

ALIGN REPORT

Education for girl-mothers in Kenya: the influence of faith and gender norms on school re-entry



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June 2026



About Jaslika Foundation

Jaslika is a dynamic social impact brand comprising a foundation, consulting firm, and Modus Design Lab. A recognised thought leader in gender, youth, education, values and rights, Jaslika's approach is rooted in the African values of Ubuntu and holism. Driven by its mission to ensure every person's right to flourish, Jaslika creates environments for holistic development and safeguards fundamental rights, including education, health, protection and expression. The organisation uses innovative methodologies like positive deviance and creative participatory data collection to prioritise authentic voices for relevant, impactful interventions.

Jaslika's strong research capabilities inform policy and practice. This, combined with a proven track record in promoting gender equality, youth empowerment and rights-based development, establishes it as an effective force for change. Through an unwavering commitment to inclusion, Jaslika actively dismantles systemic barriers, empowering individuals from all backgrounds to contribute to equitable and just societies.

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Acknowledgements

Jaslika is deeply grateful to the girl-mothers, young people and community members whose shared experiences informed this research. We appreciate the local authorities, community leaders, and officials from the Ministry of Education, government institutions, and various non-governmental, faith-based and community groups in Kajiado, Kibra (Nairobi) and Nyeri counties for their essential cooperation and insights. Confidentiality prevents the naming of many vital contributors.

Special gratitude is extended to ODI Global for financial support and to Ján Michalko for technical guidance. We also thank our local partners, Patinaai Osim and Superb Girls CBO, for their crucial collaboration and community knowledge. Finally, we acknowledge the dedicated Jaslika Study Team, all of whom contributed to the research and strengthened this report through review.

Key findings

- This study set out to identify the barriers girl-mothers face to their re-entry into education in Kenya. Around 57% of girl-mothers in the three study locations had not returned to school after having their babies – a clear sign of an implementation gap between the aims of Kenya’s 2020 Re-entry Policy and its realisation.
- Local school and religious authorities often frame pregnancy as a spiritual failure rather than a crisis needing support. This undermines a girl’s unconditional legal right to education, which is seen as a ‘conditional permit’ that she must earn through repentance. As a result, national guidelines are ignored in favour of local purity norms, making the Re-entry Policy a paper promise that offers her no sanctuary.
- There is a significant and persistent double standard where the father of a girl’s baby – often a perpetrator of child sexual abuse – is protected by institutional silence to save the reputation of the girl’s school or family. By bypassing legal reporting requirements, the system forces the girl to carry the entire moral and social burden alone, while the male responsible for her plight faces no equivalent consequences or stigma.
- The 2020 National Guidelines for School Re-entry ignore the physical reality of a girl’s postpartum body, making no provision for her to breastfeed her child or her need for flexible exam schedules. This makes school a place of physical strain rather than recovery, as seen in cases where girls have been forced to sit national examinations while in active labour because the system treats them like any other student.
- Girl-mothers are expected to balance a ‘triple shift’ of school, childcare and housework simultaneously, often as a form of punishment for their pregnancy. Although the signing of a committal/re-entry letter by the school, learner and parent is a formal requirement for return to school, it offers little practical support in the absence of shared community childcare and caregiving support. If the weight of care is not shared by the community or family, a sustained return to education remains out of reach.
- Schools and faith groups consistently replace practical sexuality education with moral instruction. This structural silence about sex and sexuality expects girls to make responsible choices without having any actual information about their bodies or rights. This lack of knowledge leaves them entirely unprepared to navigate their health or legal protections.
- Despite these failures, some teachers and leaders do prioritise restoration over judgement – demonstrating that re-entry can work. By shifting from moral surveillance to restorative mentorship, these individuals provide a blueprint for a system that recognises education as an unconditional right rather than a moral negotiation.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

FBO	Faith-based organisation
FGD	Focus group discussion
KII	Key informant interview
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
Ksh	Kenyan shillings
LHI	Life history interview
Req.	Requirement
TPI	Third party interview

Key terms

Faith ideology: A set of beliefs and principles held by a religious group that dictates how followers should behave and how to perceive social issues like teenage pregnancy.

Girl-mother: Replaces 'adolescent mother', which is a neutral clinical term describing a biological state. 'Girl-mother' exposes the paradox of a child inhabiting an adult role, insisting that the individual remains a girl – entitled to the protections of childhood and education – despite the systemic failure that thrust her into motherhood.

Patriarchy: A social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority and control of property.

Positive deviant: A term from social norms change theory that applies to an individual or group (such as a specific church, family or leader) that demonstrates uncommon but successful behaviours to support girl-mothers' re-entry to school, even when surrounding community or faith norms are unsupportive or negative.

Social norms: The informal, unwritten rules that govern everyday behaviour. Within this study, these manifest as gender norms – a subset of social expectations that dictate how individuals should act and relate to others based on their sex, often reinforcing unequal burdens between boys and girls. In highly religious contexts, these gender norms are further solidified by religious norms: faith-based expectations grounded in scripture and tradition. These layers intersect to create a value system that functions as an invisible barrier, determining whether a girl-mother is met with practical support or systemic exclusion.

Executive summary

Introduction

This report examines why Kenya's 2020 National Guidelines for School Re-Entry have not been consistent in translating the country's constitutional right to education into real opportunities for girl-mothers. Drawing on qualitative research from three counties with different social and religious contexts, Kajiado, Kibra (Nairobi), and Nyeri, the study shows that implementation challenges are shaped not only by administrative gaps, but also by faith-based beliefs and gender norms that influence decisions in schools, homes, places of worship, and communities.

The study finds that the gap between the aims of the Guidelines and their implementation is no accident and cannot be explained by a lack of resources alone. It is, rather, the result of a wider social system that often overrides the law.

Around 57% of the girl-mothers in the study had not returned to school since giving birth, despite the protections offered by Kenya's Basic Education Act 2013 and the Children Act 2022. In practice, the main barrier is not the absence of policy, but the strength of faith-based and gendered expectations that recast a legal right as something to be negotiated.

While the Re-entry Guidelines recognise that each girl is a learner with rights, many communities continue to judge her through a moral lens. This disconnect, repeated across every level of her environment, is at the centre of the report's analysis.

Why policy does not translate into school re-entry

Kenya has one of the strongest legal frameworks in Africa for protecting the education rights of girl-mothers, yet many girls are still pushed out of school each year by the same social pressures the law is meant to address. Official and recent reporting continues to place teenage pregnancy at about 15% among girls aged 15 to 19 nationally, and it remains one of the country's major drivers of school dropout.

When girls leave school because they are pregnant, the consequences for them, and for their children, are severe and long term: lower income prospects, greater dependence, and a higher risk that their disadvantage will be passed down to another generation. By contrast, each additional year of secondary education improves a girl's future earnings and contributes to better health and education outcomes for her children. This makes the effective implementation of Kenya's Re-entry Policy an urgent development and public policy priority.

This report argues that the implementation gap will not be closed through policy revision or administrative actions alone. It shifts attention from what the policy says to what actually happens when the policy collides with the social realities that shape girls' lives. At the household, community, school, and faith institution levels, the policy is often filtered through moral expectations that carry greater local authority than national guidance. In this sense, faith institutions and gender norms do not simply resist the Re-entry Guidelines: they often function as a competing system of influence that has stronger legitimacy and reach in daily life.

School entry without genuine restoration: how exclusion happens in practice

The 2020 Re-entry Guidelines call for unconditional re-admission to school, flexible examination arrangements and breastfeeding support for girl-mothers, as well as mandatory reporting of the perpetrators who have abused them. However, these measures are not being applied consistently or creatively, resulting in access in principle, but not always in practice.

While the policy creates a pathway back to school on paper, that does not, by itself, change the social attitudes and institutional practices that determine whether a girl is genuinely supported to return and remain in school. National Guidelines for School Re-Entry in Early Learning and Basic Education set out these provisions, but the findings in this report show that implementation continues to be uneven.

Across all three counties, a pregnant girl is often viewed by religious and community actors not as a girl who needs support, but as a girl who needs to repent for her moral failing. This turns an unconditional right into a conditional opportunity – one that many girls feel they must earn through apology, changed behaviour, or public proof of ‘reform’. As one faith leader in Nyeri put it, *‘The girl receives no justice, loses her chance to return to school, and nobody points a finger at the perpetrator’* (KII #001, Nyeri).

One consistent pattern across the study is unequal accountability. Girl-mothers face stigma, scrutiny and exclusion, while the boys and men responsible for their pregnancies often face little or no consequences. Male students are rarely offered counselling or disciplinary follow-up, and adult perpetrators, including teachers, stepfathers, and senior community members, are often protected by silence to preserve school or family reputation. The reporting duties outlined in the Re-entry Guidelines are rarely enforced, resulting in a system that places the full moral and practical burden on the girl while shielding those responsible for her situation. As one mother in Kajiado noted, *‘They even know who it is, but they take no action’* (LHI #016, Kajiado).

The ‘triple shift’, the physical challenges, and the examination crisis

The implementation gap is not only social; it is also practical and physical. Girl-mothers who try to return to school face what this study calls the ‘triple shift’: managing schoolwork, childcare, and domestic responsibilities at the same time.

In many cases, their burdens are intensified by families and schools that treat their motherhood as a reason to give them more labour, rather than to provide more support. When families view girls primarily as caregivers and schools interpret lateness or absence as indiscipline, re-entry becomes part of a daily struggle for survival rather than a protected educational pathway.

The 2020 Guidelines do not do enough to address the practical realities of the postpartum period. Many schools lack spaces for breastfeeding or rest; examinations are not always flexible enough to accommodate recovery after childbirth; and school environments are rarely designed with the needs of girl-mothers in mind. As a result, some girls sit national examinations under extremely difficult conditions – even when they are in labour or immediately after delivery.

One girl-mother in Nyeri recalled, *‘I actually gave birth while I was sitting for my exams... they brought the exam to me right there in the delivery room’* (LHI #003, Nyeri). An education official in the same county acknowledged the severity of this situation, saying, *‘That girl... was doing the examination in labour pain. We couldn’t help... she was not psychologically prepared’* (KII #021, Nyeri). In such cases, institutional compliance takes priority over student well-being.

Faith, stigma, and the internalised verdict

Across Kajiado, Kibra, and Nyeri, faith institutions often shape the strongest forms of stigma experienced by girl-mothers. Although 82% of respondents reported regular participation in religious life before pregnancy, many stopped attending once their pregnancy became visible. Instead of support, they encountered public shaming, restrictive rules, and social distancing within worship spaces.

In Kibra, one girl-mother described this experience as leading to suicidal thoughts. In Nyeri, some girls changed denomination or religion in search of communities where they could feel less judged. For many, a place that had once provided belonging instead became a major source of exclusion.

Importantly, this stigma does not remain external. One of the report's most significant findings is that many girls begin to withdraw from education before anyone formally excludes them. They internalise the judgement around them and lose confidence in their right to continue learning.

As one girl-mother in Kajiado explained, *'It reduces that desire... Now it's like you pity yourself instead of continuing to want to study'* (LHI #010, Kajiado). A former school prefect in Nyeri who had returned to school gave up her leadership role, asking, *'How can I lead people when I, myself, am a runaway?'* This means the implementation gap is sustained not only by institutions, but also by the psychological effects of shame and exclusion.

This pattern is particularly severe for girls aged 11 to 13, who make up 10% of the study sample and whose pregnancies signal statutory rape and a failure of child protection systems. These younger girls face the greatest risks: they are least able to manage school, childcare, and household duties; most likely to internalise stigma; and least able to advocate for themselves. For this group, the weaknesses in the Re-entry Guidelines are not simply implementation gaps: they reflect a broader systems failure in protection, response and support.

A snapshot of the implementation gap across four levels

The study explores the barriers to school re-entry that are faced by girl-mothers across four interconnected levels of her environment – barriers that build upon and reinforce each other as follows:

- **Individual level:** The education system often overlooks the physical realities of pregnancy and recovery after childbirth.
- **Household level:** Faith-based beliefs and gender norms mean that a girl-mother is seen as someone marked by shame, rather than a student, adding to stigma, weakening family support for her re-entry, and discouraging completion of the processes required to help her return to school.
- **Institutional level:** Schools and faith organisations often act as gatekeepers, placing reputation and moral control above legal obligations, with counselling becoming a form of surveillance rather than support, and reporting duties not always enforced. Girls who re-enrol often face neglect, low expectations, and isolation in the classroom.
- **National level:** Unconditional re-admission still depends on the efforts of individual champions (positive deviants). In the absence of clear data and accountability mechanisms, the Re-entry Guidelines remain a strong policy commitment that is not yet matched by consistent delivery at the school level.

Pathways of persistence: positive deviants and the sanctuary model

Exclusion is not inevitable. The study also identifies teachers, faith leaders, and community actors who are helping girls stay in school despite the wider barriers. These 'positive deviants' show that better outcomes are possible even without additional resources when existing authority is used differently. In one case, a high school teacher in Nyeri took in a girl-mother's child to remove the childcare barrier. In Kajiado, a pastor reframed the issue by saying, '*A girl with a baby is still a girl with a brain, and that brain belongs to the future of this community*' (KII #024, Kajiado). In Nyeri, a Catholic Youth Chaplain helped a pregnant Form 2 student transfer to a safer school environment and built peer support that enabled her to sit national examinations.

What sets these actors apart is not only compassion, but a different understanding of their role. They replace moral judgement with practical support, and they treat the girl as a learner with rights rather than someone who should ask forgiveness. Such responses, however, remain uneven and depend heavily on individual commitment. Because they are not built into formal systems, support often disappears when a helpful teacher, chaplain or leader changes roles or leaves. One of the report's core conclusions is that the state has not yet translated these examples of good practice into consistent, enforceable systems.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings point to four priority areas for policy, programming, and further investment:

National policy and governance should move from broad commitment to active enforcement. The Ministry of Education could pilot a digital case-tracking system that requires school heads to record each pregnant learner's re-entry journey, shifting accountability from the girl to the institution. The Kenya National Examinations Council should establish a formal deferred examination option for pregnant and postpartum students. Non-compliance with mandatory reporting of adult perpetrators should carry institutional consequences, and both boy-fathers and adult offenders should be brought into stronger accountability frameworks. The National Guidelines for School Re-Entry in Early Learning and Basic Education already provide an important foundation for this work.

