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Educational Inequality in Africa: Trends, Determinants, and Policy Pathways

Sibusiso Dlamini[1]

[1] Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

Correspondence: Sibusiso Dlamini, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa.

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Abstract

Educational inequality remains one of the most consequential barriers to inclusive development in Africa, persisting even as the continent has achieved historic gains in access to schooling. Drawing on secondary data from UNESCO, the World Bank, and national household and learning assessments, this article synthesizes the scale, structure, and determinants of educational inequality across Africa, with an emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. The analysis documents substantial progress in primary enrolment and completion, alongside persistent gaps in secondary and tertiary completion, learning poverty, and gender, wealth, spatial, and conflict-related disparities. It shows that Africa's education expansion has been accompanied by a deepening learning crisis: roughly nine in ten ten-year-olds on the continent are unable to read and understand a simple text, and only about one in ten African children reaches minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school. Wealth-based gaps remain the dominant driver of inequality, compounded by rural-urban divides, gender norms, conflict displacement, and chronic under-financing, with low-income countries spending roughly one dollar per learner for every 155 dollars spent in high-income countries. The article argues that closing these gaps requires moving beyond access-centered policies toward a systems approach that combines targeted financing, teacher quality, foundational learning, gender-responsive and spatially differentiated interventions, and resilient delivery in fragile contexts. Policy recommendations and priorities for future research are discussed.

Keywords: educational inequality, learning poverty, sub-Saharan Africa, gender gap, financing, human capital, access and completion

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as both a fundamental human right and a principal channel through which individuals accumulate human capital, escape poverty, and realize economic opportunity (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Over the past three decades, Africa has made remarkable strides in expanding access to schooling. Primary completion rates in sub-Saharan Africa rose from roughly 46 percent in 2000 to about 68 percent in 2024, adult literacy among those aged 15 and above increased from about 60 to 69 percent between 2015 and 2023, and the continent reached gender parity in primary enrolment in 2021 (UNESCO, 2024a, 2025). These achievements reflect sustained investment, policy reforms, and the global commitments embodied in the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Yet access is not the same as learning, and the expansion of schooling has not been accompanied by a commensurate improvement in educational quality or equity. Africa continues to carry the world's largest out-of-school population: an estimated 120 million children and adolescents were out of school in 2024, and although the gender gap in exclusion has narrowed dramatically, wealth, geography, gender norms, and conflict continue to structure educational opportunity in deeply unequal ways (UNESCO, 2024a, 2026). More fundamentally, the continent faces a severe learning crisis. According to the African Union, nine out of ten ten-year-olds in Africa are unable to read a simple text or perform basic mathematics (African Union Commission, 2024), and recent UNESCO analysis indicates that only about 10.8 percent of African children achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2025).

Educational inequality matters not only as a matter of fairness but also as a driver of persistent poverty and

weak economic performance. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the quality of learning, rather than mere years of schooling, is what drives growth, earnings, and intergenerational mobility (Angrist et al., 2021; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Where large segments of the population fail to acquire foundational skills, countries forego substantial economic dividends, and inequalities in learning translate directly into inequalities in income, health, and civic participation (Sahn & Younger, 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic amplified these dynamics, disrupting schooling across the continent and widening the digital and learning divides between advantaged and disadvantaged learners (Dang et al., 2023; Wawire et al., 2023).

This article examines educational inequality in Africa with a focus on its magnitude, structure, determinants, and policy implications. It addresses three interrelated questions. First, how large are the gaps in access, completion, and learning between different groups within African countries? Second, what factors—wealth, gender, geography, conflict, and financing—drive these inequalities? Third, what policy strategies are most likely to reduce them? Drawing on a synthesis of recent secondary data and empirical evidence, the article contributes to the growing literature on education and inequality in low-income contexts (Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024; Pritchett, 2021) and offers a structured evidence base for policymakers, researchers, and international partners.

The policy salience of educational inequality has intensified as Africa pursues ambitious regional agendas. The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016-2025 and the African Union's Agenda 2063 both place education at the center of inclusive growth, while SDG 4 commits member states to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030 (African Union Commission, 2024; UNESCO, 2025). Yet progress toward these equity targets has been uneven. In some dimensions gains have been rapid—gender parity in primary enrolment, for instance—while in others, such as upper-secondary completion and learning outcomes, progress has been slow and highly unequal across countries and population groups. This unevenness reflects the fact that educational inequality is not a single problem but a constellation of distinct gaps driven by different mechanisms, each requiring different policy responses.

Understanding the structure of educational inequality is therefore essential for sound policy. Inequality can be measured along several axes—access, completion, learning, and financing—and these dimensions do not always move together. A country may achieve near-universal primary enrolment while still exhibiting very high learning poverty; it may close gender gaps in access while wealth-based gaps in completion widen. Disaggregating inequality across its dimensions and examining how wealth, gender, geography, conflict, and financing intersect is thus a prerequisite for designing effective interventions. The present study responds to this complexity by bringing together recent data and evidence on the magnitude, structure, and determinants of educational inequality in Africa, and by drawing out the policy and research implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Educational Inequality

Scholarly work on educational inequality draws on several complementary theoretical traditions. Human capital theory, originating in the work of Becker and Schultz, treats education as an investment in productive capabilities whose returns accrue to individuals and societies alike; within this framework, unequal schooling reflects differential costs and expected returns facing families of different means (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018). Social reproduction theory, by contrast, emphasizes how education systems tend to perpetuate existing hierarchies of class, status, and power, transmitting advantage across generations rather than equalizing opportunity (Bourdieu, 1986, cited in Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024). The capability approach, articulated by Sen and elaborated by Unterhalter and North (2011) in relation to gender and education, reframes education as expanding people's freedoms and substantive opportunities, and thus foregrounds the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that constrain marginalized groups.

