Gender and Primary School Dropout in Sudan: girls' education and retention in Red Sea State

Within the Sudanese context, education retention and completion are major challenges that have not been seriously and sufficiently addressed. In order to understand in more depth how and why children drop out of primary school in Sudan, six empirical studies were planned as part of an EU-funded national programme focused on primary education and retention in the five states with the lowest Basic Education completion rates: Blue Nile, Gedaref, Kassala, South Kordofan and Red Sea. This paper discusses the second of the six studies (focused on the factors affecting the education and retention of girls in Red Sea State) with the aim of providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding and analysis of the challenges that girls, in particular, face in accessing schooling, staying in school and completing the primary cycle (grades 1-8). Specifically, the paper provides insights into the processes of dropout and indicators of risk factors that can be used to predict dropout for girls.

The section below discusses the complex social, political and economic context in which girls experience schooling in Sudan.

1. Context for the research

Sudan (officially the Republic of Sudan) is the third largest country on the African continent with a coastline bordering the Red Sea and land borders with Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, and Libya. A country of tremendous ethnic and linguistic diversity, the largest single ethnic group are Sudanese Arabs who are estimated to comprise 70% of the total Sudanese population of 45.7 million (BBC 2016). Sudanese Arabs are almost entirely (Sunni) Muslims and the majority speak Sudanese Arabic (BBC 2016). In the northeast of the country bordering Egypt to the north, the Red Sea to the east and Eritrea to the south is Red Sea State, where the largest ethnic group is a traditionally pastoralist and nomadic Cushitic people known as the Beja (Paul 2012). With high rainfall variability, scarcity of water, low natural productivity and extreme temperatures, Red Sea State experiences extreme livelihoods vulnerability and currently has the highest rates of malnutrition in the country (Babiker and Pantuliano 2006; UNICEF 2013).

Since its independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan has often been embroiled in internal conflict. In large part this has been due to identity politics and the 1956 constitution failing to address two crucial issues: Sudan's official status as a secular or Islamist state, and the country's federal structure. Decades of struggle by the mainly Christian and animist south against rule by the Arab Muslim north resulted in two rounds of north-south civil war (1955-1972, 1983-2005), which led to the succession of the south and ultimately the creation of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011. Conflict in the western Darfur region between non-Arab rebel groups (mainly the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement) and the janjaweed (Arabized nomadic tribes) supported by the Sudanese government is ongoing. As a result of these conflicts, Sudan has lost over 80 percent of its oilfields to the south and faced economic stagnation, a slowing of GDP growth and high inflation. Sudan currently ranks 167 on UNDP's Human Development Index (UNDP 2016).

In terms of education, 70% of the primary school-aged population in Sudan are enrolled in school (UNDP 2016). However, there is substantial student dropout at the primary level: 20.1 % of students will drop out before reaching the last grade of primary education, and young Sudanese on average complete only 7 years of schooling (World Bank 2012). Moreover, there are massive regional disparities and Basic Education completion statistics vary enormously between Sudanese states with Red Sea State falling well below the national average in relation to the indicators of Gross Intake, Gross Enrolment Rate (GER), Completion Rate and Retention Rate (PERP 2012). In addition, location, vulnerability and gender affect access to schooling in Sudan, with disadvantaged groups being significantly under-represented, urban children being 17% more likely than rural children to be at school, and boys being 8% more likely to be participating in primary education than girls (2010 school census).

2. Girls' dropout – wider educational debates

This study is situated within wider educational debates around access to education for all within the context of developing countries. The section below discusses the general trends and debates related to dropout and gender with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa.

2.1 General trends and dropout

Since the Dakar Framework for Action was adopted at the World Education Forum and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) came into force in 2000, the Education for All (EFA) movement has been a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults. In some ways, the world has made significant progress toward the achievement of the six EFA goals, with 50 million more children enrolled in school today than in 1999. However, globally, the percentage of children dropping out before they have completed a full cycle of primary education has hardly changed since 1999. In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of children reaching the last grade has actually worsened, with only 54% of children reaching the last grade in 2004 compared with 58% in 1999 (UNESCO 2015). In Sudan, the primary dropout rate in 2013 was 20.6% (UNESCO 2016). In Red Sea State, where this study is situated, the primary drop out rate was 31.1% (PERP 2013). Contributing to the problem is that dropout has often been neglected within research and policy agendas.