Curriculum and teacher development should equip schools with practical tools rather than relying on moral messaging alone. Comprehensive sexuality education that is age-appropriate and safeguarded from local distortion should be treated as an essential part of prevention and response. Teacher training should include practical strategies to support girl-mothers, such as flexible timetabling, restoration of their academic confidence, and referral pathways. For girls aged 11 to 13, pregnancy should, first and foremost, trigger a child protection response and should be treated only as a re-entry issue.

Institutional climate and community practice should be strengthened through direct engagement with faith institutions as potential partners in change. A rights-based pastoral toolkit could help religious leaders support the Re-entry Guidelines in ways that align with social justice and child protection. Faith-based schools that make re-entry conditional on confession or moral performance should face formal consequences. County-supported childcare during school hours should also be recognised as an essential infrastructure for sustained re-entry, rather than an optional add-on.

Knowledge generation should focus on identifying, documenting, and testing the support models that are already working. Further research is needed on male peer attitudes and adolescent fatherhood, the gradual 'push-out' of girls through teacher indifference, and ways in which practical sexual health education can be delivered effectively in highly religious settings.

For most girl-mothers, leaving school is not caused by one single event. It is the result of pressures that build over time across the individual, household, institutional, and national levels. These are reinforced by a moral system that often carries more influence in daily life than the law. Closing the implementation gap, therefore, requires a coordinated response that strengthens enforcement, builds practical support systems, and shifts the treatment of education from a negotiable favour to a guaranteed right.

1 Introduction

‘The girl receives no justice, loses her chance to return to school, and nobody points a finger at the perpetrator’

(KII #001, Faith Leader, Nyeri).

Over 30 years ago, 15 African Ministers of Education met in Mauritius to address an adolescent pregnancy crisis that threatened the achievement of education for all (Njau and Wamahiu, 1994). Since then, 38 African states covering over 70% of the continent have adopted formal mandates to safeguard the educational rights of girl-mothers (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Yet, despite this landmark legislative shift, a profound gap remains between policy and practice (Okwany and Kamusiime, 2017; Niboye, 2018; UNESCO et al., 2021; Imbosa et al., 2022; Wamahiu and Musembi, 2023; Network for Community Development and WORUDET, 2024). Kenya sits at the epicentre of the resulting contradiction: possessing one of the continent’s strongest legal frameworks for equity yet seeing thousands of girls pushed out of the classroom each year by the very challenges its legal reforms were designed to solve (Ministry of Education, 2020; Azumah et al., 2022).

Teenage pregnancy affects 15% of girls across the country (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022) and remains a primary driver of school dropout (Undie et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2021; National Gender and Equality Commission, 2025). For those unable to return to school, the consequences are severe: deepened economic vulnerability and heightened dependency – costs borne by families and the state alike (UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa, 2025). Conversely, each year of secondary education a girl completes generates a measurable boost to her earning potential and improves health and educational outcomes for her children (UNESCO, 2023). The urgency of determining why robust policy is failing to deliver for girl-mothers could not be greater.

This report investigates the lived realities of girl-mothers who are navigating Kenya’s socio-ecological landscape and the factors that shape their school re-entry. It examines how two intersecting forces – faith ideologies and gender norms – dominate decisions around their education. In this context, faith ideologies provide the moral value-framing for social conduct, while gender norms express the values of communities and enforce informal rules based on sex. Together, these forces combine to create a moral framework that stigmatises girl-mothers as violators of both spiritual and communal order.

The study utilises a socio-ecological approach to map how the influence of these norms ripples from the individual student to the national policy level. In Kenya, educational continuity is a constitutional mandate, not merely a policy goal. Article 43 of the Constitution (2010) affirms every child’s unconditional right to education, while the Basic Education Act (2013) explicitly prohibits discrimination based on gender or social origin [Sec 34 (2)]. These protections are further operationalised through the 2020 National Guidelines for School Re-entry (or in brief, ‘the Re-entry Policy’), which align with regional and international legal instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003 [‘the Maputo Protocol’]). Table 1 details this alignment across these key legal instruments.

Table 1 Key policies and legal instruments

Legal instrument	Core mandate/provision	Specific application to girl-mothers
Education Act (2013)	Establishes that every child has a right to free and compulsory basic education.	Prohibits the exclusion of any child from school based on any form of discrimination, including pregnancy.
Children Act (2022)	Protects the child's right to education and mandates protection from social stigma and traditional harmful practices.	Reinforces the state's obligation to ensure that child-mothers ¹ are not denied their right to education or subjected to cruelty/exclusion.
School Re-entry Guidelines (2020)	Provides the administrative framework for unconditional re-admission of learners after delivery.	Bridges the gap between the right to education and the reality of motherhood by mandating school support for breastfeeding and flexible re-entry.

Sources: Compiled by authors based on the Republic of Kenya (2010, 2013, 2022); Ministry of Education (2020).

The 2020 Re-entry Policy marks a major shift in development in this area by recognising that a girl's right to education cannot be separated from the practical realities of motherhood. However, a persistent paradox remains: a comprehensive policy on paper does not guarantee action in the classroom. This implementation gap suggests that the real barrier to girls' school completion is not a lack of laws, but a combination of weak institutional will, rigid school structures, and significant resource constraints – including limited funding, lack of childcare and re-entry support systems, and inadequate school-level capacity to meet the needs of girl-mothers (Mukabana et al., 2024; Machoka et al., 2024; Mutune et al., 2025). This results in a collision between girl-mothers and with standardised rules and examination regulations that ignore the physical and logistical demands of postpartum recovery. Because the guidelines are filtered through inflexible administrative systems and local moral expectations, a guaranteed legal right becomes a fragile and uncertain process.

Ultimately, re-entry at the local level is governed by a network of teachers, clergy and neighbours who act as informal gatekeepers to transform a statutory right into a favour that depends on whether a girl conforms to community norms. Shaped by a mix of religious doctrine and gendered expectations, these norms become the primary lens through which the community judges whether a girl is deemed to be 'worthy' of returning to school.

In practice, faith ideologies and institutions function as a parallel governance network that often supersedes secular law. Through school sponsorship and informal curricula, these faith institutions filter national policy through local moral requirements. This structural paradox establishes religious leaders as moral arbiters who may prioritise communal norms of purity and public repentance over a student's legal rights. When pregnancy is framed as a stain on the institution, the resulting stigma imposes a crushing 'triple shift' on girl-mothers: the simultaneous burden of academic, maternal and domestic labour.

This parallel governance is not, however, monolithic. Its influence is shaped by the unique denominational dominance and cultural history of specific regions (see Section 2.2 for more information). By mapping these influences from macro-level mandates to micro-level relationships, this research identifies not only where exclusion occurs, but precisely how re-entry becomes possible.

1 While the Children Act 2022 uses the term 'child-mother', in this report, 'girl-mother' is preferred to emphasise the gender of the child and her dual identity as a student and parent.

1.1 Significance of the study

The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge the gap between Kenya's progressive legal architecture and the lived realities of girl-mothers. By examining the implementation gap through a socio-ecological lens, this study offers vital contributions across three domains, as follows:

- It provides a roadmap for the Ministry of Education to move beyond statutory ideals toward enforceable protocols. By identifying the structural rigidities of the current system, the study offers evidence-based recommendations to align administrative rules with the biological and logistical realities of motherhood, while navigating the complexities of parallel governance.
- For school and faith leaders, the research illuminates how informal moral norms – often applied unconsciously – supersede constitutional mandates. By highlighting supportive narratives and a second-chance approach, the study provides a model for faith leaders to align pastoral care with national gender equality commitments. This helps to shift institutional culture away from judgement and toward practical reintegration, ensuring that girl-mothers are welcomed back rather than pushed away.
- Academically, this study advances the understanding of educational marginalisation by moving beyond a binary 'faith versus state' conflict. It introduces a more nuanced framework of policy mediation and documents how internalised stigma drives self-exclusion, contributing new insights to gender studies in post-colonial contexts.

1.2 About the report

This six-section report is organised as follows:

Section 1 presents the background, context, legal framework, and the conflict between statutory rights and moral norms relating to school re-entry.

Section 2 introduces the methodology used for the study, including the Layers of Influence conceptual framework, which was used to map the 13 policy requirements set out in Kenya's Re-entry Policy across the Individual, micro, meso, and macro levels of the girl-mother's ecosystem.

Section 3 examines the lived experiences of girl-mothers across the three diverse study sites, including their profiles and the impact of their situation on their well-being, including the burden of the 'triple shift' of motherhood, childcare and housework.

Section 4 outlines institutional gatekeeping in relation to re-entry, highlighting gaps in information, administrative barriers, the 'soft' exclusion of girls, and the role of positive deviants: teachers, pastors and others who offer support and mentorship.

Section 5 provides discussion points and conclusions.

Section 6 sets out concrete recommendations for national policy and governance; curriculum and teacher development; institutional climate and community practice; and knowledge production and future research.

2 Methodology

The study employs a narrative-driven qualitative methodology centred on the voices and lived experiences of pregnant girls and adolescent mothers. This approach explores how their individual narratives intersect with broader socio-cultural contexts, particularly faith-based ideologies and social norms, to influence, mediate or obstruct their decision to continue with their schooling. By prioritising these lived experiences, the study seeks to uncover how moral norms and unwritten rules shape the implementation of the 2020 Re-entry Policy Guidelines.

Data collection was guided by the following core research questions which are, in turn, aligned with the Layers of Influence framework outlined in the following section (see also Table 3):

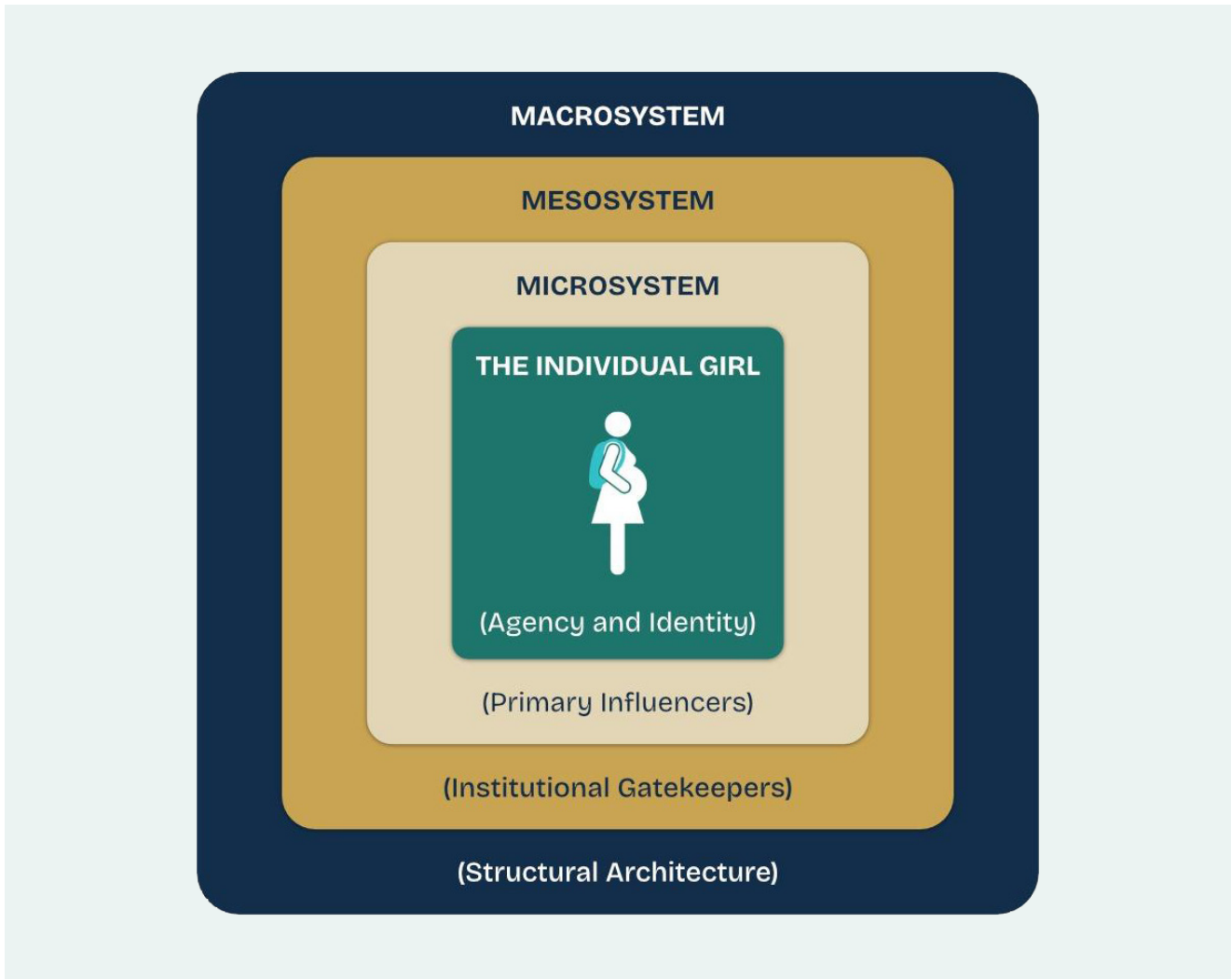
1. How do faith-based ideologies and gender norms mediate the local application of the 2020 Re-entry Policy Guidelines across the three study locales?
2. In what ways do faith-based organisations reinforce negative gender norms that block girl-mothers from continuing their education or successfully re-entering school?
3. How does the intersection of faith ideologies and purity norms determine the long-term educational trajectories of pregnant girls when compared to the state's intended policy outcomes?
4. How do the messages disseminated by faith-based organisations influence the self-perception and responses of the girls themselves, as well as the institutional actions of schools and communities?
5. Which faith-based interventions or discourses challenge stigma successfully and align with national gender equality commitments to support re-entry?

2.1 The Layers of Influence conceptual framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) for this study adopts a socio-ecological model comprising four interrelated layers, as follows:

- Layer 1 is the agency and identity of the individual girl, which are central to school re-entry.
- Layer 2 is the microsystem, consisting of significant people in the girl-mother's immediate environment (parents, family, partners, friends, peers).
- Layer 3 is the mesosystem that links a girl-mother's private life and public policy, with institutional gatekeepers (e.g. faith leaders, school heads) mediating national mandates.
- Layer 4 is the macrosystem: the policy level that is anchored in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the Basic Education Act (2013), and the Children Act (2022).

Figure 1 Layers of Influence framework



Source: Adapted by authors from Bronfenbrenner (1979).

This 'Layers of Influence' framework functions as an analytical lens to examine how the 13 specific implementation requirements of the 2020 Re-entry Policy (outlined in Table 2) are interpreted and operationalised. By integrating these statutory requirements into the socio-ecological layers, the framework identifies where administrative mandates intersect with – or are obstructed by – local norms, beliefs and institutional practices.