In the African context, early scholarship underscored the role of schooling as a mechanism of stratification in post-colonial societies, while later work demonstrated that household wealth and parental education are among the most powerful determinants of children's educational attainment (Filmer & Pritchett, 1999; Foster, 1980; Buchmann, 2000). More recent comparative research shows that although educational expansion across sub-Saharan Africa reduced inequality in school attendance, inequality in the completion of key grades has proved far more persistent, and cross-national variation is systematically explained by material deprivation, fertility, school fees, public spending, and pupil-teacher ratios (Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024).

2.2 Access, Completion, and the Learning Crisis

A large body of evidence documents Africa's distinctive pattern of high access but low learning. Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the world's highest primary enrolment ratios yet also some of the lowest completion rates and the weakest learning outcomes (World Bank, 2018, 2022). The World Development Report 2018 identified a global 'learning crisis' in which schooling does not guarantee learning, a diagnosis particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa where learning poverty—defined as the inability to read and understand a simple text by age ten—affects roughly nine in ten children (World Bank, 2022). Azevedo et al. (2021) formalized the learning poverty indicator, showing that even before the pandemic about half of all children in low- and middle-income countries could not read with comprehension by age ten, with rates far higher in sub-Saharan Africa.

Importantly, research distinguishes between inequality in access and inequality in learning, and shows that the latter is often larger and more consequential. Akmal and Pritchett (2021) demonstrate in five developing countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, that the gap in learning between rich and poor children is a substantial and frequently larger component of overall educational inequality than the more widely documented gaps in enrolment and grade attainment. Similarly, Spaull (2013) and Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) show that South Africa's education system, though well funded by regional standards, produces exceptionally unequal outcomes structured by race, language, geography, and socioeconomic status, with learning gaps of several grade levels between the poorest and richest students.

The economic consequences of these patterns are substantial. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) report that private returns to education remain high, particularly at the primary and lower-secondary levels in low-income countries, which implies that foregone learning carries large individual and social costs. Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) estimate that the learning losses associated with school closures—and, more generally, the persistent deficits in foundational skills—impose large cumulative costs on future earnings and growth. Angrist et al. (2021), using global learning data, show that differences in learning-adjusted human capital across countries are strongly associated with differences in per capita income, underscoring that Africa's learning crisis is simultaneously an economic crisis. These findings motivate a focus not merely on who is enrolled but on what children actually learn, and on how learning outcomes are distributed.

2.3 Measuring Inequality: Metrics and Their Limits

A recurrent methodological challenge in the study of educational inequality concerns measurement. Conventional indicators such as net enrolment ratios or average years of schooling capture the quantity of education but conceal the distribution of learning and the concentration of disadvantage (World Bank, 2018). Researchers have therefore developed a range of complementary metrics. The education Gini coefficient summarizes the distribution of educational attainment across a population, while the learning poverty indicator combines schooling and learning dimensions to identify children who are both out of school and unable to read with comprehension (Azevedo et al., 2021). Ratio-based measures, such as gender parity indices and richest-to-poorest attainment ratios, are widely used to track specific gaps (UNESCO, 2024a).

Each metric has strengths and limitations. Enrolment-based measures are widely available but say little about quality; completion rates capture a crucial threshold but ignore learning; learning-adjusted measures are more informative yet are available for only a subset of countries and grades. Filmer and Pritchett (1999) demonstrated how household asset indices can proxy for wealth in the absence of income data, enabling cross-country comparison of wealth-based educational inequality, an approach later extended by Plavgo and Bernardi (2024) to measure intergenerational educational inequality across 40 sub-Saharan African countries using Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. The diversity of available measures means that any credible account of educational inequality should triangulate multiple indicators; this study follows that approach, combining access, completion, learning, and financing indicators drawn from internationally comparable sources.

2.4 Gender, Wealth, Spatial, and Conflict Dimensions

Gender inequality in African education has narrowed but not disappeared. Globally, more boys than girls are now out of school, and Africa achieved gender parity in primary enrolment in 2021; however, gaps persist at secondary and tertiary levels and are especially acute for the poorest and rural girls (UNESCO, 2024a, 2026). Glick (2008) and Gajigo (2016) document how household costs, distance, safety, and gendered opportunity costs shape girls' schooling, and show that targeted interventions such as scholarships and girls' schools can yield substantial gains. Gender disadvantage is compounded by child marriage, early

pregnancy, and domestic responsibilities, which disproportionately drive girls out of education as they mature (Unterhalter & North, 2011).