Dropout is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that occurs after children have already achieved access to school. A major issue in many developing countries, the problem of dropout is often obscured by emphasis placed by governments and international agencies on initial access to school. Moreover, the phenomenon of dropout is often invisible in national and regional education statistics. This is because statistical data, such as gross enrolment ratios (GERs) and net enrolment ratios (NERs), are insensitive to changes in enrolment status over short periods of time. They also do not capture children who dropped out and re-entered the education system at a later stage (Dunne and Ananga 2012). Thus, while school dropout is a serious problem that is extremely widespread in developing countries, it is often hidden from view and overlooked within research and policy agendas. While there is a range of literature which addresses the subject of dropout, few studies focus on 'dropout' as a central theme. More frequently, dropout is embedded within studies focusing on access more generally. Another challenge is that dropout tends to be viewed as an event, rather than a process. As a result, factors contributing to the final push from school are often isolated out and made prominent. On the other hand, few studies focus on the complex processes and the push/pull factors within households, schools and communities which factor into dropout over time. Moreover, the quantitative emphasis of many studies means that the personal stories of children who have dropped out, parents and teachers are often neglected (Hunt 2008).

Dropout varies between and within countries and occurs more frequently in certain age ranges and grades (depending on the educational structure and patterns of participation in that country). However, certain broad trends have been identified. Using national data from 13 sub-Saharan African countries to compare patterns of enrolment over time, research by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) at the University of Sussex has revealed the following general patterns of educational exclusion due to dropout: a) most children out of school have dropped out rather than never enrolled; b) increased enrolment rates are often accompanied by increased dropout and a greater number of over-age children who are more likely to drop out; c) children nominally enrolled but learning little face 'silent exclusion' and are at risk of dropping out; d) dropout is linked to both demand-side and supply-side factors. Supply-side problems (i.e.: insufficient number of schools, too few qualified teachers, poor quality learning environment) remain a serious constraint to achieving access to basic education for all. On the other hand, demand-side problems (i.e.: rising opportunity costs, lack of perceived relevance of education, early marriage) are growing in importance as enrolment rates increase and basic education is extended to include higher grades; and finally e) expanding access to secondary schooling is critical to achieving universal access to primary schools. Unless transition rates to lower secondary are high, demand to complete primary schooling will soften (CREATE 2014). Studies on the school environment from across Sub-Saharan Africa also indicate that various forms of violence, including corporal punishment, verbal abuse and sexual abuse are part of daily life for many students and contribute to a hostile environment within schools. As being in school

often places young girls and boys in difficult, uncomfortable and even vulnerable circumstances, it is not surprising that many children and youth choose to drop out (Leach et al., 2003; Dunne et al., 2005; Dunne, 2007).

2.2 Gender and dropout

Dropout varies within countries, and previous research has shown that differences in school completion are often most stark between children from urban and rural areas, between children from the poorest and richest wealth quintiles and between children with educated or uneducated mothers (Colclough et al 2000; Colclough 2008; Unterhalter 2008; Arnot and Fennell 2008). Dropout rates are also highly sensitive to gender. In low income countries, gender disparities in enrolment are commonly at the expense of girls, with only 20% of low-income countries achieving gender parity in primary education, 10% in lower secondary education and 8% in upper secondary education. Moreover, three-quarters of the countries farthest from achieving gender parity within education are in sub-Saharan Africa. The gender disparity in education in developing countries described above is in marked contrast to the situation in middle and high income countries where 2% of upper income countries have a gender disparity at the expense of boys in primary education, 23% in lower secondary education and 62% in upper secondary education (UNESCO 2014).

The fact that gender disparities within education are not globally consistent indicates that the differences in educational access, achievement and outcomes between girls and boys are a result of notions of gender (the socially constructed roles, attributes, activities and responsibilities associated with being male or female in a given society) and unequal gender relations, which often manifest themselves through an inequitable distribution of educational resources, opportunities and power. Moreover, gender does not produce categories of people in particular ways. Rather, it intersects with other social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity, disability, and so on, to construct new forms of social exclusion. In this way, girls from low income groups within ethnic minority communities (simultaneously bearing exclusions of gender, ethnicity and class) are often the most marginalized and excluded from participation in education (March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay 1999).

Attempts by governments, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs to address the problem of girls' dropout have traditionally been grounded within Women in Development (WID) frameworks. Framed through economic 'efficiency' arguments, WID approaches generally focus on the benefits of girls' education for others in terms of faster economic growth, more productive agriculture, smaller and better educated families and reduced infant and child mortality ('if you educate a girl, you educate a whole nation') (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005). From a WID perspective, the goal is to expand education for girls and women through an equal allocation of resources and a focus on gender parity (counting the number of girls as compared with the number of boys). In practice, this might entail providing an equal number of places in school for boys and girls, providing them with equal resources, such as learning materials and school toilets, and providing 'equal' opportunity for male and female candidates to enter Teaching Training Colleges.