Table 2 Implementation requirements mandated in Re-entry Policy Guidelines

Category	Policy requirement	Specific mandate
Communication and planning	Requirements 1 and 3	Schools must notify parents immediately and document all communication regarding the re-entry policy.
	Requirement 4	The school, learner and parent must sign a committal letter for re-entry six months after delivery.
Health and support	Requirement 2	Mandatory enrolment in a guidance and counselling programme; coordination with health facilities for antenatal care.
	Requirements 5 and 6	Pregnant learners remain in school as long as possible and are allowed to sit for national examinations with reasonable accommodations.
Admission and placement	Requirements 7 and 8. Also reiterated as a cross-cutting requirement for all children, regardless of their reason for dropping out.	Guaranteed unconditional re-admission to the same grade. This applies even if a learner becomes pregnant more than once, provided they are of school age.
	Requirement 9	Learners over 18 are transitioned to adult education or vocational centres.
Legal and accountability	Requirement 10	Counselling for schoolboy fathers under 18 regarding their responsibilities.
	Requirements 11 and 13	Mandatory reporting to the Police and Children's Department if the person responsible is an adult, caregiver, or teacher.
	Requirement 12	Disciplinary action against teachers per the Teachers' Service Commission code of conduct and advising parents on legal action.

Source: Summarised by the authors from Ministry of Education (2020).

Rather than offering a broad system-wide analysis, the Layers of Influence framework focuses on the individual, household, community and institutional contexts that dictate the educational trajectory for a girl-mother. Table 3 maps the research questions against these nested layers and the corresponding policy mandates (Ministry of Education, 2020: 19–21), providing a structured approach to assessing the implementation gap from national policy to lived experience.

Table 3 Mapping research questions to the Layers of Influence framework

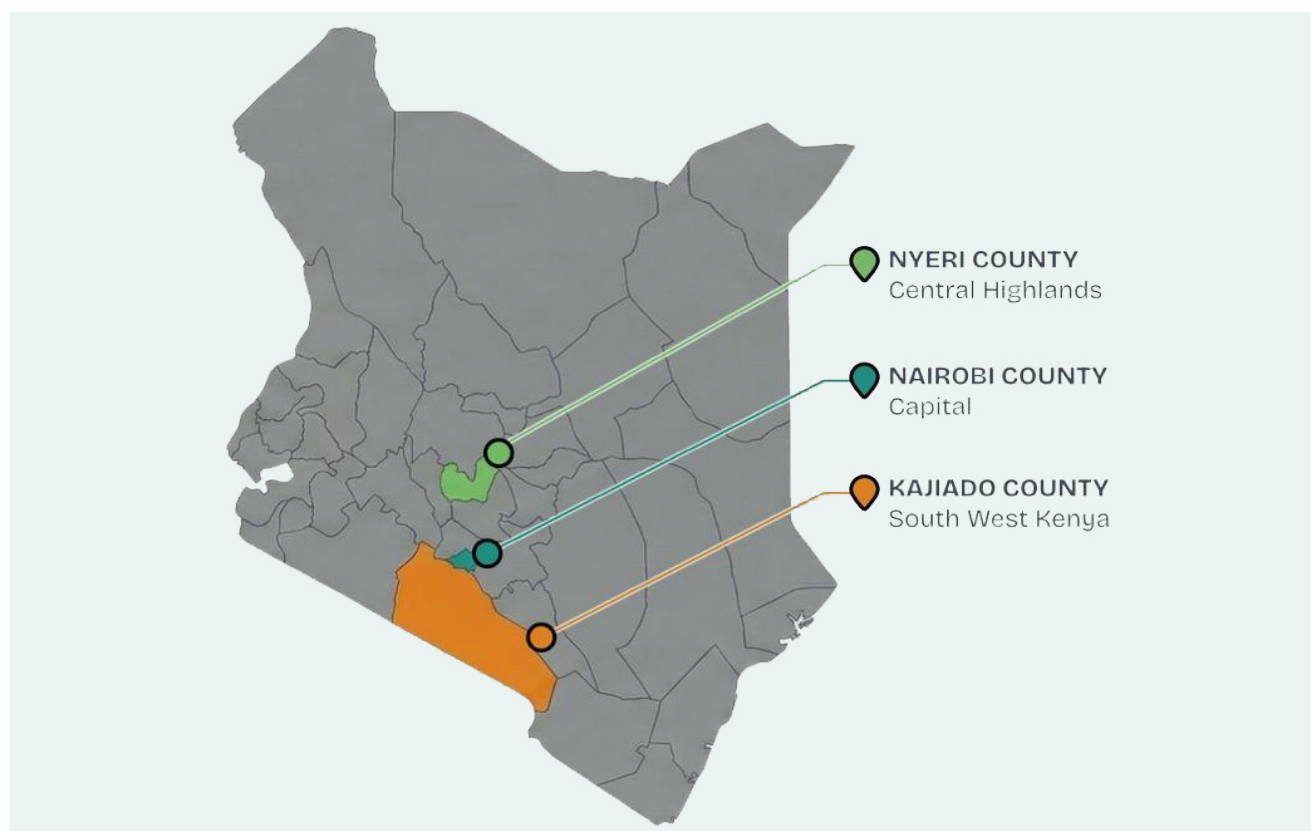
Socio-ecological layer	Research question	Integrated 2020 policy requirements
1. Individual/micro	How do the messages of faith-based organisations influence the self-perception of girls and the institutional actions of schools and communities?	Health: Requirement 2 (mandatory guidance and counselling) Legal: Requirement 10 (counselling for schoolboy fathers) Health: Requirement 5 (right to remain in class)
2. Micro (communal)	How does the intersection of faith ideologies and purity norms determine the long-term educational trajectories of girls?	Communication: Requirement 1 (parental notification) Communication: Requirement 4 (committal letter/six-month nursing rule) Legal: Requirement 11 (reporting adult offenders)
3. Meso (institutional)	In what ways do faith-based organisations reinforce negative gender norms that block adolescent mothers from re-entering school?	Communication: Requirement 3 (official documentation) Health: Requirement 6 (exam accommodations/maternal needs) Legal: Requirement 12 (disciplinary action for staff)
4. Meso/macro (policy application)	How do faith-based ideologies and gender norms mediate the local application of the 2020 Guidelines across the study locales?	Admission: Requirements 7 and 8 (unconditional re-entry and multi-pregnancy) Legal: Requirements 11 and 13 (mandatory reporting) Health: Requirement 5 (remaining in school)
Synthesis (restorative)	Which faith-based interventions successfully challenge stigma and align with national gender equality commitments?	Health: Requirement 2 (referral to reproductive health/antenatal care) Admission: Requirement 7 (placement assistance/county support) Admission: Requirement 9 (transition to adult/vocational education)

Source: Authors' mapping of the Layers of Influence framework (2025-2026).

2.2 Geographical landscape

Kajiado, Nyeri and Kibra (within Nairobi County)(Figure 2) were selected as study locales to provide a representative cross-section of Kenya's socio-economic and religious diversity.

Figure 2 Map of Kenya with study locales



Source: Open access base image from Wikimedia Commons modified by Jaslika.

As shown in Table 4, Kajiado faces the greatest structural disadvantage among the study sites, reflected in a high poverty headcount rate of 37.3% (KNBS, 2022). This economic vulnerability is mirrored in social outcomes, with Kajiado reporting the highest prevalence of teenage pregnancy (22%) and child marriage (7.3%), both substantially higher than the rates observed in Kibra (Nairobi) and Nyeri counties.

Table 4 Key indicators by study locale

Region	Size	Poverty headcount rates	Teen pregnancy rate	% married girls (age 12-18)	% out-of-school population
Kajiado	21,292 km ²	37.3%	22%	7.3%	5.9%
Nairobi	695 km ²	16.5%	8% ²	3.2%	3.3%
Nyeri	3,337 km ²	26%	5%	3.4%	2.0%
National	580,367 km ²	39.8%	15%	13%	5.8%

Sources: KNBS (2022); UNESCO (2021).

2 The 8% is an average figure that masks very high teen pregnancy rates in Nairobi's informal settlements. Onyango and Tortensen (2015) estimate that 50% of girls and young women aged 15 to 25 have experienced pregnancy.

While Kibra (Nairobi) and Nyeri counties record lower poverty headcount rates (16.5% and 26.0%, respectively), Kajiado's disadvantage is further shaped by its vast geographical size (21,292 km²), which presents persistent challenges for service delivery and physical access to schools and health facilities. In this context, spatial dispersion and economic deprivation co-exist with a higher out-of-school population (5.9%) than seen in the more urbanised and relatively better-served study sites.

Socio-culturally, these locales offer distinct landscapes, as follows:

- **Kajiado:** Defined by its pastoralist heritage, traditional patriarchal norms, and early marriage, now intersecting with a rising Pentecostal presence.
- **Kibra (Nairobi):** A fragmented metropolitan hub where high-density urban poverty challenges traditional family support structures.
- **Nyeri:** While contemporary Kikuyu society is largely patriarchal, Nyeri retains a matrilineal and matriarchal heritage where women have, historically, held significant roles in lineage and stewardship. Today, this manifests as a high prevalence of grandmother-led households that creates a unique tension: while matriarchal household arrangements can and do provide practical childcare support, strong Christian institutional presence and community networks intensify informal moral surveillance, reinforcing gender norms related to sexuality, respectability and motherhood.

Table 5 maps the faith landscape across the study locales of Kajiado, Kibra (Nairobi) and Nyeri.

Table 5 Mapping of faiths by study locales

Study site	Primary Christian influence	Islamic presence	Traditional / syncretic ³ influence
Kajiado	Christian (88.3%): Largely Protestant (Anglican, Africa Inland Church, Presbyterian, Methodist), Evangelicals, other smaller denominations	Growing presence in urban centres (2.4%)	Maasai traditionalism: Strong emphasis on rites of passage, including male and female circumcision. ⁴ Syncretic religions emphasise alternative rites of passage, particularly for girls. Traditional, syncretic religions are estimated at 6.4%
Kibra (Nairobi)	Diverse/Neo-Pentecostal: Catholic, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Winners' Chapel, Deliverance Church	High: Large Nubian Muslim communities (11%-15%)	Urban syncretism: Prophetic circles and independent miracle-focused ministries that blend faith with urban survivalism
Nyeri	Christian (97.7%): Predominantly Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Roman Catholic	Minority presence (0.6%): Primarily in central town areas	Statistically Agikuyu ⁵ traditionalism (0.1%) is negligible but matrilineal elements persist in everyday practices, e.g. naming conventions (son adopting mother's name as surname where father is missing)

Sources: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2019); Sarre (2025); Waweru et al., (2022).

3 The merging or blending of different, often contradictory, beliefs, practices, or cultures into a new, unified system. Examples of syncretic religions are African Independent/Instituted Churches.

4 'Female genital mutilation' (FGM) is a legal term under international and Kenyan laws that emphasises the violation of human rights, the lack of medical necessity, and the permanent physical and psychological harm caused to the girl. In the present context, however, 'female circumcision' has been used deliberately to reflect the traditional Maasai perspective that it is a ritual necessary for social integration, marriageability, and purity.

5 This is the culturally more accurate reference to the Gikuyu people who live in Central Kenya where Nyeri is located. Kikuyu is the Anglicised version of Agikuyu.

Together, these environments capture how traditional heritage and religious ideologies collectively shape the implementation of the Re-entry Policy.

2.3 Data collection methods

To capture the multi-layered data required for the study, a suite of qualitative tools was used, tailored to each level of influence. These are summarised in Table 6.

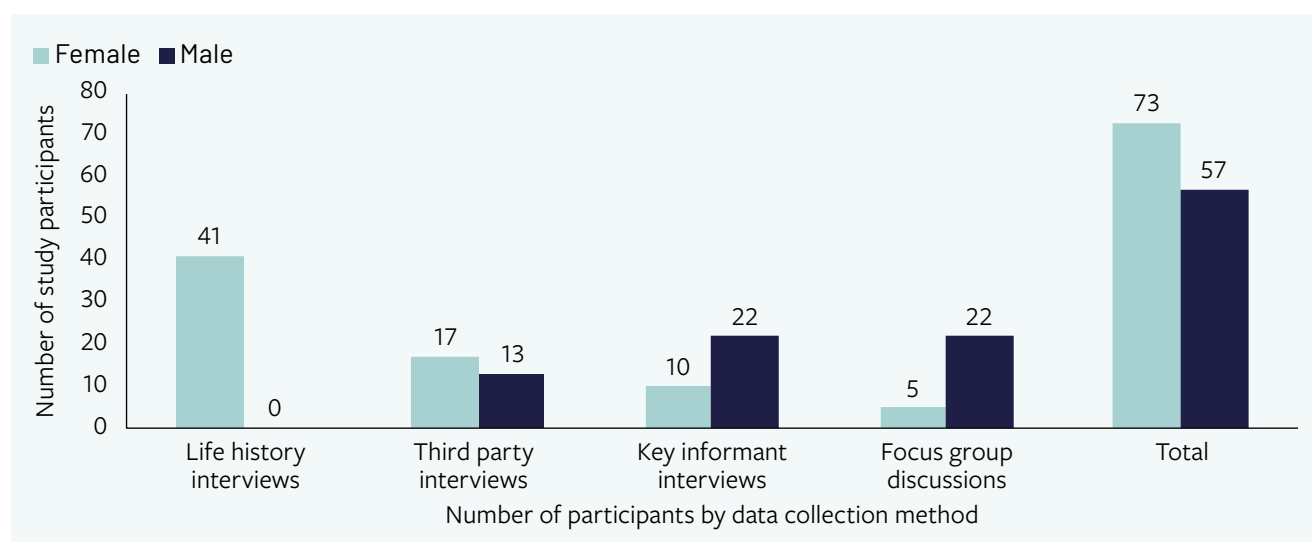
Table 6 Data collection method used by participant type and purpose

Participant type	Method/tool	Purpose
Pregnant girls and girl-mothers (in and out of school)	Life history interview (LHI)	To capture personal stories, decision-making processes and barriers/enablers to re-entry. This methodology involved multiple interviews with each interviewee.
Significant others (parents, guardians, relatives, partners, faith counsellors, peers)	Third party interview (TPI)	To understand household, relational and social influences on girls' schooling decisions.
Faith leaders, school leaders, government officials (education, gender, health, children's services, social services, and chiefs)	Key informant interview (KII)	To explore institutional perspectives, faith norms and policy implementation at local and county levels.
Youth participating in faith-based activities including school religious clubs, adolescent learners (girls and boys), and youth from the communities where girl mothers live (15–35 years)	Focus group discussion (FGD)	To gather collective views on gender norms, faith beliefs and re-entry experiences within the community.