Wealth and spatial inequalities are closely intertwined. Filmer and Pritchett (1999) established that household wealth strongly conditions enrolment and attainment across dozens of developing countries, a finding repeatedly confirmed for Africa (Buchmann, 2000; Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024). Rural-urban divides reflect unequal distribution of teachers, materials, infrastructure, and learning time; recent evidence from South Africa shows that where a child lives is nearly as predictive of literacy as socioeconomic status, and that rural schools exhibit a pattern of 'shared disadvantage' (Goldmann, 2026). Conflict and displacement further disrupt schooling and widen inequality, as violence destroys schools, displaces teachers and pupils, and erodes the returns to education (UNESCO, 2024a).

2.5 COVID-19 and the Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented shock to education systems, and its effects have been unequal. Global simulations estimate that school closures could have increased learning poverty in low- and middle-income countries by around 13 percentage points, reduced learning-adjusted years of schooling by about 1.1 years, and produced lifetime earnings losses on the order of $21 trillion (Azevedo et al., 2022). Micro-simulations for sub-Saharan Africa project substantial declines in secondary completion and in intergenerational mobility of education, with the largest losses concentrated among children of low-educated parents (Neidhöfer et al., 2024).

Evidence from African countries indicates that the pandemic reproduced or widened existing inequalities. Dang et al. (2023) show that households with higher education, better living standards, and urban residence were far more likely to engage children in learning during school closures. Remote learning initiatives, typically delivered by radio, television, and mobile platforms, reached only a fraction of learners, and access was systematically lower among rural, poor, and female students (Malenya & Ohba, 2023; Wawire et al., 2023). The pandemic also exposed and deepened the digital divide in higher education, where rural and low-income students were least able to participate in online learning (Ajani, 2023; Chomunorwa et al., 2023). These findings underscore that education technology is not neutral: in the absence of deliberate policy, it amplifies rather than mitigates inequality.

2.6 Financing and Governance

Chronic under-financing is a central constraint on equitable education in Africa. Public spending on education in sub-Saharan Africa represents a comparatively large share of total government expenditure—around 16.5 percent—yet in absolute terms remains far below what is required (UNESCO, 2024a). The disparity is stark: low-income countries spent roughly $55 per learner in 2022, compared with $8,543 per learner in high-income countries (UNESCO & World Bank, 2024). Within countries, resources are often inefficiently allocated, with too little reaching the poorest schools and learners (Oketch, 2016; African Union Commission & UNICEF, 2024). Research also emphasizes that additional spending alone is insufficient; the quality of expenditure, teacher deployment, and system governance determine whether resources translate into learning (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; Pritchett, 2021).

The literature converges on a systems perspective: closing educational inequality requires not simply expanding access but simultaneously improving learning quality, targeting the poorest and most marginalized, addressing gender and spatial barriers, and building resilient systems able to withstand shocks (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021). The present study builds on this evidence base by organizing current data on African educational inequality and interrogating the mechanisms through which advantage and disadvantage are reproduced.

3. Methodology

This study employs a secondary data synthesis design to characterize educational inequality across Africa. Rather than collecting new primary data, it integrates publicly available, internationally comparable statistics from authoritative sources, principally the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, the World Bank (including the Learning Poverty database and World Development Indicators), the United Nations SDG monitoring system, and national household and learning assessment programmes such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), PASEC, SACMEQ, and PISA for Development. This approach is appropriate for a continent-level analysis where the aim is to document aggregate patterns, identify persistent disparities, and synthesize evidence on determinants.

Indicators were selected to capture the three dimensions of educational inequality emphasized in the

literature: (a) access and participation, measured by gross and net enrolment ratios and out-of-school rates; (b) completion, measured by primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary completion rates; and (c) learning outcomes, measured by learning poverty, minimum proficiency levels, and literacy rates. Inequality is examined across four intersecting axes: household wealth (richest versus poorest quintiles), gender, spatial location (rural versus urban, and sub-regional variation), and fragility/conflict. For financing, the analysis draws on public education expenditure as a share of GDP and of total government expenditure, and on per-learner spending.

Data were compiled from published UNESCO and World Bank reports covering the period 2000 to 2025, with particular emphasis on the most recent available estimates (2022-2025) to ensure currency. Where estimates are presented, the source and reference year are indicated. The analysis is largely descriptive and comparative, complemented by a narrative synthesis of empirical findings from peer-reviewed and institutional studies. This design has well-known limitations, including differences in data coverage and quality across countries, inconsistent definitions, and the unavailability of comparable learning data for many countries; these limitations are addressed in Section 7. All figures and tables present data drawn from the sources cited in the text and reference list.

4. Findings and Results

4.1 Aggregate Access, Completion, and Out-of-school Gaps

Across Africa, access to schooling has expanded substantially, but large gaps in completion and learning persist. As Figure 1 shows, the out-of-school rate among girls of primary and secondary school age fell from 47 percent in 2000 to 28 percent in 2024, while the corresponding rate among boys declined from 39 to 27 percent. Although the gender gap in exclusion has nearly closed, Africa's out-of-school rate remains well above the global average of about 17 percent, and an estimated 120 million African children and adolescents were out of school in 2024 (UNESCO, 2024a, 2026).

It is important to note that the composition of the out-of-school population has shifted over time. Whereas the problem was once concentrated in the early primary years, the largest out-of-school populations now sit at the secondary level, where enrolment remains far from universal. Globally, around three-quarters of the out-of-school population at the upper-secondary level is concentrated in Central and Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2024a). This upward drift of the access problem reflects the success of primary expansion and, simultaneously, the failure of secondary systems to absorb and retain all who complete primary school—a pattern with direct implications for the design of policy.