However, the WID focus on gender parity obscures deeply embedded structures of power and exclusion, such as discriminatory laws, customs, practices and institutional processes which undermine opportunities and outcomes for girls in education. For example, WID interventions, such as abolishing school fees and providing food in return for school attendance, typically do not raise questions about the gendered curriculum, the gendered practices of teachers, the gendered nature of school management practices or the gendered structures of power in society. Moreover, WID policies to address gender parity often obscure the unequal conditions under which girls participate in schooling as a result of the social and cultural expectations on them to perform all domestic labour and childcare within the home. As the social expectations upon girls often limit their opportunities to rest adequately, enjoy leisure time and keep up with their schoolwork, they often experience disadvantage in terms of educational opportunities and academic performance in relation to boys. Similarly, seemingly 'gender neutral' education policies and processes can actually end up disadvantaging girls and women (Leach 2003). For example, assumptions that male and female teachers interact with Teacher Education structures on equal terms fail to take into account the different positions, needs and experiences of men and women within society. This obscures the particular

problems that female teachers may have at deployment or in relation to their career advancement (i.e.: postings to rural areas, separation from husbands, sexual harassment, marital responsibilities, childbirth and maternity leave). As male and female teachers are assumed to be the same and enter the teaching profession on equal terms within a WID framework, they are treated the same and there is no affirmative action to equalise conditions between them (Mulugeta 2012).

The examples above illustrate the problems with focusing on gender equality ('sameness') without also considering issues of gender equity (fair and just outcomes) in order to address imbalances between males and females. Gender equity involves moving beyond a mere 'counting of girls in school' to an analysis of the complex processes entailed in the reproduction and transmission of gendered identities and unequal gender relations within the family, the labour market, the community and the state (including education) (Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996). A focus on equity within education can help both girls and boys to develop their freedoms to choose lives that they have reason to value (Sen 1999). Conversely, simply adding girls and women to existing education systems and structures without addressing issues of gender equity is, at best, likely to only result in short-term (and often superficial) benefits for a particular group of girls (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005).

3.   Methodology

3.1 Research design

In order to discern the factors affecting girls' access to education and retention in primary schools (grades 1-8) in Red Sea State, empirical research was conducted in 3 locations (Port Sudan, Hayya and Tokar) over a period of 12 days between March and April, 2015. These locations were selected for analysis by the Sudan Ministry of Education (SMoE) because they have the highest rates of school dropout and repetition and they represent an urban location (Port Sudan), a rural location (Hayya) and a remote rural location (Tokar). Located on the Red Sea, Port Sudan, with a population of approximately 500,000 people, is Sudan's main port city and is home to approximately 60% of the state's population. Hayya is a town of about 218,557 people that is a junction station on the mainline of the Sudan railway network. Tokar is a town of approximately 40,000 people, which is located 160 km south of Port Sudan close to the Eritrean border.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study in order to capture the views, voices and perspectives of girls' and to produce an in-depth account based on their experiences of schooling and dropout. As many previous studies on dropout have been conducted through a quantitative methodology (household surveys, large scale questionnaires, statistical/ econometric approaches), this study addressed a gap in the literature by providing the personal perspectives of girls who are still in school, those who have dropped out, as well as those of key stakeholders, such as parents and teachers (Hunt 2008). A qualitative approach to the study also complemented the quantitative data that was being gathered in the target localities (baseline studies, EMIS, rapid survey) by the project implementing agencies (two large INGOs). Initial research questions that framed the study included:

1. Why do girls not stay in school or not attend at all?
2. If they are not in school, what are girls of primary age doing?
3. What are the factors in their families and communities that contribute to girls dropping out?
4. What factors in and around the learning environment may also play a role?
5. How do girls themselves see dropout and schooling?
6. What factors or changes would make it possible for girls to stay in school?

Each participant group (discussed below) was asked a particular set of questions. As the research progressed, further questions emerged through an iterative approach.

Consistent with a qualitative research methodology, research methods for the study included document analysis (state, national, international levels), informal observations recorded in a fieldwork diary and focus

group discussions conducted with girls in school, girls not in school, boys not in school, mothers, fathers, teachers and head teachers. Over the course of 12 days, 11 focus groups (3-8 participants each) were held (4 in Port Sudan, 3 in Hayya and 4 in Tokar) with a total of 59 participants. 18 girls not in school (aged 10-19) were interviewed to determine their reasons for dropping out of school before completing the primary cycle of education. Interviews with 12 girls in school (aged 10-15) were conducted to ascertain the factors that prevented some girls from dropping out. 5 boys (aged 10-13) were also interviewed to determine which factors resulting in dropout had a specifically gendered dimension disadvantaging girls. In order to capture the views of stakeholders within the education process, 10 parents (4 mothers and 6 fathers), 6 teachers and 8 head teachers of the girls interviewed were also consulted. The number of focus groups conducted depended on the time available in each field site, and the number of respondents interviewed in each category was determined by their availability.