Source: Authors' research design and methodology (2025–2026).

In all, 130 individuals (56% female) were interviewed across the three participant categories and counties, as presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Number of study participants by sex and data collection method



Source: Authors' analysis of participants' demographic data (2025–2026).

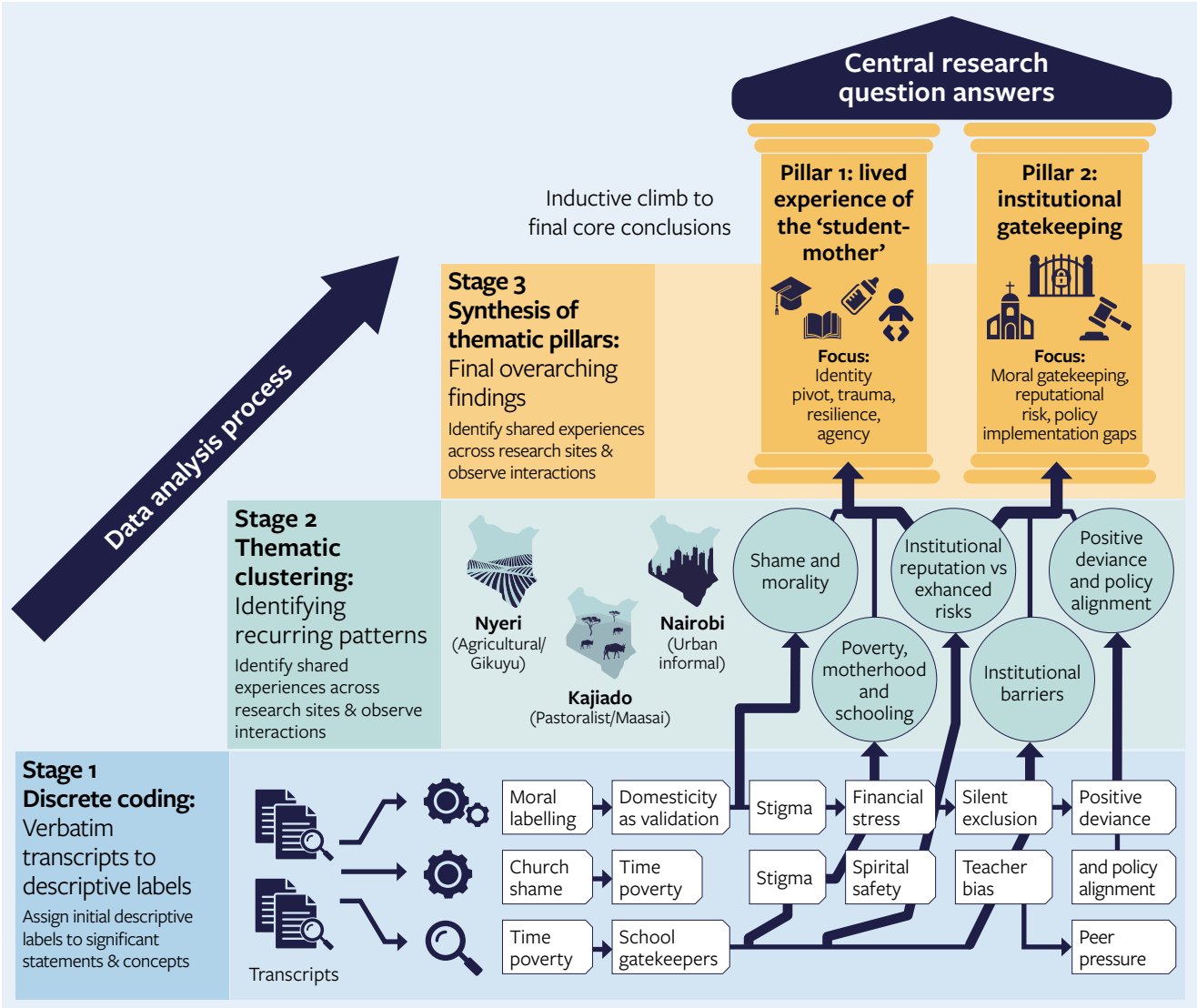
Figure 3 illustrates a clear and significant gender skew, but in different directions, across the four participant categories. The sample of girl-mothers is the largest at 41 individuals, all females. While the third-party interviews with primary influencers exhibited a more balanced gender distribution than the other participant groups, this was not an intentional design choice. Rather, it was a direct result of the study’s participant-driven approach.

The data indicates that Christians were the overwhelming majority of participants, with Muslims constituting less than 10%. Those whose religious affiliation was unknown accounted for approximately 8% of the total. For further information about the participants, including about their pregnancy and education experience, see Section 3.1.

2.4 Data analysis and synthesis

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with consent and were transcribed verbatim. Local language interviews were translated into English and peer-validated by a Jaslika researcher who was fluent in both languages to ensure accuracy. The analysis followed a systematic three-stage process, as Figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 4 Three-stage inductive data analysis ladder



Source: Adapted by Jaslika from a graphic generated by Google Gemini (3.0 Flash), March 2026.

To maintain consistency and reliability throughout this process, the research team used inter-coder calibration workshops, where coding definitions were harmonised and negative cases (outlier data that contradicted emerging patterns) were analysed to ensure the findings remained credible and representative.

2.5 Ethical considerations

This research was approved by an institutional Ethical Review Board, and a research permit was obtained from the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, Kenya's research regulatory body. Parallel ethical approval was obtained from the ODI Global Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent and the assent of minors was obtained from all participants. Given the risk of stigma associated with pregnancy disclosure, all participants were assured of anonymity, and pseudonyms were used throughout the research and report.

2.6 Study limitations

The study prioritises qualitative depth over statistical breadth, focusing on the intricate moral architectures, norms and institutional practices that shape girls' schooling trajectories within specific communities rather than on numerical generalisation. Because the sample was drawn from three distinct socio-religious and geographical contexts, the findings are not intended to represent the full diversity of experiences across all Kenyan communities. Instead, they provide a granular, 'thick description' of how policy implementation unfolds within specific settings and thereby inform and challenge broader policy debates.

The study also identified school leaders, teachers and faith actors who are active supporters of girls' continued education and re-entry. This support is not, however, examined in equal depth across the report, given the study's deliberate analytical focus on implementation gaps, systemic barriers, and contexts where the application of the Re-entry Policy is weakest. This emphasis reflects the study's underlying ambition to identify points of breakdown and areas that require policy attention, rather than to provide a comprehensive account of all forms of successful practice.

Finally, some cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions may have undergone subtle shifts during the translation of interviews from local languages into English, despite careful transcription and verification processes.

3 Identity, faith and survival: the lived experiences of girl-mothers

'I can say it was rape because I didn't have the strength to fight back... I even came home looking like someone who had been beaten'
(LHI #024, Nyeri).

This section examines the individual, micro and meso levels of the Layers of Influence framework, starting with the girl-mothers' lived experiences and identity negotiations within the individual and microsystem layers. The section assesses how the national Re-entry Policy interacts with their realities, analysing the psychological, social and structural factors that shape their transition to motherhood. The core tension lies between the girls' student identity and community labels like 'sinner' and 'mother,' and their school re-entry positioned at this difficult intersection.

The section then examines the relationship between the domestic microsystem (caregiving/ household labour) and the academic mesosystem (school) to determine whether they support girls' return to school, with specific assessment of the impact of domestic demands on their academic focus. This interaction is framed within a macrosystem that has been designed, historically, for students who do not have children, analysing how current structures accommodate the overlapping roles of girl-motherhood.

3.1 The profile of girl-mothers

An analysis of the age of girl-mothers who participated in the study, summarised in Table 7, found that 46% of them became pregnant between the ages of 14 and 16. This suggests that many girls encounter a developmental crossroads where gendered expectations of early womanhood override their individual agency. In this context, education is often interrupted by community norms that prioritise reproductive status over academic identity, leading to systematic exclusion.

Furthermore, pregnancies among girls as young as 11 (10%) are a critical breach of international and national legislation, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Kenyan Constitution (2010). They are clear evidence of statutory rape and the failure of duty-bearers to provide adequate protection.

As the data presented in Table 7 reveals, approximately 70% of those identified as responsible for impregnating the girls were either peers or boyfriends and included both the perpetrators of sexual abuse and consensual partners. Older men – including 'sugar daddies', stepfathers, and influential clan members – accounted for at least 20% of the remaining cases. The evidence suggests that many perpetrators in the 'undisclosed' category are older men whose economic, social or kinship status put pressure on families to accept a private settlement. One faith leader explained:

'When a teenage girl is impregnated by a man in the community, nobody exposes the person responsible. Why? "It's our relative." They often say, "Let's just let this go away," especially if the father is a senior village member. Since everyone is related, nobody wants their relative to go to jail, so they let the case drop entirely. The girl receives no justice, loses her chance to return to school, and nobody points a finger at the perpetrator'
(KII #001, Faith Leader, Nyeri).

Table 7 Girl-mother data by age, perpetrator identity, school re-entry status and attendance of religious services

Variable category	Sub-category	Percentage (%) (n=41)
Age of girl	11 to 13	10% (n= 4)
	14 to 16	46% (n=19)
	17 to 19	44% (n=18)
Male responsible for her pregnancy	Peers and boyfriends	70%
	Older men ('sugar daddies') ⁶ and authority figures	20%
	Undisclosed	10%
School re-entry status	Did not return	57%
	Returned to school	43%
Religious observance	Regular attendance at weekly religious services	82%

Source: Authors' analysis of field data (2025-2026).

A senior chief confirmed that cases were often hidden to avoid the legal consequences of violating the Sexual Offences Act (2006), particularly when the accused is a minor or a family member (KII #003, National Government, Kajiado). Common across all study locales, this reliance on traditional dispute resolution prioritises communal standing and family honour over the girl's legal rights, effectively stalling the formal reporting process and silencing the victim.

This systemic silence about perpetrators extends to the religious microsystem. Even though 82% of girl-mothers report that they attended religious services regularly before their pregnancy, many across all three locations stopped attending their church or madrasa once their pregnancy became visible because the pressure of intense moral oversight outweighed any spiritual benefit.

Instead of finding a safety net, these girls encountered an environment of judgement where their private life became a public cautionary tale. In Nyeri, for example, some pastors shamed pregnant girls from the pulpit, a practice that drove some to abandon their denominations or in one instance, convert to Islam to escape the stigma. Others simply stopped attending Christian Union or worship services to avoid the distress of hearing sermons that implicitly condemned their pregnancies.

This exclusion was often formalised through institutional rules that labelled unmarried mothers as 'backslidden', stripping them of their status as full members. For those who had once been role models, the fall from grace was particularly visible; in one instance, an adolescent community health worker whose father was a pastor was stripped of all her leadership roles – including teaching Sunday school and leading worship – while her family felt pressured by the congregation to keep her out of sight when she became pregnant.

In Kibra (Nairobi), this social pressure was equally relentless, with girls reporting that constant whispers and judgemental staring made the act of attending a church or mosque a source of deep anxiety. Whether it was a Muslim girl describing congregants physically distancing themselves from

⁶ In the context of child pregnancy, an older male perpetrator who leverages significant economic disparity and social influence to engage in transactional sexual exploitation of a minor. This dynamic relies on 'luring' – the provision of material needs (such as school fees, sanitary pads, or food) to bypass the child's agency – and constitutes a predatory breach of both the Sexual Offences Act (2006) and the Children Act (2022).

her during prayer or a Christian girl feeling suicidal because of the weight of the congregation's surveillance or 'gaze', the result was the same.

This suggests that religious institutions acted more like moral watchdogs than places of support. Instead of helping girls recover and return to school, they often monitored and judged their behaviour. Close involvement in a faith community did not provide any safety net for these girls. Instead, the religious group's expectations often reinforced the stigma that led to them dropping out of school.

The fact that 57% of the girl-mothers had not returned to school is a clear sign of the implementation gap. While 43% of participants did go back to school, the majority of these reported experiences of their exclusion. As discussed in the following sections, this is the result of a combination of gendered accountability and entrenched communal doctrines that undermine their statutory right to education.

3.2 Identity crisis and the moral burden

Girl-mothers navigate the psychological collision between their identity as learners and the moral labels imposed by their significant others (including their parents, grandparents, siblings, extended family members, partners and close friends), community and school leaders – labels that draw on traditional gender norms and faith-based ideologies. Across diverse religious and cultural contexts, doctrines of *purity* and *sin* converge to deliver a moral verdict that is often more disabling to a girl's education than the pregnancy itself.

The circumstances of a pregnancy, whether resulting from experimentation, sexual coercion or survival sex, will determine the distribution of the subsequent moral burden. As discussed further in Section 4, the initial conditions for adolescent pregnancy are shaped by factors such as a lack of institutional supervision, the absence of comprehensive sexuality education,⁷ and strained family communication. However, the consequences are normative rather than structural, as pre-marital adolescent pregnancy is perceived as a girl's moral failure.

Across all sites, rigid masculinity norms link virility to social status, transforming fatherhood into a badge of prowess. Even in Nyeri, despite the matriarchal traditions of the Kikuyus, men often gain 'alpha' standing and face little censure, while girls are burdened with shame and condemnation (FGD #001 and 002, Male Youth, Nyeri). These double standards treat pregnancy as a male triumph but a female failure. As a result, the girl suffers the 'social death' of stigma and invisibility, while the boy remains a celebrated figure, particularly among his peers.

Paradoxically, faith institutions often act as both the architects of high-risk environments and the moral prosecutors of their consequences. For example, 20-year-old Silole, who became pregnant during a relationship that began in lower secondary school, does not blame the father of her child. Instead, she identifies her church as a primary factor: *'Because of the seminars. There you're free, no one is watching you, you're away from the parents, and you have the freedom'* (LHI #010, Kajiado).

Youth seminars and overnight vigils organised by Christian churches during long school holidays are intended to promote abstinence. However, study participants described them as unsupervised social spaces where *'girls interact freely with men'*, inadvertently facilitating the very encounters these events aim to prevent (KII #038, National Government, Kajiado; KII #017, Faith Leader, Kajiado; FGD #003 Female Youth, Nyeri).