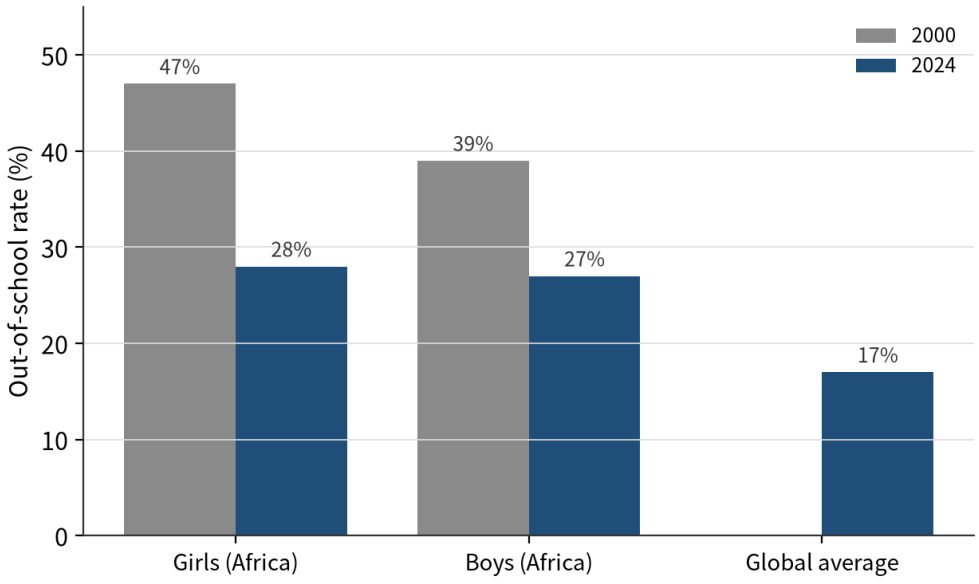


Figure 1. Out-of-school rates among primary and secondary school-age children in Africa and globally, 2000 and 2024. Source: UNESCO (2024a, 2026)

Completion gaps are even more pronounced than access gaps, particularly at the secondary level. As Figure 2 illustrates, primary completion in sub-Saharan Africa improved from about 46 percent in 2000 to 68 percent in 2024, and adult literacy rose from about 60 percent in 2015 to 69 percent in 2023. However, upper-secondary completion advanced only modestly, from about 18 percent in 2000 to 28 percent in 2024, and only about two in three children complete primary school on time (UNESCO, 2024a, 2025).

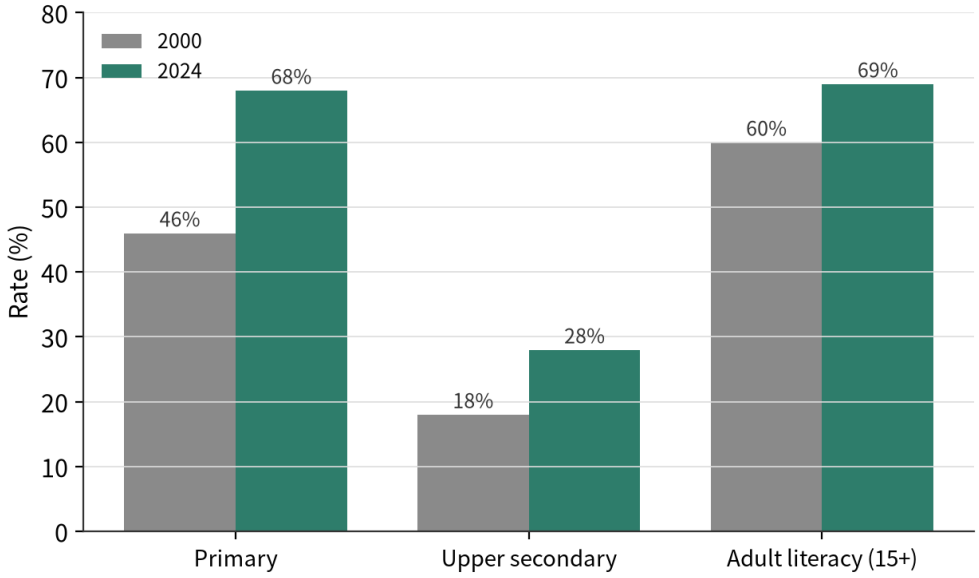


Figure 2. Primary and upper-secondary completion and adult literacy rates in sub-Saharan Africa, 2000-2024. Source: UNESCO (2024a, 2025)

4.2 Learning Poverty and Proficiency Gaps

The most striking finding concerns learning outcomes. Although Africa has nearly universal primary enrolment in many countries, a large majority of children fail to acquire foundational skills. The African Union (2024) reported that nine out of ten ten-year-olds on the continent cannot read a simple text or perform basic mathematics, a situation it described as a continental learning poverty emergency. UNESCO (2025) estimates that only about 10.8 percent of African children achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school, among the lowest shares in the world. These learning deficits are not randomly distributed: learning poverty is systematically higher among the poor, rural residents, and girls in the most disadvantaged settings, and it is compounded by language-of-instruction mismatches, teacher shortages, and weak early-childhood foundations (World Bank, 2022; Akmal & Pritchett, 2021; Mandikiana & Mutasa, 2025).

