment for women. Drawing on desk review and key informant interviews, this brief recommends a shift towards transformative social policies.

Key recommendations include: (1) implementing targeted incentives like conditional cash transfers for girls' education; (2) integrating gender-sensitive curricula and teacher training; (3) reforming the Modified National Service to provide market-relevant skills for women; and (4) strengthening partnerships to fund infrastructure and second-chance education programmes. For Djibouti to achieve its development goals, its education policy must move beyond providing equitable access by transforming the structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical role of robust social policies in mitigating crises, particularly for the most vulnerable. In Djibouti, forced school and university closures from March to September 2020 resulted in a rise in school dropouts, child labour and early marriages. Although learning partly continued through online lessons, most learners, especially female students in rural areas, had no access to ICT gadgets and this limited their access to education.

Focusing on the education sector, this brief analyses the gender-transformative potential of social policies in the Republic of Djibouti from the late colonial era to the post-pandemic period. Transformative social policy aims to alter the underlying societal norms and power dynamics that perpetuate inequality. However, despite progress in access, policies have not adequately addressed the patriarchal norms and economic constraints that disproportionately exclude girls, limit their life prospects and undermine efforts at gender equity.

Gender equity here is defined as the fair treatment of all genders, which requires providing specific resources and support to address historical and systemic disadvantages that ensure equal outcomes.

Research Approach

This study was conducted under the Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy for Post-COVID-19 Africa Project. The objective was to identify specific gaps that perpetuate inequality. It employed a mixed-methods approach, combining an extensive desk review of secondary data with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). KIIs were conducted with officials from the Ministries of Health, National Education, and Labour, as well as experts from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the University of Djibouti.

Key Findings

Historical Context

Post-independence policies in Djibouti successfully expanded access through school construction and social allowances. However, these measures were gender-blind, assuming equal benefit without addressing the specific barriers girls face.

Setbacks and Gendered Impacts

The civil war (1991-94) and the subsequent discontinuation of social allowances, such as the USD\$120 annual social allowances distributed to students from disadvantaged families, had a disproportionate impact on girls. As one informant noted:

“When family resources are scarce, educating a son is often prioritised as a long-term investment, while daughters are kept home for safety or domestic labour.”

This highlights how gender norms amplify the effects of economic shocks.

The COVID-19 Crisis

School closures led to a surge in dropouts, child labour, and early marriages, predominantly affecting girls. The shift to remote learning exposed a profound gendered digital divide. For example, interviews revealed that in households with one device, boys were often given priority for its use, systematically excluding girls from virtual learning.

Systemic Barriers

Challenges like long distances to school, teacher absenteeism, and packed classrooms are not gender neutral. Concerns for girls' safety during long commutes and the lack of separate sanitation facilities in schools are significant deterrents to their consistent attendance.

Vocational Training Mismatch

The Modified National Service (Service National Adapté—SNA) was found to offer vocational skills in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, without childcare support or training in high-growth sectors for women, female graduates remain largely unemployable and unable to transform their economic status.



Vocational training | Source: dreamstime.com

Conclusions

Djibouti's education policies have promoted a basic level of gender equity by increasing female enrolment. However, they have not been transformative. The government has failed to:

1. Incentivise education strategically by targeting support for girls;
2. Address safety and infrastructural barriers that specifically deter girls;

3. Align skills training with labour market opportunities for women, resulting in a system where initial access does not translate into long-term empowerment.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a stark revealer of these underlying inequalities, demonstrating that without a transformative approach, crises will consistently reverse gains for girls.

Recommendations

To promote truly gender-equitable and transformative education, the following actions are critical:

1. Implement targeted, conditional incentives

Reintroduce and redesign financial support as conditional cash transfers for low-income families that keep their daughters enrolled and achieve specific milestones, directly countering the economic drivers of early dropout and marriage.



Djiboutian learners enjoying meals | *Source: insuco.com*

2. Mainstream gender sensitivity in education

Revise curricula to eliminate gender stereotypes and incorporate content on gender equality. Mandate gender-sensitive pedagogy training for all teachers to create inclusive classroom environments.

3. Reform vocational training for economic empowerment

Overhaul the SNA curriculum in partnership with the private sector to provide skills in high-growth sectors for women (e.g., ICT, healthcare, renewable energy). Integrate mentorship, internships, and childcare support to ensure female participation and graduation into decent work.

4. Strengthen infrastructure and second-chance programmes

Partner with international organisations to invest in gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g., separate latrines, safe dormitories for girls). Establish robust second-chance education programmes with flexible schedules (e.g., night classes) for dropouts and victims of early marriage.



Providing Djiboutian school dropouts and those who entered in early marriages with second-chance education. *Source: voicesofyouth.org*

5. Change social norms

Launch nationwide campaigns targeting parents and community leaders to challenge norms around early marriage and highlight the economic and social benefits of educating girls. Mount awareness campaigns targeting parents, community leaders, and religious figures to shift perceptions about the value of educating girls.



Donation of new school facilities to the community of Bouyya, Djibouti | *Source: mncg.org* (Multinational CIMIC Group)

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