⁷ In this report, the term 'comprehensive sexuality education' (CSE) is used in a general sense to describe an in-depth, holistic approach to health and relationships. It is intentionally distinguished from the specific CSE curriculum often associated with international mandates, which remains a subject of local controversy. The focus here is on the essential need for well-rounded, age-appropriate information rather than a particular global framework.

When asked if leaders were aware of these risks, one girl noted: *'They know, but they just ignore it because they feel nothing can be done'* (LHI #010, Kajiado). One teacher gave the example of his church, which once organised a two-week spiritual camp:

'It really shocked us later to realise we had no impact on five girls who got pregnant. The church is trying to do something, but at night the youth are doing their own things... The youth use church functions badly. Most of these pregnancies are not from church members; other people from far away are coming to your church just to meet girls'

(KII #13, Teacher, Kajiado).

In contexts where sexual violence is prevalent, the lack of basic sex education makes effective policy implementation almost impossible. Because many girl-mothers do not have the information needed to understand consent or their legal rights, the 2020 Re-entry Policy operates in a vacuum. This knowledge gap severely disadvantages survivors of violence; without knowing their rights, they cannot advocate for themselves or successfully navigate their return to the classroom.

The impact can be seen in in Mariam's case. At age 12, Mariam was sexually assaulted, an encounter she struggled to define: *'I can say it was rape because I didn't have the strength to fight back... I even came home looking like someone who had been beaten'* (LHI #024, Nyeri). Despite her academic intelligence, Mariam lacked the sex and reproductive knowledge she needed to fully comprehend the violation of her rights following the assault. Seven years later, her perpetrator has not been prosecuted, underscoring a complete failure of both the protection and justice systems.

Maasai cultural protocols, often reinforced by religious interpretations, impose strict limits on direct communication between fathers and daughters. This silence is rooted in a profound fear of fathers that leaves adolescent girls socially and economically isolated.

As a result, many turn to boyfriends or older men ('sugar daddies') to secure basic necessities, as Nailantei's (LHI #016) experience illustrates: her boyfriend provided her with essential items like sanitary pads. In Kajiado, these relationships often fill the dangerous void left by the breakdown of family communication and economic provision. As Nailantei explains, her inability to articulate needs directly to her father transformed the pregnancy itself into a way of communicating with parents:

'You find that most girls cannot communicate with their parents directly because of fear... In this culture, a girl is not supposed to talk to her father directly. You can't go tell them you want this or that. It becomes very hard. For some, that pregnancy is the way they communicate that they want to get married'

(LHI #016, Kajiado).

In Kajiado, the community often interprets a girl's physical growth as a sign that she is ready for marriage. This cultural view is reinforced by a household power structure where the norm of women being submissive prevents mothers from intervening. One informant talked about the helplessness of women who are silenced by the constant threat of domestic violence:

'We can't do anything because if you argue with your husband, he will beat the child... or he will say it's my fault. I just stay quiet because he is the power of the home'

(KII #011, Community Woman, Kajiado).

Collectively, these insights reveal that the Maasai view of the father as the absolute authority creates a dual barrier. First, it prevents the girl from asking for help before a pregnancy occurs. Second, it positions early marriage as the only culturally accepted solution. Within the family, upholding gender power imbalances through a dominant-submissive relationship becomes a survival tactic.

While maternal silence and a daughter's fear act as protection against conflict in the home, they also mean that a girl's legal right to an education is pushed aside by the cultural mandate of male authority.

Moral judgements from the community also shape girls' healthcare behaviours. For Mariam, internalised shame nearly proved fatal when she concealed labour pains for hours because she believed she had done something bad and feared judgement. Girls also face shaming and isolation by healthcare professionals, despite the national adolescent health policy (Ministry of Health, 2015) which mandates compassionate care practice. For others, like Nailantei, pregnancy triggered an immediate cultural shift toward marriage, signalling the dissolution of her educational identity.

The invisible learner: anticipatory exclusion and the internalised verdict

A significant pattern across the study was anticipatory self-exclusion – a strategic withdrawal into invisibility adopted long before any formal exclusion is imposed either by the church or the school. This is a rational, albeit devastating, response to a moral environment that communicates the total disqualification of the girl-mother. In this context, disqualification refers to the social and psychological process where the girl is stripped of her identity as a decent student and redefined as a moral liability. She is no longer seen as a child with potential, but as a person who has forfeited her right to belong in a pure academic or religious space.

At the heart of this withdrawal is a process where girls adhere to internalised gender norms based on purity to avoid the crushing weight of moral stigma. By choosing to disappear, they attempt to protect themselves from a society that now views them as tainted. This self-exclusion is driven by two key mechanisms: shame, which acts as a social barrier, and a profound sense of self-pity and unworthiness, which convinces the girl she is no longer fit to carry on with her education.

To illustrate this, a youth church leader in Kajiado (LHI #010) stopped attending all public functions – including both church and school – as soon as she knew she was pregnant: *'I stopped because of the shame... you felt like they would see you in a bad light'*. This internalised fear migrated seamlessly from the church to the school, resulting in a total retreat from public life. Because she felt she had lost her moral standing, she became equally unwilling to return to the classroom without intense parental compulsion. This reveals that the implementation gap is not just caused by schools pushing girls out, but by a psychological barrier where the girl – convinced of her own unworthiness – shuts the door on herself.

Across all three counties, girls internalised the moral values of their faith communities long before any external labels were applied. The 'sinner' label functioned from within, dictating whether they still held the right to be learners. Nailantei was most afraid of her pastor's judgement: *'I was mostly scared of my spiritual dad... I felt I had done wrong'* (LHI #016, Kajiado). In Nyeri, Mariam felt excluded by school messaging that focused solely on virginity, leaving her – a victim of rape⁸ – without a vocabulary for victimhood: *'So surely my God, did I do something bad that I'm not a virgin?'* (LHI #024, Nyeri).

As Silole concluded, the weight of self-pity erodes ambition: *'It reduces that desire... Now it's like you pity yourself instead of continuing to want to study'* (LHI #010, Kajiado). This psychological shift strips the girl-mother of her sense of belonging in her own future, solidifying the transition from student to out-of-school mother.

Shame effectively shrinks a girl's world until she is, in essence, invisible. Nailantei (LHI #016) described the isolation of a classroom where peers did not even need to be hostile for her to feel excluded: *'There is that feeling you have on your own; you just feel "I'm not the same as them". So sometimes you would go and sit by yourself; you stay alone.'* This sense of disqualification was most acute for those who held leadership roles. A former school prefect in Nyeri (LI #024) described a voluntary moral demotion upon her return: *'I told the teachers I didn't want to be a prefect... how can I*

8 In Kenya, the legal terminology for the rape of a minor (that is a child below age 18) is defilement.

lead people when I, myself, am a runaway?'. Her use of the word 'runaway' is a poignant example of the moral norm of purity. Factually, she had exercised significant agency to return to school; however, her deeply held beliefs made motherhood and leadership mutually exclusive. She relinquished her right to lead because she accepted the verdict that her record was now blemished.

This illustrates that the most effective barrier can be the internalised norms of a community that equate a mistake with a permanent loss of status. This 'double erasure' of identity first through the faith community's verdict and then through the school's indifference strips girls of their entitlement to a future.

The moral norms of faith communities are expressed not only through public condemnation but also through a strategic silence regarding – what is described by many participants as 'restoration' – to a position of equal worth and leadership. This silence creates a vacuum that forces the girl-mother to navigate her return to school without the necessary support from her home, school or faith community. While perceptions of this support vary across religious lines, the underlying priority remains consistent: the emphasis is on preventing the moral failure of pregnancy rather than facilitating the girl-mother's return to education.

Salma, for example (LHI #043, Kibra, Nairobi), observed that while some local churches provided occasional financial aid, she perceived a total absence of mosque-based structures for young mothers. This gap reveals a critical disconnect: the community's resources are often used to police morality (prevention), leaving nothing left to support the academic and social reintegration of the girl. Regardless of whether these support structures exist on paper, the lack of visible, accessible help confirms to the girl that the community is more interested in her disqualification than her recovery.

Community moral norms and practices towards young mothers often contradict faith teachings. These contradictions, illustrated in Table 8, are most visible when religious authority and institutional reputation are at stake, leading to the use of practical, often secretive, manoeuvres to protect the status of male leadership, be it in the family, school or the faith community.

The response to adolescent pregnancy often prioritises an institution's image over the girl's safety and well-being. Examples include a family arranging an abortion to protect the reputation of the girl's pastor-father (LHI #041, Kibra, Nairobi) and an alleged cover-up of a minor's rape by a Catholic priest.

Table 8 The moral dissonance – doctrinal standards vs institutional realities and their impact on girl-mothers

Institutional teachings (de jure morality)	Institutional practice (de facto reality)	Impact on the girl-mother
Condemnation: pregnancy is strictly prohibited outside of marriage.	Reputational management: facilitating secret abortions to protect male/family status.	Silencing: her physical safety is sacrificed for the institution's image.
Labelling: children are categorised as illegitimate or haram.	Structural absence: providing no visible pathways for reintegration or spiritual support.	Isolation: The 'sinner' label becomes a permanent barrier to belonging.
Disciplinary gaze: using pregnant girls as a cautionary tale or warning sign.	Informed silence: offering little to no guidance on the legal right to school re-entry.	Self-exclusion: she internalises the warning and withdraws from the future.

Source: Authors' analysis of field data (2025–2026).

This urgent focus on shielding religious figures from reputational damage effectively silences the girl and upholds a system that values the appearance of holiness over authentic pastoral care. Ultimately, shaming the girls is a way of looking moral to outsiders. By using gossip and labels, the community creates a show of righteousness that prioritises the school or church's status over the individual's needs. This behaviour is driven by a fear of social judgement – what neighbours or congregants will think – rather than the core values of the faith itself. The result is a gendered double standard where the institution survives by sacrificing the girl's restoration, leaving her to navigate the return to school in a vacuum where there is no support.

3.3 The triple shift: navigating poverty, motherhood and schooling

'Waking up at 4 a.m., preparing milk for the baby; going to school the whole day. You are at school, the breasts are full of milk, swollen – it is so painful... In the evening... I must wash the baby's clothes, utensils... It was very tiresome'
(LHI #041, Nairobi).

For girl-mothers, returning to school is less an academic journey and more a gruelling test of endurance. While many girls in rural areas or informal settlements already manage a dual burden of housework and studies, having a baby triples that workload. This triple shift – balancing school, chores and childcare – leaves young women physically and mentally drained, turning an often-fragile decision to stay in school into a daily struggle.

Life history data reveals a routine of chronic time poverty. Participants described days that begin at 4:00 a.m. with infant care and domestic chores, followed by a full day of school, and ending with evening labour. This cycle leaves no time for study or rest.

Focus group discussions confirmed that family members often view the girl-mother as a labourer first and a student second. Instead of offering support, some families pile on responsibilities like cooking and fetching firewood as a form of punishment for the pregnancy. As one participant in Nyeri noted, *'You get home and the child's clothes are right there... it's like you've become a house-help'* (FGD, Nyeri).

This pressure often leads to mental dropout long before a girl physically leaves school. Girl-mothers like Talia (LHI #003, Nyeri) and Silole (LHI #010, Kajiado) reported severe concentration difficulties, especially when their babies were sick. Because many schools treat pregnancy as a moral failing rather than a life transition, teachers often blame underperformance on a girl's status rather than these obvious structural barriers.

In all three counties, formal re-entry did not guarantee regular school attendance because of both administrative and logistical barriers. Administratively, some schools refused to register pregnant girls for national exams, forcing them to repeat entire school years. Logistically, absenteeism spiked when infants fell ill or elderly grandmothers could no longer provide full-time care. Furthermore, despite official re-admission policies, many girls were still sent home for failing to pay auxiliary levies.

The collision between postpartum physical reality and rigid school rules represents a final, critical barrier. National examination protocols do not offer flexibility for medical recovery. As a result, girls are often forced to sit for high-stakes exams in hospital wards or classrooms immediately after childbirth.

The lack of nursing breaks or private spaces leads to physical pain and breast engorgement that makes concentration impossible. As a Clinical Officer in Kajiado noted, a girl cannot *'think about a math problem when her body is signalling a physical crisis'* (KII #016, Kajiado). Standard school furniture – not designed for a body in recovery – only adds to her discomfort. In this environment, the 2020

Re-entry Guidelines fail to bridge the gap between policy and practice, turning education into a test of physical survival that the current system is not built to support.

3.4 Agency and the search for spiritual safety

Across Kajiado, Kibra and Nyeri, girl-mothers protect their dignity by renegotiating their relationship with faith. Many find that the religious spaces that were once sources of comfort are transformed into sites of distress. Participants described the surveillance of leaders and congregations as a physical weight, with sermons often feeling like targeted personal attacks. This scrutiny enforces a gendered purity norm that leaves no room for error, driving some toward suicidal despair. As one girl-mother recalled, the weight of shame was so heavy she contemplated ending her life (LHI #043, Kibra, Nairobi).

This stigmatisation is often systemic and explicitly theological. In some Christian settings, girls are denied Holy Communion, a ritual intended for spiritual nourishment and forgiveness until they complete secondary school. A faith leader in Nyeri explained that these girls are 'not considered saved' and must remain in a 'state of guilt' (TPI #023.4). This standard rarely applies to men, who typically retain their leadership roles. In Kibra (Nairobi), Aisha (LHI #041) found that neighbours warned their daughters to avoid her, lest they too be 'ruined'. No longer seen as a student, she became a living warning sign, carrying the burden of her family's reputation and internalising the belief that she had brought them shame.

Women and neighbours, regardless of their specific faith affiliation, act as primary agents of surveillance. In Kibra, in the Nubian community, Ranya (LHI #007) described an upbringing of 'silos of *haram*', where enforced silence left girls without options for reintegration once abstinence was broken. Neighbours engaged in moral forecasting, labelling girls as inevitable failures. This gossip functions as a social discipline that chooses punishment over reintegration.

In Kajiado, this asymmetric enforcement destroys academic ambition. As one young man noted, once the church labels a girl, she feels her '*book is closed*', believing that if God and the pastor have turned away, there is no reason to remain in the classroom (FGD #04).

In some evangelical spaces, anti-education rhetoric further blocks re-entry by framing formal schooling as worldly compared to spiritual devotion. Furthermore, some leaders in Kajiado pushed narratives of domesticity, suggesting women should '*stay indoors to serve their husbands*' (LHI #016). By framing marriage as a punishment for pregnancy, these leaders subvert national re-entry policies, replacing education with early marriage.