Country and regional learning assessments reinforce this picture. In South Africa, for example, 81 percent of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, and only 1.6 percent reach the highest international benchmark (Goldmann, 2026). In Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, three-quarters of Grade 3 students could not read a simple sentence even before the pandemic (Angrist, 2022, cited in World Bank, 2022). These findings indicate that the expansion of schooling has outpaced the expansion of learning, and that inequality in learning—not merely inequality in enrolment—is the defining feature of Africa's education challenge.

4.3 Gender Disparities in Secondary and Tertiary Education

While Africa reached gender parity in primary enrolment in 2021, gender gaps persist and widen at higher levels of education. In 2024, there were 93 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in upper-secondary education across Africa, and 94 women for every 100 men enrolled in tertiary education. Continental averages, however, conceal substantial sub-regional differences. In Central Africa there were only about 79 girls for every 100 boys of upper-secondary age, and in Eastern Africa about 71 girls for every 100 boys, while

Northern Africa saw more girls than boys enrolled at that level (UNESCO, 2024a, 2026). These patterns are shown in Figure 3.

Gender parity in enrolment is not the same as gender equality in outcomes. Even where girls enrol at comparable rates, they may be more likely to repeat grades, attend lower-quality schools, or leave early because of marriage, pregnancy, or domestic responsibilities; completion statistics that fail to account for delayed and interrupted progression can therefore understate the barriers girls face (UNESCO, 2024a). The global evidence indicates that girls are often more likely to complete education without prolonged delay once enrolled, but that the pressure to leave intensifies with age as social and economic constraints mount. This underscores the need to monitor participation and completion not only by gender but also by wealth and location.

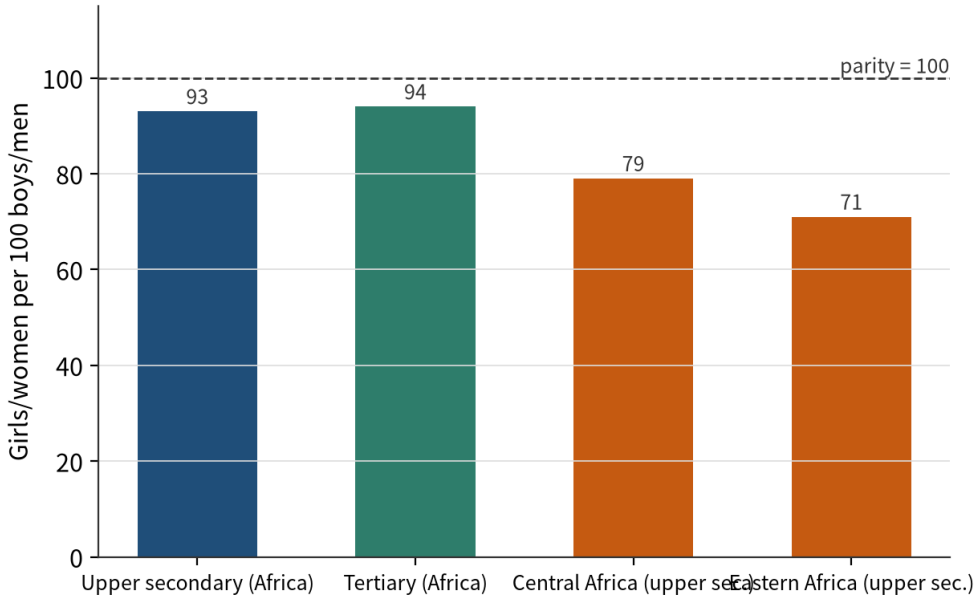


Figure 3. Gender parity in upper-secondary and tertiary enrolment in Africa, 2024 (number of girls/women per 100 boys/men). Source: UNESCO (2024a, 2026)

Gender disadvantage is concentrated among the poorest and rural populations. Among the poorest households in some countries, far fewer girls than boys complete upper secondary, while the reverse is often true among the wealthiest (UNESCO, 2026). Barriers include child marriage, early pregnancy, distance to school, safety concerns, and the higher opportunity cost of girls' time. The policy literature consistently finds that making education free and compulsory, targeting financial assistance, preventing child marriage, and providing safe, accessible schools generate disproportionate gains for girls (Glick, 2008; Gajigo, 2016; UNESCO, 2026).

4.4 Wealth, Spatial, and Conflict-Related Divides

Wealth is the single most robust predictor of educational inequality across Africa. Children from the poorest households attend school less, complete fewer grades, and learn far less than children from the richest households (Filmer & Pritchett, 1999; Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024). Cross-national analysis indicates that the poor-to-rich gap in learning is often larger than the corresponding gap in enrolment, implying that 'hidden exclusion'—lower learning at the same grade—is a substantial component of overall inequality (Akmal & Pritchett, 2021). Plavgo and Bernardi (2024) find that although educational expansion equalized attendance, inequality in completing six grades persisted across 40 sub-Saharan African countries, with material deprivation, fertility, school fees, public spending, and pupil-teacher ratios systematically explaining the variation in socioeconomic gaps.