Interviews were conducted by the lead researcher (author) and a local female researcher familiar with the area and a native Arabic speaker. In order to comply with government regulations, research instruments were drafted by the lead researcher, vetted by the project team leader and finalised through consultations with officials at the Federal Ministry of Education (FMoE) through a validation workshop. The local researcher translated all interview guides into Arabic before the commencement of the fieldwork. At the start of each focus group, Bio-sheets (used to collect personal data) were distributed to each participant to complete with help from the researchers. In order to conform with local traditions, focus groups were conducted in single-sex groups. Interviews were conducted in English (teachers and head teachers), Arabic (girls in school, girls not in school, boys not in school, parents) and, where necessary, the local language of Beja (girls not in school in Port Sudan and Hayya). When required, translation was conducted with the interview questions first being read in English and then translated into either Arabic or Beja. Interviews conducted in Arabic were done through the assistance of the local researcher. Interviews conducted in Beja were done through the assistance of two local research assistants (one male and one female). Where possible, interviews were recorded and later transcribed into English.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic coding of the explanations and viewpoints of interviewees on issues related to girls' education and dropout. This enabled the researchers to note patterns, count the frequency of occurrence, make interpretations and develop tentative theories, relating the findings of the study to previous literature and research.   From this, a general narrative description of the educational experiences of girls in Red Sea State was produced.

3.2 Challenges in executing the research

A number of bureaucratic and logistical issues arose during the planning and execution of the research that added layers of complexity to the research process and limited what was possible to achieve within the allotted timeframe.

First, semi-structured interviews were specifically selected for the purposes of this research study, as they allow local, individual and marginalized viewpoints to emerge more readily than are possible with structured interviews. The advantage of using a flexible interview schedule is that respondents can decide what is important and create the categories for the interview, directing the conversation towards issues of interest or concern to them. This enables the emergence of unexpected or unanticipated answers, which can challenge the researchers' preconceptions and suggest unthought-of relationships or hypotheses. However, due to the requirement that all research questions had to be vetted through the FMoE through a validation workshop at the national level, this flexibility was largely lost, and the interview process became far more rigid than originally intended. The research process, and particularly the fieldwork duration, were also subject to the obtaining of national and local authorisations. While these permissions were granted at both levels, the period of fieldwork permitted was less than had initially been requested.

In terms of access to participants, access to girls out of school proved to be challenging in all three localities, as these girls were often sequestered in the home and many were unknown to education officials. This was particularly the case for girls who had dropped out of school at a very young age or had never enrolled in school. Access to fathers also proved to be challenging, as they were often unable to commit their time and attention for the duration of the interview and were often called away mid-interview to attend to personal matters.

The section below discusses the main findings of the study.

4. Research findings and discussion

As discussed earlier, previous research has largely focused on dropout as an event rather than a process. However, the findings of this study indicate that there are complex processes and push/pull factors within households, schools and communities which contribute to dropout over time. Moreover, there are specific gender-related factors that can encourage dropout. This section discusses the findings of the research on girls' education and retention in Red Sea State and provides insights into the processes of dropout and indicators of risk factors that can be used to predict dropout for girls. In keeping with the unique qualitative emphasis of this study, the personal stories of girls who have dropped out, those who have remained in school, parents and teachers are highlighted.

4.1 Home and community-based factors:

The findings of this study indicate that home and community-based factors are among the most significant in relation to girls dropping out of school in Red Sea State. The following home and community-based factors were the most noteworthy in determining girls' retention in school in each of the three localities.

4.1.1 Both parents living

Focus group interviews with girls in and out of school revealed that girls tended to be in school and remain in school if they lived with both of their parents. A stable home life seemed to provide the economic and social security that was conducive to helping girls to stay in school. Girls who came from families where the parents had divorced and remarried did not seem to indicate a higher risk for dropout if the father (or step-father) was present in the home.

On the other hand, a significant number of girls who had dropped out of school in all three localities came from families in which one parent had died or the parents had divorced and not remarried. In households where the mother had died, girls (particularly the eldest girl in the family) often became responsible for domestic work and childcare within the home. On the other hand, girls whose fathers had died were more likely to be married early or sent out to work as domestic workers in other people's homes in order to relieve the 'financial burden' on the family. In both cases, girls in these circumstances often dropped out of school. As one girl out of school explained,

> My father died so my mother asked me to leave school and work in a neighbour's home to bring money. It is boring and I miss my friends.

4.1.2 Education of parents and their participation in their daughters' education

Nearly all girls who were regularly attending school had parents that were educated at least to secondary level. In many instances (particularly in Tokar), girls in school had mothers that had reached or completed tertiary education. Parents (mothers and fathers) who were educated tended to strongly believe in the value of education for girls (for the girl's benefit as well as for the benefit of the family). Moreover, these parents tended to be actively involved in their daughters' education, were able to help them with their schoolwork, were actively involved in Parent-Teacher Associations and regularly participated in school meetings. Educated parents also tended to be more financially secure. As one female teacher in Port Sudan explained,

If the parents have a car and a good house, they are more involved in their daughter's education and visit the school.