Despite this shaming, girl-mothers remain active negotiators of their own futures. The study found examples of those who seek a moral reset through two primary strategies:

- Denominational shifting: Moving to different churches that embrace them as 'sisters in progress' rather than 'fallen daughters', allowing them to refocus energy on their studies.
- Strategic conversion: In a radical exercise of agency, some girls change faiths entirely – one participant in Nyeri converted to Islam to erase the Christian purity metrics used to judge her (LHI #024).

By leveraging Kenya's diverse religious landscape, these girls find allies who prioritise their education over dogma, successfully resisting the stigma that threatens to push them out of school.

Significant others as allies or adversaries

The agency of a girl-mother is heavily mediated by the religious attitudes of her significant others, who act as either the ultimate barrier or an essential safety net.

In families that hold rigid, sin-based views of pregnancy, her home becomes an extension of her faith's judgemental gaze. Influenced by purity dogmas, some parents viewed pregnancy as entailing a forfeiture of family resources. This economic abandonment – refusing to pay fees or provide for the infant – was framed as a natural consequence of moral failing. Furthermore, conservative families often 'resolved' shame by pressuring the girl into marriage based on the moral instructions mentioned earlier. In Kajiado, the fear of a curse (*endai*) is specifically weaponised to coerce girls into unions that end their academic journeys to satisfy communal respectability (KII #011, Female Community Member; KII #005, County Government, Kajiado).

Conversely, when guardians adopted a rights-based view – often framed as a 'God-given second chance' – they became the primary drivers of persistence. These allies shielded the girl-mother from gossip and provided the vital labour relief that makes re-entry physically possible. By shouldering the triple shift of domestic tasks, discussed in Section 3.3, they acted as allies to provide the financial and logistical support needed by the girl-mothers to continue with their schooling and reduce the risk of permanent dropout (FGD #003, Female Youth, Nyeri). Table 9 highlights the different ways in which family members provide support to the girl-mothers.

The stance of significant others emerged in LHIs as the most reliable predictor of persistence. If the home mirrors the church's judgement, the cumulative weight of shame leads to dropout. However, if the home serves as a redemptive space – facilitating breastfeeding and covering medical/childcare costs – the girl is empowered to bridge the gap between mother and student, successfully navigating the institutional hurdles at school.

Table 9 Pathways of family support and the restoration of education

Pathway	Mechanism of support	Key evidence and impact	Institutional/social gap addressed
1. Inter-generational care	Grandmothers and guardians assume primary caregiving duties.	<i>Nyeri/Kibra (Nairobi)</i> : grandmothers abandoned manual labour to handle childcare, allowing girl-mothers to be 'free to study without stress' (LHI #018; TPI #001.1).	The triple shift: support prevents the collapse of schooling under the weight of domestic labour and child-care duties.
2. Systems mediation	Relatives act as buffers between the girl and medical/educational systems.	<i>Nyeri</i> : a grandmother negotiated a 1:00 p.m. 'leave-out' ⁹ for breastfeeding. <i>Kajiado</i> : relatives escort girls to antenatal clinics to 'avoid traumatising' from public stigma (KII #066).	Policy implementation gap: support operationalises local accommodations that formal guidelines often miss.

9 In Kenyan schools, this is an official document or permission slip that authorises a student to leave the school compound during term time for a specific, valid reason. In the present context, the girl-mother was allowed to go home during her lunch hour to breastfeed her baby.

Pathway	Mechanism of support	Key evidence and impact	Institutional/social gap addressed
3. Financial support	Health and education costs are covered through networks.	<i>Nyeri/Kibra (Nairobi)</i> : mothers paid hospital delivery bills (e.g. Ksh. 14,000/£80); extended family secured NGO (non-governmental organisation) scholarships (e.g. Carolina from Kibra (LHI #005); 'Muslim sister' paid rent (LHI #024).	Economic abandonment: support removes the financial barrier often used as a punitive tool by exclusionary actors.
4. Emotional affirmation	Replacing internalised shame with love and psychological recovery.	<i>Nyeri</i> : mothers emphasised the need to be shown love to counter the sinner label and affirm that a baby ' <i>does not stop you from school</i> ' (TPI #018.1).	The moral gaze: support dismantles the internalised stigma that leads to permanent dropout.

Source: Authors' analysis of field data (2025–2026).

3.5 Summary

Section 3 has demonstrated that education and faith are inseparable for Kenyan girl-mothers. From the initial trauma of pregnancy to the daily triple shift, religious norms – not just administrative rules – regulate school access. While some girl-mothers are excluded by the gaze or surveillance of the congregation, others exercise spiritual agency to forge new paths. However, school re-entry remains a gruelling moral negotiation rather than a simple administrative process.

Because pregnancy is often treated as a 'social death', external stigma eventually infiltrates a girl's internal world, where moral and gender norms are deeply internalised. This process erodes her self-worth, leading to self-exclusion – a psychological withdrawal where the girl drops out mentally before she does so physically. Viewing herself through the community's lens, she begins to believe she no longer belongs in the classroom. Across Kajiado, Kibra (Nairobi) and Nyeri, these hurdles remain rooted in religious barriers and moral surveillance.

While the 2020 Re-entry Policy addresses a girl as a student, the girl burdened by internalised shame often sees herself only as a sinner. This psychological weight converts a statutory right into a faith-filtered permission, where her own agency is suppressed by the belief that she has 'closed her own book' on education. Ultimately, transforming this reality and moving beyond a paper promise requires shifting from a network of exceptional individuals to one of institutionalised, non-negotiable rights.

4 Institutional gatekeeping – doctrine and policy

'I actually gave birth while I was sitting for my exams... they brought the exam to me right there in the delivery room'

(LHI #003, Nyeri).

The implementation of the 2020 School Re-entry Policy is often undermined by the practices of schools and faith-based organisations. Within the Layers of Influence conceptual framework of this study, these institutions represent the meso level – the social layer where national policy meets local reality. At this level, these organisations act as gatekeepers – often prioritising their own reputations and traditional moral standards over state mandates. In doing so, they effectively undermine a girl's legal right to education by treating her education as a conditional privilege. This institutional behaviour creates a critical contextual gap, where the policy's intended support is replaced by practical barriers. As a result, returning to school becomes a difficult negotiation for the girl-mother rather than a standard, protected procedure.

To analyse how this meso-level gap is formed, this section is structured around three key areas, as follows:

- The information gap: the pervasive lack of practical sexual and reproductive health knowledge.
- System incompatibility: the conflict between existing school structures and the requirements of motherhood.
- Positive deviance and policy alignment: identifying institutions that successfully integrate religious values with human rights as a blueprint for wider change.

Through these thematic lenses, this section demonstrates that the success of Kenya's Re-entry Policy hinges on challenging the deep-seated religious and social norms that govern these institutions. In all three study sites, schools and religious denominations serve as central custodians of community identity. Within this role, a girl-mother is often perceived not merely as a student, but as a threat to the institution's public image.

This perspective is reinforced by a pronounced gendered double standard: while girls face intense scrutiny, male students involved often face no disciplinary action. As one mother noted, '*They even know who it is, but they take no action*' (LHI #016, Kajiado). This bias protects the academic future of boys while treating a girl's education as secondary to the school's desire to maintain its standing in the community.

4.1 The information gap

While faith institutions and schools are quick to exclude girl-mothers, they often play an unintended role in the pregnancies themselves. Ironically, the same institutions that judge pregnancy as a moral failure also withhold sexuality education that is holistic, denying girls the knowledge they need to prevent pregnancy in the first place. As a result, the Re-entry Policy only deals with the *downstream* consequences of an *upstream* problem – responding to the crisis only after the damage of exclusion has already begun.

In all three counties, the data reveals a consistent, systemic absence of holistic sexuality education. This silence on sexuality issues substitutes moral instruction for practical guidance, expecting girls to behave responsibly without providing them the tools to do so. This creates a deep information gap where sexuality is not openly discussed, and the little that is addressed or discussed – at home or at school – is framed through a moral lens rather than factual guidance, further embedding this systemic lack of information.

As Nansinka stated, *'No one told me I could say no'* (LHI #009, Kajiado). Lacking basic sexual literacy, a girl often learns of her pregnancy from her mother or community, sometimes before she understands it herself: *'I didn't desire to have it... I had to be told by my mother for me to accept'* (LHI #009, Kajiado).

Faith-based education through churches, mosques and other faith-run institutions, often centres on the command to abstain, said Naishiri: *'They don't really talk about contraceptives because it's seen as a sin'* (LHI #014, Kajiado). As a result, even acknowledging sexual activity can be seen as transgressive and this leaves girls unable to assess the risks.

For many adolescents, the silence around sexuality education does not prevent pregnancy; instead, it creates a hidden layer of risk. Trapped by shame, other girls resort to obtaining abortion pills from back alleys, often arriving at clinics only when their condition becomes an unbearable emergency. In the most extreme cases of fear and isolation, babies have been delivered in school or clinic toilets. A key informant gave the example of a girl from Kajiado:

'... [She] she came here [health clinic] and we didn't even know she was in labour. She just said she wanted to go to the toilet, where she proceeded to give birth. She tried to push the baby into the flushing basin, but the head wouldn't fit, so she left the baby there and walked out. The doctor on duty handled the situation. When she tried to leave, the CCTV operators noticed and it became a difficult situation where the police had to be called'
(KII #025, Health Officer, Kajiado).

These incidents suggest that when reproductive knowledge is withheld, girls can be pushed toward dangerous, instinctive responses.

The data reveals that the journey toward termination is often expensive, unregulated and fraught with medical uncertainty. Some girls attempt to use emergency contraception (such as P2, a morning after pill) purchased from private clinics after a sexual encounter (LHI #001, Nyeri). When those measures fail or are not an option, the pregnancy may end in abortion. However, abortions are expensive for a student. One girl sent Ksh. 5,000 (£28) to a doctor for drugs to perform a procedure over the weekend (LHI #023, Nyeri), while another was asked for Ksh. 2,000 (£12) by a private hospital doctor to terminate a one-month pregnancy (LHI #001, Nyeri). One interviewee recounted how her boyfriend sent her Ksh. 8,000 (£46) with the explicit command to *'terminate it and go abort'* a pregnancy that was already six months along (LHI #023, Nyeri).

Despite facing intense pressure, some girls may choose not to abort due to a combination of physical fear and personal reflection. One interviewee in Nyeri, for example, decided against the procedure after a teacher warned her about the potential for future infertility. While specific discussions on the dangers of abortion may not be a formal part of the national curriculum, these warnings often feature in the general life-skills counselling that teachers provide to all learners. This guidance is often rooted in the teachers' own faith-based beliefs, where medical warnings about physical safety are intertwined with moral perspectives on the sanctity of life.

For others, the decision is a choice of survival over social death, as described in Section 3.2. One participant, after paying for the procedure, changed her mind, concluding she would *'rather raise the*

child than die' (LHI #023, Nyeri). Born to a single mother herself, this decision was also rooted in her own history; she asked herself, *'If I wasn't aborted [by my mother], why should I abort?'*

These accounts demonstrate that the lack of holistic sexuality education leaves girls navigating life-and-death medical decisions without reliable support, where accurate knowledge is replaced by fear and moral judgement and where such knowledge only becomes available at the point of crisis.

The information gap begins with a lack of information on basic biology. Mariam (LHI #024, Nyeri) recalled her first menstruation with terror: *'I thought I was sick... I didn't know what happens when someone grows up'*. This void extends into the realm of consent. Without a language for bodily autonomy, girls often cannot name their own abuse. Another girl-mother admitted: *'I didn't know anything about sex. Even when I was abused, I didn't know'*. For her, understanding came only through trauma: *'He [the perpetrator] is the one who taught me'* (LHI #007, Kibra, Nairobi).

While the lack of information is a shared issue, its manifestation varies across the three study sites, creating unique hurdles for re-entry:

- **Kajiado:** Silence is enforced through strict moral regulation and abstinence-only messaging.
- **Kibra (Nairobi):** Despite proximity to information, social silence ensures harm goes unrecognised.
- **Nyeri:** The information gap manifests as profound confusion and self-doubt regarding consent.

In every context, however, girls learn from experience and exposure rather than from preparation and comprehension. Leaving aside, for the moment, those who were raped,¹⁰ many other girls described entering sexual relationships without adequate knowledge of consent, contraception or reproductive health. In Kibra (Nairobi), accounts point to unrecognised coercion, while in Nyeri, narratives of ambiguous consent often translate into self-blame. Across all three settings, pregnancy is less an isolated decision than an outcome of intersecting structural constraints.

Current responses tend to focus on managing consequences once a girl is pregnant, rather than preventing the risk of pregnancy. When asked what information might have altered their trajectory, girls consistently identified practical knowledge – which was absent. They had received moral instruction in abundance, but lacked specifics on how pregnancy occurs, what contraception is, how to access it, and what rights they held over their own bodies. This information is not complex or expensive to provide, but it was withheld or reshaped by teachers who exercised discretion over sensitive content.

A pastor in Kajiado (KII #072) offered a perspective that captures the limitation of purely spiritual responses to material knowledge gaps. Invoking the Swahili proverb, *'The breaking of a cooking spoon is not the end of cooking'*, he reframed pregnancy and dropout as recoverable setbacks. However, while his words are encouraging, they focus on fixing the damage rather than preventing it. The proverb may be quoted to help a girl move on after pregnancy, but it does nothing to deal with the lack of information that would help her avoid the situation in the first place. Put simply, it is a reactive cure for a preventable problem: the spoon might not have broken if the girl had been taught how to cook. The data indicates that unless the silence surrounding sexual and reproductive health is replaced by practical literacy, Kenya's School Re-entry Policy will remain a reactive measure rather than a preventive solution.

¹⁰ In Kenya, sexual intercourse with a minor is technically termed 'defilement'. However, this report uses the more common term: rape.

4.2 Administrative barriers and soft exclusions

The return to school for girl-mothers is fundamentally obstructed by a deep-seated structural incompatibility between the design of the Kenyan education system and the biological and socio-economic realities of teen motherhood. While the 2020 Re-entry Policy provides a legal mandate for return, the actual transition is governed by invisible hurdles that render the process exhausting and unsustainable. In practice, this mismatch is reflected in rigid school routines, lack of childcare support, and inflexible attendance expectations that assume uninterrupted student availability, effectively excluding learners whose caregiving responsibilities make such consistency impossible.

Financial trade-offs and structural inflexibility

'If I go back, I am taking food away from my baby because of the school fees'
(LHI #032, Kajiado).

Theoretically, macro-level policies like Free Primary Education and Free Day Secondary Education suggest an open door for the re-entry of girl-mothers. In practice, however, micro-level implementation reveals financial barriers that effectively block re-entry in two ways.