Spatial inequality compounds wealth-based disadvantage. Rural schools typically have fewer qualified teachers, poorer infrastructure, weaker connectivity, and higher pupil-teacher ratios than urban schools, and

these disparities translate into large learning gaps. Evidence from South Africa indicates that the urban-rural literacy gap is equivalent to roughly 1.5 years of learning and is largely explained by language, school quality, and peer socioeconomic composition (Goldmann, 2026). Conflict and fragility further widen inequality by destroying schooling infrastructure, displacing learners and teachers, and disrupting the accumulation of human capital; countries affected by violence account for a disproportionate share of out-of-school children in the region (UNESCO, 2024a).

Language of instruction operates as a particularly consequential axis of disadvantage. In much of Africa, children are taught in a language other than the one they speak at home, which depresses comprehension and learning, especially in the early grades. The evidence indicates that mother-tongue instruction, at least in the early years, can substantially improve learning outcomes, and that the mismatch between home and school language contributes to the persistence of learning poverty among the poorest and most rural students (Akmal & Pritchett, 2021; Mandikiana & Mutasa, 2025). Language policy is therefore not a peripheral concern but a central instrument of educational equity, and its neglect compounds the disadvantages associated with poverty and rurality.

4.5 Financing Inequalities

Educational inequality is mirrored in, and partly caused by, unequal financing. As Figure 4 illustrates, the gap in per-learner spending between low-income and high-income countries is enormous: roughly $55 versus $8,543 in 2022, a ratio of about one to 155 (UNESCO & World Bank, 2024). Within Africa, public education expenditure represents a comparatively large share of total government spending—about 16.5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa—but absolute levels remain low, and the COVID-19 pandemic strained education budgets further (African Union Commission & UNICEF, 2024). The efficiency of spending also varies widely; research suggests that resources are often not directed to the schools and learners most in need, and that simply increasing funding without improving system quality yields limited gains (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; Oketch, 2016).

The financing gap has distinct distributional implications. Where spending is concentrated in higher education or in urban schools, it tends to subsidize the relatively advantaged, while early-childhood education and rural basic education—the levels and locations that would do most to equalize opportunity—remain underfunded (Oketch, 2016; African Union Commission & UNICEF, 2024). This pattern reflects both the political economy of education budgets and the weak alignment of spending with equity objectives. It also implies that improving equity is not solely a matter of increasing total spending but of reallocating resources toward the earliest grades, the poorest households, and the most disadvantaged regions—a conclusion with direct policy relevance.

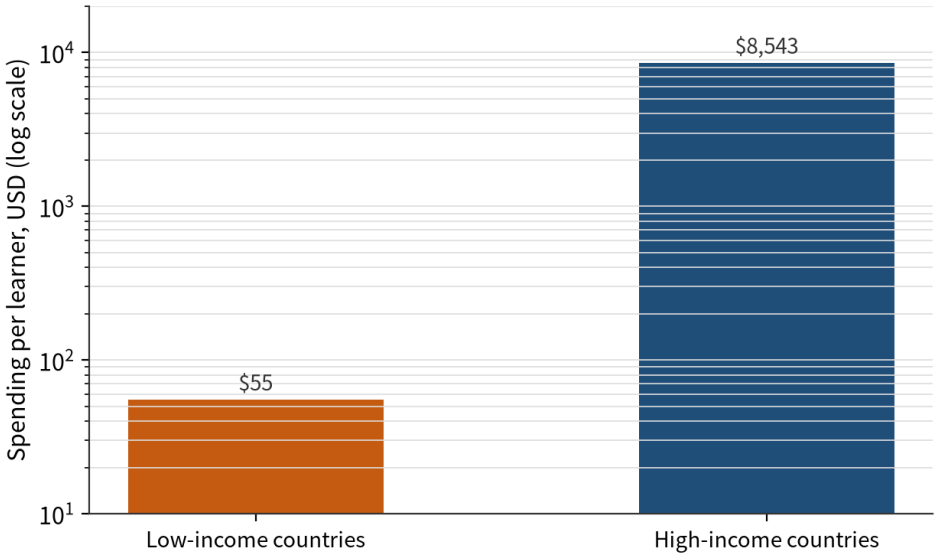


Figure 4. Public education spending per learner, low- versus high-income countries, 2022 (log scale)

Source: UNESCO & World Bank (2024).

Table 1. Key indicators of educational inequality in Africa (selected estimates)

Indicator	Value / trend	Region / level	Year	Source
Out-of-school rate (girls)	47% to 28%	Africa, primary & secondary	2000-2024	UNESCO (2026)
Out-of-school rate (boys)	39% to 27%	Africa, primary & secondary	2000-2024	UNESCO (2026)
Out-of-school population	~120 million	Africa	2024	UNESCO (2026)
Primary completion	46% to 68%	Sub-Saharan Africa	2000-2024	UNESCO (2024a)
Upper-secondary completion	18% to 28%	Sub-Saharan Africa	2000-2024	UNESCO (2024a)
Adult literacy (15+)	60% to 69%	Sub-Saharan Africa	2015-2023	UNESCO (2025)
Minimum proficiency (read/maths, end primary)	~10.8%	Africa	2025	UNESCO (2025)
Gender parity in upper-secondary enrolment	93 girls per 100 boys	Africa	2024	UNESCO (2026)
Gender parity in tertiary enrolment	94 women per 100 men	Africa	2024	UNESCO (2026)
Per-learner public spending	$55 vs $8,543 (LIC vs HIC)	Global comparison	2022	UNESCO & World Bank (2024)