In terms of providing girls with help with their schoolwork, the education of mothers seemed to be more important, as mothers were the ones who were most often present and available in the home for the girls to talk to. On the other hand, education of fathers seemed to be more important in terms of girls' retention in school, as they were the ones who made the financial decisions for the family, and they were the ones who made decisions in relation to their daughter's marriage.

In contrast to girls in school, the vast majority of girls out of school came from homes where their parents were not educated. Parents who were not educated often had a lower appreciation of the value of girls' education or tended to view education of girls solely in terms of how it could economically benefit the family. Uneducated parents often felt unable to help their daughters with their schoolwork once they advanced past the early grades. Moreover, due to their status as 'uneducated', these parents often lacked the confidence to approach and engage with the school because, as one uneducated mother stated, 'uneducated people are different from educated people'. Due to their lack of communication with the school, uneducated parents felt as if they didn't understand what was required of them to support their daughters' education. Fathers, in particular, seemed to play a very limited role in the education of girls who had dropped out. Many of these girls complained that their fathers had always been busy and away from home and that they were not available to help them with their schoolwork or to provide them with guidance on school-related matters. On the other hand, fathers often saw their roles in their daughters' education in very limited ways, such as only being responsible to provide the material and financial resources for them to go to school (i.e. textbooks, clothes, pens, bags, uniforms and money for transportation to school).

4.1.3 Culture and tradition in relation to gender roles and responsibilities

Particularly important in determining whether or not girls would continue their education were attitudes in the family relating to gender roles and responsibilities. For example, parents (both mothers and fathers) who believed in the intellectual capabilities of girls to achieve academically tended to support their daughters' continued attendance in school. Moreover, parents who believed in the possibility of women working outside of the home tended to support their daughters' education. These parental views and expectations were often related to whether or not the parents themselves had been educated.

On the other hand, parents who did not believe in the intellectual capabilities of girls to achieve in school, or only believed that girls could excel in certain subjects, often did not feel that their daughters' education was worth the investment. Moreover, parents who believed strongly that 'a woman's place is in the home' and that her 'role' is to take care of the home and the family did not believe in education for girls or believed that education for girls should be limited to basic literacy, Qur'anic studies and domestic education (sewing, cooking) to enable girls to become better housewives and mothers. As these modest educational goals could be achieved within only a few years of schooling, some parents saw no reason to retain their daughters in school past their acquisition of these skills. Ironically, prescribed gender roles for girls sometimes encouraged parents to send their girls to school and to keep them there as long as possible due to limited employment prospects for girls due to cultural constraints. As one father in Hayya explained,

> Boys can find jobs anywhere (eg. as a driver, bus conductor, shop keeper), but girls need an education to find a job.

Prescribed gender roles and responsibilities for girls within the home (cooking, cleaning and taking care of younger siblings) were critical to decisions relating to girls' retention in school. While girls in school generally reported that their household duties were minimal (due to support from their mothers and older sisters), or restricted to contributions to the home made after school, girls who had dropped out of school often reported that they had been responsible for housework and childcare both before and after school. This work often made them tired, gave them little time for rest or leisure activities and did not provide them with enough time or energy to adequately

complete their schoolwork. For girls who were the oldest in the family, as well as girls in families where the mother had died, this domestic burden was increased. As one girl in Tokar reported,

> I stopped going to school because my mother got pregnant and asked me to help her at home.

On the other hand, all girls (both in and out of school) indicated that their father and brothers took no part in domestic work or childcare. Rather, as girls, it was their 'responsibility' to perform these 'duties' in the home. Although boys were not expected to work in the home, boys out of school reported that they experienced pressure from their parents and from society to work outside the home to financially contribute to the family. This was particularly the case in Port Sudan where the availability of employment opportunities (for males) in the city made leaving school to enter paid work both possible and attractive for boys.

Another important issue related to gender was the concern expressed by (mainly uneducated) parents about the influence of schooling on girls' attitudes and aspirations. Fathers in particular often perceived education for girls as a threat to local cultural traditions and norms related to male authority. As one father in Hayya explained,

> Girls may do bad things if they are educated, such as go out to work and meet males. Educated girls can challenge the authority of their father and refuse to get married. Girls who go to school become impolite and stand up for their rights and challenge their husbands.

As such, these fathers were hesitant to keep their daughters in school.

Fathers in particular complained about poverty being a major source of their unwillingness to continue to send their girls to school, as they believed that to educate girls was more expensive than to educate boys. However, through in-depth discussions it emerged that for fathers the cost of educating sons and daughters was actually the same. Rather, the perceived higher costs associated with sending girls to school were actually in relation to transportation costs for girls who they felt needed to be 'protected' from damage to their (and their family's) reputation by interacting with boys on the street. In other words, cost differentials in educating boys and girls can be explained through culturally constructed notions of 'honour and shame', where females are made responsible to preserve the 'honour' of the family and community through regulating their dress, movements and behaviour (conditions which do not apply to boys). For parents, these cultural constructions relating to girls' 'honour' tended to be articulated in rigid terms through particular interpretations of Islam ('we are ruled by Islam') and regulated through social pressure from the community. However, in contrast to the claims made by many fathers, the vast majority of girls indicated that they walked to school and so did not incur any additional costs for their parents.