First, government capitation grants – intended to cover tuition and specific operational costs for each child at public primary and secondary schools – are often delayed or reduced. This forces schools to bridge the funding gap by requiring households to cost-share through extra levies that they can ill-afford.

Second, the system's reliance on auxiliary charges, such as for uniforms, activity fees, and lunch subsidies, creates a direct conflict with the costs of a child's survival. For a girl-mother, every shilling spent on a school activity fee is a shilling taken away from diapers, healthcare or nutrition.

When family safety nets are thin, the cost of diapers, milk and transport forces a girl to choose between school fees and the baby's survival. In Nyeri, some girls worked as domestic help or picked coffee to 'hustle' for their infants. In Kajiado, one mother described her education as a 'theft' from her baby's well-being: *'If I go back, I am taking food away from my baby because of the school fees'* (LHI #032, Kajiado). These financial pressures are compounded by the rigid school schedule, which forces girl-mothers to choose between the high cost of full-time attendance and the immediate need to provide for their children. As one interviewee noted:

'Yeah, maybe I'll do a course. Because if I go back to school, who will take care of my child? The father currently doesn't have a job. Who will cater for the child? Even now I hustle to get diapers and basic needs. If I go to college, I can hustle because it's not daily. Maybe I attend twice a week and come back home. In high school, you go from early morning to evening'
(LHI #007, Kibra, Nairobi).

Meeting the demands of the typical Kenyan school timetable is challenging even for a student who has no caregiving responsibilities. For the girl-mother, this rigid model becomes an almost insurmountable barrier. The schedule offers no flexibility for her *first shift* – the essential early morning hours required for breastfeeding, bathing and preparing her child for the day.

By the time she reaches school, she has often completed hours of intensive labour. Once she is there, the challenges continue; the lack of private spaces for nursing forces girls to choose between physical pain and 'soft exclusion' – a situation where they miss so many classes to attend to their needs that they eventually fall behind. Girl-mothers like Talia (LHI #003, Nyeri) and Silole (LHI #010, Kajiado) found that even when they were physically in class, their focus remained with their children,

especially when the infants were sick. This led to severe concentration difficulties and, consequently, poor grades.

Rather than recognising these structural hurdles, schools often view this struggle as a moral failing. When a girl is late or absent because of her child's needs, it is rarely seen as a logistical conflict; instead, it is reframed as a character flaw or a lack of commitment. By refusing to allow for flexible nursing breaks or clinic visits, the system treats girl-mothers the same as their peers who do not have these burdens. In practice, this rigidity penalises girls for the biological and social realities of motherhood, turning the school schedule into a tool of exclusion.

This lack of a formal support system means that a girl's success often depends entirely on the attitude of the teacher she encounters. One girl-mother in Nyeri described the confusing and intimidating hurdle of simply trying to take her child to a clinic during a school day:

'We had one teacher, Madam Kahenya [not real name], who was fine; when I asked to take my child to the clinic, she gave me permission. But another teacher told me I had to go all the way to the principal, asking me, "Wasn't it he who allowed you back into this school?" I started going to the deputy principal instead. One time, I took the child to the clinic when the deputy wasn't there. The next day, a teacher claimed I hadn't asked for permission at all. He sent me home to bring my parents and told me we shouldn't even try to argue'
(LHI #023, Nyeri).

This account highlights how re-entry is often a negotiated and unstable process, making a routine medical visit a potential source of conflict. The girl-mother is forced to navigate a confusing hierarchy where one staff member is supportive, while another uses the girl's return to school as to intimidate her, treating her right to an education as a personal favour that can be withdrawn at any time.

The institutional environment: 'look and pass' and the examination crisis

'A girl cannot think about a math problem when her body is signalling a physical crisis'
(KII #016, Kajiado).

The Kenyan school system wrongly assumes that a girl-mother's re-entry is achieved merely by her physical presence. Yet this physical presence often masks a mental dropout, as girl-mothers are preoccupied with their child's well-being. Without institutional support or pastoral care, even resilient, high-achieving students like Mariam (LHI #024, Nyeri), whose performance dropped significantly after pregnancy, eventually withdraw permanently.

The most subtle exclusion of girl-mothers is the 'look and pass' approach of teaching staff. Nailantei (LHI #016, Kajiado) described this abandonment: *'They just look at you and pass... they have already replaced you in their minds'*. When a girl-mother withdraws into silence, the lack of teacher intervention functions as a systemic write-off. The resulting mental alienation precedes the girl-mother's physical exit, reinforcing the message that she is no longer a learner with a future.

Institutional indifference is most evident during national examinations, which can transform into a high-stakes medical crisis. The rigid administration of these tests may even force girl-mothers to choose between their physical survival and their academic future. One girl-mother in Nyeri recounted the trauma of this experience: *'I actually gave birth while I was sitting for my exams... they brought the exam to me right there in the delivery room'* (LHI #003, Nyeri).

In such instances, the school system's response is purely logistical – prioritising the completion of the paperwork while ignoring the psychological impact. As one education official noted: *'That girl... was doing the examination in labour pain. We couldn't help... she was not psychologically prepared'* (KII #021, Nyeri). This highlights a fundamental disconnect in the system.

Without formal accommodations such as the option to postpone exams or specific support for nursing mothers, the examination process becomes a source of profound physical and emotional distress. This insistence on treating all students identically regardless of their circumstances, prioritises administrative compliance over substantive fairness. It turns the process of exercising their legal right to education into a gruelling physical and logistical struggle, effectively penalising girl-mothers for the basic demands of recovery and childcare.

As Table 10 illustrates, with its analysis of the different layers of gaps, this disconnect is part of a much larger gap between national policy goals and actual school practices. Recognising these systemic failures is essential to understanding the importance of positive deviants – the rare leaders and institutions that do not follow negative social norms and have managed to bridge the gap, aligning their religious values with a commitment to the rights of the girl-mother, as discussed in more detail in Section 4.3.

Table 10 Policy mandates vs institutional realities

Institutional reality	Policy requirement (2020 Guidelines)	The 'gap-layer' analysis
Financial trade-off	Unconditional re-admission unless otherwise stated (cross-cutting requirement)	Macro-micro gap: Statutory free education is undermined by not only auxiliary charges but also cost-sharing of operational costs, forcing a choice between school and infant survival. The requirement to give fee waivers to girl-mothers is often ignored by school authorities.
Mental dropout	Provision of psychosocial support and professional counselling (Requirement 2)	Support gap: The absence of pastoral support means cognitive distress is misread as academic incapacity rather than the result of a lack of mental healthcare.
Lactation/nursing crisis	Provision of nursing for first six months before joining school (Requirement 4)	Infrastructure gap: The rigid school timetable assumes full-day, uninterrupted attendance, failing to accommodate the biological and caregiving needs of nursing mothers, particularly those returning before completing the recommended six-month breastfeeding period.
'Look and pass' culture	Collection and maintenance of re-entry data (cross-cutting requirement); strengthening monitoring and mentorship (roles and responsibilities of stakeholders)	Relational gap: Teachers act as passive gatekeepers, mentally replacing the girl before she even drops out, thereby violating their mandate for proactive mentorship.
Maternity ward exam	Flexible assessment and special considerations for examinations (e.g. catch-up exams, alternative arrangements where feasible). (Requirement 6)	Administrative gap: Despite policy requirements mandating flexible assessment and special examination accommodations for girl-mothers, rigid examination schedules continue to take precedence in practice, limiting their ability to fully exercise their right to sit examinations.

Source: Authors' analysis of field data (2025-2026).

These implementation gaps are not uniform; they disproportionately affect the youngest adolescent mothers, as described in Box 1.

Box 1 Extreme vulnerability of girl-mothers aged 11 to 13

The gap-layer analysis of the Kenya School Re-entry Policy 2020 shows that implementation failures create a tiered system of exclusion, with girls aged 11–13 facing the most severe consequences. These children lack the ability to think and act like adults when trying to manage the triple shift; handling postpartum recovery, childcare and schooling all at once is simply too much, both physically and mentally.

At the meso level, institutional moral gatekeeping often reframes them, not as victims of defilement but as moral participants or ‘anomalies’, which accelerates internalised stigma and reinforces the sense of being a ‘fractured’ version of themselves.

Compared to older adolescents (15–19), these girls are far less likely to return to or remain in school. Older girls may exercise limited agency or negotiate support, while those aged 11–13 are almost entirely dependent on others and are more likely to internalise stigma and face harsher judgement.

For this group, the absence of physiological support and structural safeguards results in near-total system failure, leading to early and entrenched social exclusion.

These differentiated outcomes illustrate that exclusion is not uniform but shaped by how actors within the system interpret and navigate policy constraints.

4.3 Positive deviants and policy alignment

‘A girl with a baby is still a girl with a brain, and that brain belongs to the future of this community’

(KII #024, Kajado).

The *exclusion* documented in previous sections is not a fixed reality; it is a choice. Data reveals that within the same socio-religious environments that produce stigma, certain positive deviants achieve inclusive outcomes.

As defined by Wamahu (2018), positive deviants operate under the same structural and resource constraints as their peers but their choices, and their actions, are different. Their significance lies in what they reveal about institutional possibility: the barrier to inclusion is not a lack of funding, but a matter of how authority is exercised – moving from judgement and exclusion to successful re-integration. Box 2 highlights five case studies that demonstrate positive examples of this approach.

Box 2 Spotlighting positive deviance

Case 1: *The mediator of rights*

A male high school teacher in Nyeri took a practical approach to support a Form 3 student who was also a young mother. Recognising that the heavy burden of schoolwork, housework, and childcare was stopping her succeeding, he shifted his role from a judgemental authority figure to become a supportive mentor. To help her stay in school, he used his own family's resources to fill the gaps in the system. He took the student's child into his own home, integrating her baby into his family's childcare routine. This allowed the girl-mother to focus on her education while knowing her child was safe and cared for:

'At times, she could even come with the baby. Then I will show her a place where we can put the baby... She stays with the baby [at my home]. The baby stays there with the other children at home so that she would be able to do her study in school'

(TPI #023.3, Nyeri).

This intervention dismantled the childcare barrier, allowing the girl-mother to fully prioritise her identity as a student.

Case 2: *The theology of the second chance*

A pastor dismantled exclusion by presenting re-entry as a communal obligation. He challenged the 'stain' narrative by reframing the girl's education as a '*God-given second chance*':

'If we put her aside, we are the ones committing the sin... Our faith is not a stick to beat the fallen; it is a hand to lift them up. A girl with a baby is still a girl with a brain, and that brain belongs to the future of this community'

(KII #024, Kajjado).

Case 3: *Strategic pastoral reasoning: the chaplain as a bridge*

While many faith-based institutions function as sites of moral surveillance, the case of a Catholic Youth Chaplain in Nyeri (KII #011) demonstrates how strategic pastoral reasoning can bridge the implementation gap. Recognising that over-moralisation often leads to lethal consequences, the Chaplain adopted a non-judgemental stance, framing the pregnancy as a communal responsibility: '*It is okay... the child is ours*'.

This intervention moved beyond rhetoric into a physical manifestation of a supportive mesosystem. When a 15-year-old girl became pregnant in Form 2, was being bullied in her school, and was on the verge of having an abortion, the Chaplain facilitated her transfer to a supportive boarding school, ensuring she sat for her 2024 national examinations. Crucially, he utilised peer-led positive deviance to dismantle the 'sinner' label. By pairing the girl-mother with a peer of the same age, he fostered an environment of radical acceptance:

'She [the peer] encouraged her... "Girl, don't worry. We are together in this." ... She felt so comfortable and accepted. So even when tomorrow tell her, "You need to go back to school," she'll know she's going back to young girls who have already accepted her'

(KII #011, Nyeri).

This example of protective scaffolding suggests that the barrier to re-entry is often a lack of institutional will rather than a lack of policy. By ensuring peers '*will not jeer at her, they will not mock her, they will be journeying with her*', religious leaders can transform faith from a site of exclusion into a catalyst for educational continuity.

Case 4: *The expert by experience*

In Kibra, a community mentor built an organisation to scale up the support she, herself, once lacked when she became pregnant as a teenager. By securing media-sponsored scholarships - '*NTV [one of the leading private television channels] has really sponsored two of our girls... a full scholarship for them*' - she removed the barrier of economic abandonment. She also partnered with Catholic residential facilities that '*accept all... they house them, they counsel them by the time they're getting their babies*' (KII #012, Kibra, Nairobi).

Box 2 Spotlighting positive deviance (continued)

Case 5: The deputy head teacher: compassion as a structural intervention

A deputy head teacher in Nyeri (TPI #003.2) demonstrated how a practical, faith-based approach can bridge the gap between policy and reality. By viewing her faith as a call to compassion rather than an excuse for judgement, she removed the moral barriers that often block a girl-mother’s path. Grounding her leadership in the belief that she should ‘do what is right in the eyes of God’ – particularly for a student without parents – she turned the school into a place of safety. Her support included practical measures, such as exempting the girl from heavy physical work in school and ensuring she could sit for her national examinations even during labour and the recovery period. This case proves that when school leaders use their power with empathy, they can protect a student’s legal right to an education.

Source: Based on selected key informant and third-party interviews, Kajiado, Kibra (Nairobi), Nyeri (2025-2026).

The examples in Box 2 show that successful outcomes are not just acts of individual kindness; they are a direct reflection of an institution’s core values. A crucial shift occurs when faith leaders begin to speak the language of rights. For example, when a church elder advocates for ‘a programme whereby the girl will be breastfeeding... during lunch time’ (KII #003.3), the school moves away from a position of doing her a favour towards being held accountable.

This distinction is the key to closing the implementation gap. While pastoral compassion is often left to an individual’s discretion, legal rights are non-negotiable. Positive deviants demonstrate that Kenya’s national and international commitments can be achieved in practice. Unlike exclusionary gatekeepers who treat a girl’s education as a personal favour, these schools – and the civil society organisations supporting them – actively bridge the gap between policy and reality.

By operationalising the rights of girl-mothers, these actors fulfil the true intent of the 2020 School Re-entry Policy Guidelines, which mandate an unconditional right to education. Table 11 maps the five case studies in Box 2 against the specific mandatory policy steps they have implemented successfully.