Table 2. Determinants of educational inequality in Africa and illustrative evidence

Determinant	Mechanism	Illustrative evidence
Household wealth	Costs, opportunity cost, returns	Filmer & Pritchett (1999); Plavgo & Bernardi (2024)
Gender norms	Child marriage, pregnancy, safety, opportunity cost	Unterhalter & North (2011); Glick (2008); UNESCO (2026)
Rural-urban location	Teacher and material distribution, distance, connectivity	Goldmann (2026); World Bank (2018)
Language of instruction	Mismatch between home and school language depresses learning	Akmal & Pritchett (2021); Mandikiana & Mutasa (2025)
Teacher quality and supply	Shortages, weak preparation, inequitable deployment	Evans & Mendez Acosta (2021); Spaull (2013)
Conflict and fragility	School destruction, displacement, disrupted returns	UNESCO (2024a)
Financing	Low absolute spending and inefficient allocation	UNESCO & World Bank (2024); Oketch (2016)
Pandemic / digital divide	Unequal access to remote learning, widened gaps	Dang et al. (2023); Wawire et al. (2023)

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that educational inequality in Africa is multi-dimensional: it is simultaneously a problem of access, completion, learning, and opportunity, and it is structured by the intersecting forces of wealth, gender, geography, conflict, and financing. Three observations merit emphasis.

First, the centrality of learning poverty redefines how inequality should be understood. The enormous gap between enrolment and learning—nearly universal primary enrolment in many countries alongside learning poverty rates of roughly 90 percent—indicates that the principal axis of inequality is no longer who attends school but who learns (World Bank, 2022; Akmal & Pritchett, 2021). This finding has important implications for measurement and policy: indicators based solely on enrolment or years of schooling systematically understate inequality and misdirect attention away from the quality of instruction, the language of learning, and early-childhood foundations (Pritchett, 2021; Angrist et al., 2021). The present results align with the emerging consensus that 'schooling is not the same as learning' and that learning-adjusted measures are essential for tracking genuine progress (World Bank, 2018; Azevedo et al., 2021).

Second, wealth is the dominant but not the only driver of inequality. Consistent with prior research, household wealth explains a large share of the variation in access, completion, and learning (Filmer & Pritchett, 1999; Plavgo & Bernardi, 2024). However, the persistence of gender gaps at secondary and tertiary levels, and their concentration among the poor and rural, indicates that gender disadvantage is not simply a wealth effect but reflects entrenched social norms and policy failures (Unterhalter & North, 2011; UNESCO, 2026). Similarly, the large urban-rural learning divide shows that spatial inequality has an independent effect on outcomes, shaped by the unequal distribution of teachers, materials, and connectivity (Goldmann, 2026). These findings suggest that reducing educational inequality requires policies that address multiple, interacting disadvantages rather than a single axis of difference.

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic and the digital divide have intensified existing inequalities and revealed the fragility of education systems. The evidence that remote learning disproportionately excluded rural, poor, and female learners (Dang et al., 2023; Malenya & Ohba, 2023; Wawire et al., 2023) and that projected losses are concentrated among children of low-educated parents (Neidhöfer et al., 2024) indicates that shocks amplify advantage. This has two policy corollaries: education systems must be resilient to shocks, and technology must be deployed deliberately to reach the most marginalized rather than left to reproduce existing divides (Chomunorwa et al., 2023).

Finally, financing remains a binding constraint, but money alone is insufficient. The stark contrast in per-learner spending between low- and high-income countries underscores the scale of the resource gap (UNESCO & World Bank, 2024). At the same time, the literature is clear that the quality and targeting of spending matter as much as its quantity: increasing financing without improving teacher effectiveness, curriculum alignment, and system governance yields limited returns (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; Oketch, 2016; Pritchett, 2021). The most effective strategies combine sustained and well-targeted financing with structural reforms that improve the quality of teaching and learning, and that explicitly reach the poorest and most marginalized learners.

Taken together, these observations point to a broader interpretation of educational inequality in Africa as a problem of opportunity rather than simply of resources. The persistence of learning poverty alongside high enrolment indicates that the binding constraints are pedagogical and systemic—teacher quality, language of instruction, instructional time, curriculum, and school leadership—rather than merely the number of classrooms (World Bank, 2018; Mandikiana & Mutasa, 2025). This is not to minimize the severity of the financing gap, but rather to emphasize that additional funding will be transformative only if it is channeled through reforms that change what happens inside schools. The evidence on effective interventions—structured pedagogy, targeted instruction, mother-tongue instruction, and school feeding—suggests that there are proven, affordable strategies available (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021). The central policy challenge is therefore not primarily one of knowledge but of political commitment, institutional capacity, and sustained implementation.

Finally, the distributional consequences of the pandemic and of the digital transition deserve continued scrutiny. The sharp growth in the use of education technology, accelerated by COVID-19, creates both opportunities and risks for equity. On one hand, low-tech approaches such as mobile-phone-based instruction can reach the most marginalized at scale; on the other, reliance on internet-dependent platforms tends to reproduce and deepen existing divides (Dang et al., 2023; Chomunorwa et al., 2023). Whether the digital transition narrows or widens educational inequality in Africa will depend on deliberate policy choices about infrastructure, connectivity, teacher support, and content design. This is an area where the balance of outcomes is not yet settled and where continued monitoring and evaluation are essential.