4.1.4 Early marriage

Directly related to the prescribed gender roles and responsibilities discussed above, but deserving particular mention, is the issue of child marriage, which is pervasive in the communities studied in Red Sea State (marriages in some cases being arranged from birth). As family sizes in these communities are large and there is little family planning ('we are ready to receive the number of children that come'), which intensifies economic hardship within the household, most fathers expressed a desire to marry off their children quickly. However, their particular choice to marry off their daughters (rather than their sons) shortly after they reached puberty was due to fears of them bringing shame on the family. Once a girl was married, she not only became the financial responsibility of her husband but her behaviour now reflected on him, rather than her father. As one father in Hayya explained,

> If someone proposes, we agree to be free from the responsibility (both financial and honour).

Many girls expressed that they felt they had no choice but to accept proposals that came and to do their 'duty' and marry. As one girl stated, 'marriage cannot be planned, it is kismet'. Early marriage has profound implications for education, and most of the girls out of school dropped out either because their husbands did not permit them to stay in school ('my husband wants me to be a housewife') or because they were now responsible for all the domestic

work in the home and were engaged in pregnancy and/or childcare, which did not give them enough time or energy to continue their education. Although some girls indicated that there were special classes provided for girls who had become pregnant, most did not see attendance as a viable option for the reasons previously mentioned. Girls were generally not happy to have dropped out of school. As one girl from Tokar stated,

> My life is OK but being educated is better. Staying at home doesn't benefit us. Domestic work is boring.

By contrast, interviews with girls in school revealed that none of them had yet married.

4.2 School-based factors:

In addition to home and community-based factors, the findings of this study indicate that school-based factors are very significant in relation to girls dropping out of school in Red Sea State. The following school-based factors were the most significant in determining girls' retention or dropout from school.

4.2.1 Quality of education and teaching

In general, all girls (both those in school and those who had dropped out) expressed satisfaction with their school environment in terms of infrastructure and facilities. Girls generally reported that their school was within walking distance (or in the case of Port Sudan, a short rickshaw ride away), had an adequate supply of water and electricity (subject to power cuts) and separate toilets for girls. Moreover, food was available at or near almost all schools (either freely provided or available for purchase at subsidized rates). Most girls reported that they felt safe to walk to school alone or in groups (this was especially the case in the close-knit rural communities of Hayya and Tokar). As a result, none of these factors seemed to be significant in determining whether or not girls stayed in school (the one exception being the difficulty of families engaged in nomadic livelihoods to access schools in rural areas, such as Tokar, due to the nature of nomadic life). Rather, for the girls, education quality was most important in influencing their decisions to remain in school or drop out, and they understood educational quality in terms of their experiences in school and their interaction with teachers, in particular. These findings challenge WID-based assumptions often held by education policymakers and planners that dropout (particularly for girls) can simply be addressed by improving educational infrastructure (i.e. providing toilets for girls) or providing free school meals.

Girls in school generally spoke about how they enjoyed learning and were satisfied with the quality of teaching. For the girls, a 'good teacher' was someone who could explain curriculum content clearly, was engaging in the classroom, freely gave of his/her time to students and did not punish students indiscriminately. Also important to the girls was the care teachers expressed towards them and the courtesy of teachers in their communications with students. As one girl in school said, 'I like going to school because our teacher loves us'. Most girls (in and out of school) expressed that they felt more comfortable having female teachers, because 'they understand us, and it is easier to communicate with them'.

On the other hand, girls not in school often spoke about how their experiences in school and their interactions with teachers had not been positive. Frequently mentioned was teachers' inability to explain curriculum content clearly, their lack of classroom management skills, and their frequent use of corporal punishment when students arrived late to school or were unable to complete their schoolwork. As one girl who had dropped out of school in Hayya reported,

> I hated school because I was beaten by a specific teacher (hit in the face). I will not return to school until that teacher changes his behaviour.

Girls who had dropped out of school also reported that their teacher had often shouted at them and made them feel afraid, left them alone in the class unsupervised for long periods of time and sometimes asked them to come to their homes to clean, serve their visitors or retrieve things for them from the shop.

For their part, teachers widely reported that they felt demoralized and unmotivated due to the poor conditions of service, low salaries, low status of teachers in the community, lack of recognition for their work and lack of opportunities for promotion and advancement. As one female teacher from Port Sudan explained,

> In the past, there was a song about teachers and people wanted to marry a teacher, but now teachers are not well educated and they have poor salaries. I will not encourage my children to be teachers because they are poor and not respected in the community. Even if we work hard to get another degree, we are not recognised.

Several female teachers said that they had entered the teaching profession only because teaching was one of the few 'suitable jobs for females' open to them in the community, as female teachers could work without having to travel away from home, which might be required of them in other professions.

As the number of schools for girls is small (particularly in Hayya and Tokar), and relatively few teachers are employed per subject, teachers explained how they were forced to teach unreasonably large classes (up to 100 students per class at primary level). Large classes forced the teachers to resort to using traditional teaching methods, like lecturing, which did not enable them to pay attention to individual student needs. Moreover, large class sizes meant that the teachers did not have the time or energy to provide extracurricular activities for the students. Classroom management was a recurring concern, and students often complained that excessive classroom noise and quarreling amongst the students both distracted them from learning and made the learning environment unpleasant. As a result of the complex classroom management issues related to large class sizes and teachers' limited training to deal with such issues, teachers reported that they often resorted to using corporal punishment to control the class. As one male teacher from Port Sudan explained,

> In the past, families asked us to hit their children, but now teachers cannot hit children by law. Students don't respect us if we don't hit them.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, students commented that fear of the teacher and corporal punishment discouraged them from wanting to remain in school.

As a result of the challenges they faced in teaching within the public education system, several teachers expressed a desire to move to employment within private schools, where salaries were higher and training and advancement opportunities were present. Other teachers expressed a desire to leave the teaching profession altogether. On the other hand, a number of teachers expressed that they received great intrinsic satisfaction from teaching. These teachers had a strong desire to improve their professional practice through in-service training (INSET) in creative teaching methodologies and the use of computers and information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom. In other words, teacher motivation was often linked to professional development. However, teachers noted that these training opportunities were generally not available to them.

4.2.2 Lack of student progression and academic failure

A significant factor in whether or not girls remained in school was related to their levels of academic success. Girls in school almost unanimously reported that they were doing well in most or all subjects and that they had not been asked to repeat any grade. Girls tended to like subjects in which they excelled and in which they felt they had a good teacher.

On the other hand, girls who had dropped out of school generally reported that they had been toward the bottom of the class in terms of achievement, had failed one or more subjects and then were not able to progress to the next grade. In some cases, girls had repeated grades several times. There were several reasons for this academic failure. In some instances, girls felt that the curriculum was too challenging (often due to irrelevance or age inappropriateness). This was a particular issue for girls whose parents were uneducated and who did not have

anyone to help them with their schoolwork. Although many older girls (both in school and those who had dropped out) indicated that they had paid for evening classes from their teachers (a form of supplemental income for cash-strapped teachers), these classes did not seem to help students to avoid academic failure. As students began to fail, their confidence was shaken, and they began to dislike school.

Other students experienced failure as a result of ongoing and/or persistent absences from school. For some girls, these absences were related to an inability to get to school (as a result of disability, tiredness from excessive domestic work or ongoing illness) or avoidance of going to school (as a result of loss of confidence, fear of the teacher or bullying from other students). As absences increased and accumulated, students started falling behind in their schoolwork, failing in exams and were unable to catch up. For these students, dropout took place over time and was gradual rather than a specific event. Because of the large classes they were working with, teachers were often unaware of the warning signs of dropout or were unable to address them. As one female teacher from Port Sudan explained,

> I cannot pay attention to every student. I don't know when students are absent.

Another factor in school retention related to academic achievement was personal aspiration. Girls in school generally enjoyed education and valued it as a way to achieve their personal goals and dreams. In other words, they were intrinsically motivated to continue their education. On the other hand, girls out of school generally lacked intrinsic motivation and tended to view their education narrowly in terms of how it could benefit their families ('it will benefit my [future] children'). Also playing a role in student motivation were girls' expectations in relation to the outcomes of their education. When asked what they wanted to do in the future, virtually all girls (in school and out) said they wanted to be teachers, doctors or engineers. While being a teacher was a reasonable goal for many girls, the high academic achievements required to enter the fields of medicine or engineering meant that these goals were unrealistic and unattainable for most students. With their limited knowledge of other potential careers open to them, many girls who were not high achieving academically simply gave up hope that their education would one day help them to participate in the labour market.

4.2.3 Gender bias within schools

Related to student achievement is the issue of gender bias in schools. Within schools in Red Sea State, girls and boys study the same subjects, follow the same curriculum and use the same textbooks. However, focus groups with teachers revealed that they have very different expectations for student behaviour and achievement based on gender. Teachers and head teachers generally believed that there were inherent differences between girls and boys in terms of characteristics ('girls are helpful, obedient and quiet') and in relation to academic ability ('boys are cleverer in science and math'). Moreover, these differences between males and females were understood by the interviewees to be innate from birth and 'given by Allah'. Thus, they were 'natural' and could not be changed.