6. Conclusions

Educational inequality remains a defining challenge for Africa's development. This article has shown that, despite historic gains in access to schooling, the continent continues to face substantial gaps in secondary and tertiary completion, exceptionally high learning poverty, and persistent disparities structured by wealth, gender, geography, conflict, and financing. The central finding is that Africa's education expansion has not been matched by a commensurate expansion of learning, and that the resulting learning inequality—rather than simple differences in enrolment—is the principal axis along which advantage and disadvantage are reproduced.

Three conclusions follow. First, policy attention must shift from access alone toward learning and its distribution; this requires better measurement of learning outcomes and explicit targets for reducing learning poverty and proficiency gaps. Second, because inequality is multi-dimensional and intersectional, effective responses must combine targeted financing for the poorest and most marginalized, gender-responsive and spatially differentiated interventions, improvements in teacher quality and foundational learning, and attention to language, early childhood, and child protection. Third, education systems must be made resilient to shocks such as pandemics and conflict, and technology must be harnessed deliberately to reach, rather than bypass, the most disadvantaged learners. Taken together, these measures offer a realistic pathway toward a more equitable and effective education system in Africa, one capable of translating schooling into genuine learning and opportunity for all.

The stakes are high. Africa's young population represents both a demographic opportunity and a challenge: if the education system succeeds in equipping the next generation with foundational skills and the capacity for further learning, the continent stands to realize a substantial demographic dividend; if it continues to produce cohorts of young people who leave school without basic literacy and numeracy, the costs will be borne in slower growth, persistent poverty, and entrenched inequality for decades to come. The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that the knowledge and tools to improve learning and its distribution exist; what is required is the sustained political will to implement them at scale and to hold systems accountable for equitable learning outcomes.

7. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations that qualify its findings and point to directions for future research. First, it relies on secondary data of varying quality and coverage across countries. Learning assessment data, in particular, are unavailable for many African countries, and differences in sampling, test instruments, and definitions limit cross-national comparability; estimates of learning poverty and minimum proficiency therefore carry considerable uncertainty. Second, the descriptive and comparative design cannot establish causal relationships between determinants and outcomes, and the synthesis of empirical evidence necessarily depends on the quality of the underlying studies. Third, the analysis operates largely at the level of continental and sub-regional aggregates, which can obscure substantial within-country heterogeneity and mask the experiences of specific groups. Fourth, several of the most recent estimates (2024-2025) are based on preliminary or modeled data that may be revised. Finally, the study does not systematically address within-country inequality in tertiary education or private provision, and it treats financing and governance only at a general level.

Within these constraints, the following recommendations emerge for policymakers, international partners, and researchers. For policy, governments should prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy in the early grades, adopt learning-adjusted targets and regular assessment systems, and direct resources to the schools and learners most in need, with particular attention to rural and conflict-affected areas. Gender-responsive policies—free and compulsory secondary education, targeted scholarships and cash transfers, child-marriage prevention, and safe, accessible schools—should be scaled, since the evidence indicates they generate large returns for the most disadvantaged girls (Glick, 2008; Gajigo, 2016; UNESCO, 2026). Teacher policy must address shortages, weak preparation, and inequitable deployment, as teacher quality is among the most cost-effective levers for improving learning (Evans & Mendez Acosta, 2021; World Bank, 2018). Education systems should build resilience to shocks by investing in low-tech remote-learning channels and by ensuring that digital infrastructure and connectivity reach rural and low-income learners rather than reproducing the digital divide (Dang et al., 2023; Chomunorwa et al., 2023).

For financing, sustained domestic and international investment is necessary but must be accompanied by improvements in the efficiency and targeting of expenditure, including better budget execution, school-level allocation, and accountability (UNESCO & World Bank, 2024; Oketch, 2016; African Union Commission & UNICEF, 2024). For research, priorities include expanding comparable learning-assessment coverage across the continent, building longitudinal data to trace inequality over time and across generations, and rigorously evaluating interventions aimed at reducing learning poverty, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Addressing educational inequality in Africa is both a moral imperative and an economic necessity; the evidence

reviewed here indicates that, with sustained political commitment and well-targeted, system-level reforms, meaningful progress is achievable.

The recommendations above are deliberately framed at the level of systems and evidence rather than as a one-size-fits-all prescription, because the appropriate configuration of reforms will differ across countries with different fiscal capacity, institutional quality, language contexts, and conflict profiles. What is common across successful cases is a coherent strategy that aligns financing, teacher policy, curriculum, assessment, and school leadership around the goal of equitable learning, and that monitors progress disaggregated by gender, wealth, and location. International partners can support this agenda by financing the global public goods of learning assessment and evidence generation, by aligning aid with national equity strategies, and by supporting debt relief and fiscal space for education in the poorest and most fragile states. Ultimately, reducing educational inequality in Africa is achievable, but it will require treating learning—and its fair distribution—as the explicit objective of education policy rather than as a by-product of expanding enrolment.

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