These beliefs about the differences between boys and girls shaped teacher expectations of students ('girls are less gifted but are more motivated'), and influenced their assignment of roles, tasks and responsibilities for students within the school. As one male teacher from Tokar explained,

> Boys should be class president because boys have courage and girls are afraid. We assign girls to clean the classroom and fetch water.

Moreover, these beliefs also influenced teachers' views on suitable types of education for males and females, with males being guided into types of education that would enable them to perform their socially constructed roles as 'breadwinners' for the family and girls being encouraged to develop skills which would enable them to perform their future 'roles' as homemakers and mothers. As a female teacher from Tokar reported,

> Technical and vocational education is better for boys so they will find a job sooner. Home economics and domestic education are better for girls so they will raise their children in a better way.

When asked their opinions on the best ways to encourage girls to stay in school, teachers often drew on their understandings of expected gender roles for males and females in society. As one female teacher from Tokar suggested,

> To keep girls in school, tell them they will not marry a good man if they are not educated. Give them kitchen resources and sewing machines.

Moreover, interviews with girls revealed how constructions of gender transmitted through the curriculum (with its focus on the achievements of males in history and science), and mediated through teachers, was helping to influence girls in how they saw themselves. For example, a few girls indicated that they were not doing well in math 'because they were girls'. Thus, although boys and girls were studying the same curriculum in the same classrooms in Red Sea State, they were often not receiving the same education.

4.2.4 Lack of re-entry strategies and mechanisms

Once girls dropped out, after a period of time passed, they often felt that they couldn't return to school because of being overage. As one girl from Tokar reported,

> I can't go back to primary school because of my age. I will feel shy, and I have no friends there anymore.

Moreover, many of the girls who had dropped out indicated that although they would like to return to school, they had no strategy for doing so and they had no one to support them in this endeavour. Teachers and headteachers also reported that their schools did not provide any re-entry mechanisms for girls **who had dropped out to** re-enter.

5.   **Conclusions**

The discussion above has highlighted the key factors which are affecting girls' education and retention in schools in the Red Sea State communities of Port Sudan, Hayya and Tokar. The findings indicate that there are home, community and school-based factors which are influencing girls' decisions to stay in school or drop out. Moreover, parents and teachers have a particularly strong influence over girls' retention in school either by directly or indirectly influencing the girls' decisions to stay in school, or in the case of parents (and especially fathers), making these decisions on behalf of the girls.

In terms of home and community-based factors affecting girls' dropout, the most significant are the presence of both parents in the home, the parent's level of education and their active support of, and involvement in, their daughters' education (particularly for fathers). Although poverty is a factor affecting parents' decisions to withdraw their children from school (influenced by the indirect costs of schooling and the opportunity costs of education), it is attitudes in the family relating to gender roles and responsibilities, as well as familial and community beliefs and practices around child marriage, that determine if the particular children withdrawn from school will be girls.

In terms of school-based factors, girls generally do not make decisions about staying in school based on infrastructure issues (school buildings, water and electricity supplies, the availability of food), nor do they put much emphasis on the presence or absence of specific facilities and services for girls in schools (toilets for girls, provision of 'period' supplies). Rather the content of education, the quality of teaching and their achievement and progression in school are the most significant factors influencing their decisions to stay in school. For parents (particularly those that are uneducated), it is beliefs about the relevance of education to prepare their children for their future 'roles' in society (boys as future 'breadwinners', girls as future 'wives and mothers') which influence their decisions to keep them in school. Moreover, these beliefs about gender roles are reproduced in the school through the formal curriculum, which is then mediated by teachers who hold different expectations for students based on gender. Gender bias reproduced in the home and through schools is significant in shaping the educational experiences and future aspirations of girls.

Girls who drop out of school in Red Sea State generally end up in fulltime domestic work either at home or in the homes of others as domestic workers (in contrast to boys, who generally end up in paid employment). Although many girls express a desire to return to school, most say that they have no strategy for doing so, nor do they have anyone to support them in this endeavor.

Based on the discussion and conclusions above, it is clear that the causes of girls' dropout from school in Red Sea State are related to deep structural issues (content and relevance of education, quality of teaching) and cultural issues (gender roles and relations). Therefore, there can be no 'quick fixes', and WID-type interventions, such as providing school feeding programs, are unlikely to provide anything more than modest short-term gains which are unlikely to be sustainable in the long run or benefit more than a particular group of girls. As a result, what is needed to increase girls' retention in school and to facilitate girls' re-entry into school after they have dropped out are transformative approaches that require long-term and sustained commitment from educational policymakers and planners, parents, teachers and the girls themselves. These include increased and sustained investment in education (and particularly in teachers), provision of re-entry mechanisms for girls who have dropped out, community education and training on the importance of education for girls and improvement of school/community relations:

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