Table 11 Alignment of positive deviant actions with the Re-entry Policy 2020

Requirements (Req.) (2020 Policy)	Positive intervention observed	Case study source	The solution
Req. 2: Guidance and counselling	Non-judgemental disclosure: reframing pregnancy as a <i>second chance</i> and communal obligation.	Case 2 (pastor); Case 3 (chaplain)	Replaced moral policing with psychological safety and institutional compassion.
Req. 4: Committal letter/agreement	Institutional shielding: negotiating with parents/using personal resources to provide childcare.	Case 1 (teacher)	Reduced the triple shift burden by integrating childcare, allowing the girl to focus on studies.
Req. 6: Sitting for examinations	Labour and postpartum accommodation: facilitating national examinations during labour/postpartum period and exempting from physical labour.	Case 5 (deputy head teacher)	Prioritised the statutory right to education over the rigid national examinations schedule and prevented obstetric violence.

Table 11 Alignment of positive deviant actions with the Re-entry Policy 2020 (untitled)

Requirements (Req.) (2020 Policy)	Positive intervention observed	Case study source	The solution
Req. 7: Unconditional re-admission	School transfers: moving a girl from a 'bullying' school to a supportive institutional environment.	Case 3 (chaplain)	Recognised that re-admission requires a safe, non-judgemental environment, not just paper approval.
	Securing media-sponsored scholarships and Catholic residential facility partnerships.	Case 4 (Kibra mentor)	Removed the economic barrier and provided integrated scaffolding (housing, counselling).
Reqs. 11/12: Reporting adult offenders	Physical rescue: removing the girl from the vicinity of the offender and/or the immediate threat to her safety.	Case 3 (chaplain)	Prioritised the girl's safety over protecting the institutional reputation or patriarchal 'honour'.

Sources: Authors' analysis of the field data and Ministry of Education National Re-entry Policy Guidelines 2020.

Such interventions are currently piecemeal and relationship-driven – relying on specific individuals (like a sympathetic teacher, supportive pastor or caring school principal) rather than on standardised procedures. They do, however, demonstrate that positive action is possible, even in high-stigma environments. This analysis yields three key insights that, collectively, point to three broader lessons about what makes re-entry support effective in practice:

1. The lack of formal documentation (Req. 3) is a major risk. Positive interventions were rarely documented in writing, such as the documentation of pregnancy, the initiation of referrals, or the recording of re-entry support steps, as required by policy. Instead, they relied on individual commitment and discretion, meaning support could vanish if the supportive actor like a chaplain or principal left.
2. Family mediation ensured compliance with Reqs. 4 and 7 (committal and re-admission). Positive deviants mitigated the family's shame by reducing stigma and normalising re-entry. This reduction in shame was achieved through peer acceptance and religious reframing, fostering a socially safe environment for parents to comply with the law.
3. Ignoring the waiving of fees, as provided in Req. 3, poses a barrier to Req. 7. The Kibra mentor (Case 4) addressed this by securing outside scholarships, proving that without dedicated financial aid, the state's promise of unconditional re-entry is functionally impossible for most girl-mothers.

To transition from a model of moral surveillance to one of social infrastructure, the study identifies elements of a 'sanctuary model' based on the good practices of the positive deviants, which could serve as a blueprint for reform. Table 12 contrasts the dominant gatekeeper approach with the restorative practices observed among successful positive deviants.

Table 12 Comparative framework – gatekeeping versus sanctuary model

Feature	The moral gatekeeper models	The sanctuary model (positive deviance)
View of the girl	A ‘sinner’ who has lost moral standing	A ‘learner’ with a legal right to a future
Response	Social death: isolation and shaming	Restoration: compassion and planning
Philosophy	Conditional: reward for ‘purity’	Unconditional: fundamental human right
Climate	Moral contagion: fear of corruption	Peer empowerment: a lesson in resilience
Triple shift	Individualised burden: no assistance	Integrated scaffolding: coordinated care
Accountability	Gendered: focuses solely on the girl	Systemic: addresses institutional failure

Source: Authors’ analysis of field data (2026).

4.4 Summary

While the 2020 Re-entry Guidelines provide a strong foundation for inclusive education, there are three key implementation gaps between policy and practice. These are often linked by moral conditionality, where education is seen as a privilege, rather than an unconditional right.

Practical barriers

Despite the Policy’s intent, schools may struggle to accommodate the demands of motherhood, such as nursing or flexible scheduling. When schools disregard the fees waiver for girl-mothers, when auxiliary fees remain high and when school structures remain rigid, girl-mothers must often choose between the immediate needs of their child and their own academic progress. The lack of a tailored support system can lead to a quiet withdrawal from school, despite policy intentions.

The social divide in schools

This includes the ‘look and pass’ culture, where girl-mothers are physically present but socially sidelined. This culture, often influenced by traditional views of purity, can prioritise quiet indifference over the proactive mentorship and pastoral care mandated by the state. Without a strong sense of belonging, many girls experience mental dropout and disconnect from their studies long before they physically leave the system.

Rigid rules

Standardised schedules, such as the ‘maternity ward exam’ scenario, show how fixed protocols clash with maternal health. While these rules are meant to ensure academic uniformity, their inflexible application can lead to soft exclusion, with the system prioritising procedural consistency over the equitable flexibility that can keep girl-mothers in the classroom.

5 Conclusions

This study has found that the gap between policy and practice is not a random failure. Religious and social expectations actively override national law across four connected levels of a girl's life and neutralise the 13 core requirements of the 2020 Re-entry Policy Guidelines.

Level 1 (individual): the biological and cognitive toll

The system consistently ignores the physical realities of young mothers by treating the postpartum body as a standard student. The data reveals that the policy does not address the triple shift of balancing school, childcare, and housework. For girls aged 11 to 13, whose bodies are still developing, this physical burden is often a biological impossibility. This leads to the frequent violation of Requirement 6 (exam accommodations); without flexible testing, school becomes a place of exhaustion rather than recovery. Consequently, the lack of lactation support turns the six-month nursing period mentioned in Requirement 4 into a time of isolation rather than a planned return to learning.

Level 2 (micro/home): identity shift from student to sinner

At the domestic level, religious doctrines shift a girl's identity from student to sinner. This internalised stigma often leads to mental dropout, where girls stop seeing themselves as learners long before they physically leave the classroom. This is exacerbated by a communication gap in faith-based messaging, where religious networks frame pregnancy as a moral transgression rather than a crisis needing support. Such messaging delays intervention and discourages families from signing the Requirement 4 committal letter or completing the documentation required by Requirements 1 and 3, as parents often prioritise hiding the shame over the girl's educational rights.

Level 3 (institutional): gatekeeping and moral surveillance

Schools and faith groups act as gatekeepers that prioritise institutional honour over legal duties. This culture is fuelled by negative gender norms and purity culture, which penalises the girl while exempting the male. This leads to two critical institutional failures: first, the counselling mandated in Requirement 2 is often weaponised for moral surveillance rather than academic restoration; and second, schools often bypass Requirements 11, 12 and 13 (mandatory reporting) to protect their local reputations.

Level 4 (macro/state): the 'paper promise' and positive deviants

At the national level, Requirement 7 (unconditional re-admission) is rarely delivered. Instead, successful interventions are almost always driven by positive deviants who step in to secure outcomes the system cannot guarantee. These individuals treat the girl as a learner with an unconditional right to education. The State, however, is not converting these individual successes into an enforceable, standard system. The 2020 Guidelines, therefore, remain a paper promise that fails to bridge the gap between Ministry of Education headquarters and the local classroom.

This is most visible in the failure to implement mandates regarding transparency and physical support. Specifically, the almost universal disregard for Requirements 3 and 11 represents the most critical collapse of the policy, as these are the pillars of institutional accountability.

The failure to implement Requirement 3 (official documentation) creates a paperless exit from education, erasing the girl's legal trail. Without this record, there is no evidence that she was ever informed of her rights, allowing the school to avoid oversight from education officials and making her invisible to the state.

Similarly, the failure to implement Requirement 11 (reporting adult offenders) perpetuates a culture of silence. By prioritising institutional reputation or family honour over the law, schools protect perpetrators while leaving the girl-mother to carry the entire social and moral burden alone.

Furthermore, the system remains ill-equipped for the nursing mother. Without a personal advocate to fight for her, the prevailing 'look and pass' culture ensures that once a girl is out of sight, her survival is no longer considered a school concern. This reveals that the implementation gap is not a simple mistake or a lack of resources; it is a tiered system of exclusion that systematically pushes girls out of the classroom.

6 Recommendations

This study suggests that the departure of girl-mothers from school is rarely a single event, but rather a process of systemic erasure. For Kenya's 2020 Re-entry Policy to fulfil its promise for every girl, the system must move beyond re-entry as a mediated favour based on individual acts of kindness: it must guarantee and uphold education as a non-negotiable right. This section proposes strategies designed to realise the full and effective implementation of girls' right to education by dismantling the socio-cultural and administrative barriers that undermine their statutory protections.

The implementation gap is the product of mutually reinforcing gaps across the macro, meso, and micro layers of the education system. Addressing any one level in isolation is insufficient; the fulfilment of girls' right to education requires a synchronised shift that replaces moral surveillance with social infrastructure. Recommendations span four domains to uphold re-entry as a guaranteed right:

- National policy and governance structures
- Curriculum and teacher development systems
- Institutional climate and community practice
- Knowledge production and future research

6.1 National policy and governance structures

Implementation requires sustained public investment and institutional commitment. Strengthening the implementation of the 2020 Re-entry Guidelines should be seen not as discretionary, but as a rights-based obligation with significant long-term benefits.

Aligning macro-level oversight and legal accountability

- To enforce the 2020 Guidelines, the Ministry of Education should pilot a re-entry tracking system supplementing the Kenya Education Management Information System (Ministry of Education Kenya, 2020). Drawing inspiration from South Africa's Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (Department of Basic Education, 2024) and Sierra Leone's

Education Management Information System monitoring framework (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, n.d.), this digital system would require school heads to log each pregnant student's progress against key re-entry requirements, shifting accountability from the girl to the administrator by mandating verifiable recording.

- To enforce accountability, the state should establish protected, anonymous reporting channels (such as encrypted portals or hotlines) for staff to safely report non-compliance and adult offenders (Requirement 11). Mandatory annual compliance reporting by school heads, supported by a high-level state directive prioritising child protection over institutional honour, is essential.
- To end gendered impunity, state actors should update the 2020 Guidelines to include explicit protocols for male perpetrator accountability, including mandatory reporting of adult offenders and immediate suspension of implicated school staff pending investigation. A joint Ministry of Education and Ministry of Gender enforcement framework is needed to address power imbalances in teacher/employer–student cases and to ensure that the bypassing of Requirement 11 carries institutional consequences.
- The Kenya National Examinations Council should mandate a formal deferred examination policy for pregnant and postpartum students. A formal policy would establish clear deferral protocols and alternative sitting arrangements to protect a girl-mother's academic record and ensure that her education no longer depends on the personal goodwill of administrators.
- Beyond adult perpetrators, the state should address the broader culture of male non-accountability that means boy-fathers face no consequences. The Ministry of Education should work with the Ministry of Gender and the Department of Children Services to develop enforceable frameworks for adolescent paternity responsibility and to integrate male accountability into existing legal provisions governing child maintenance and support.

6.2 Curriculum and teacher development systems

Professionalising the meso-level response to student motherhood

- The Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should mandate holistic sexuality education as a core part of the Competency Based Curriculum. This should not be left to the discretion of schools, faith groups, or individual teachers. Sexuality education that is age-appropriate, accurate, practical, and protected from local religious or cultural overrides is more effective than abstinence-only models at delaying sexual activity and supporting safer behaviours among youth (UNESCO, 2018; Walgwe et al., 2016).
- To better support re-entering girl-mothers, schools should formalise the role of restorative mentors such as counsellors or designated teachers who provide structured emotional and social support. These mentors should offer girls regular check-ins and confidential counselling. Schools must also establish clear referral pathways so students can easily access healthcare and specialised services.
- In addition, teacher training should provide practical tools to support girl-mothers. This includes offering flexible timetables, adjusting workloads and managing attendance with compassion. Educators should also be empowered to adapt exam and assignment schedules for students who have recently returned or are currently nursing.
- While the recommendations above apply to all girl-mothers, those aged 11 to 13 require a specific, age-appropriate protocol.

- Schools should implement mandatory health referrals as soon as a pregnancy is identified, offer a reduced class load during the first term of re-entry, and provide access to counsellors specialised in adolescent maternal well-being. Most importantly, the state must treat pregnancy in a child under 14 as a child protection emergency, involving the full weight of the protection system, rather than treating it as a simple administrative matter of school re-entry.
- Schools must implement an early warning system to counter self-exclusion, where girls withdraw themselves from school. A mandatory flag should be triggered when a girl's attendance drops significantly, followed by a formal outreach protocol including a documented home visit before she is ever recorded as a dropout. This shifts the responsibility from the girl to the school itself.
- To address dropout driven by domestic labour, the state should operationalise the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement (2019) through existing school-parent structures. This operationalisation should include orientation that frames re-entry as a legal right and guides families on redistributing domestic labour. Integrating this family engagement into the 13 re-entry requirements set out in the Re-entry Policy will formalise the counselling that currently depends on the initiative of individual teachers.

6.3 Institutional climate and community practice

Integrating meso-to-micro practices through faith-community engagement

- Faith institutions would benefit from the development of a rights-based pastoral toolkit. This should reframe the 2020 Guidelines through the lens of social justice and the right to education, equipping faith leaders to utilise their moral authority to challenge stigma. The toolkit should include practical guidance on the creation of inclusive congregational environments, pastoral responses to pregnant girls and girl-mothers, and the referral of cases involving adult offenders to secular authorities.
- The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with recognised councils of religious leaders and education accreditation bodies, should integrate compliance with re-entry and childcare support requirements into accreditation and quality assurance processes for faith-based schools and training institutions. Faith-based schools that operate as gatekeepers that condition re-entry on moral performance or public confession should face formal accreditation consequences, not merely guidance.
- Mandatory child protection certification is required for all youth leaders and clergy in faith communities. This would mandate the referral of adult offenders to secular authorities as a doctrinal requirement for religious 'good standing', closing the accountability gap.
- Faith-based organisations should establish health desks that offer reproductive health literacy alongside spiritual guidance. Integrating holistic sexuality education within faith settings would address the shortcomings of abstinence-only methods and provide youth with practical and spiritual preparation.
- To address the triple burden of school, childcare, and housework for girl-mothers, local faith groups and community organisations should set up formal, community-based childcare during school hours. By sharing caregiving among trusted adults, the weight is lifted from the individual family, allowing the girl-mother to attend school consistently.

- County governments should recognise and fund these centres as essential social infrastructure, not just informal charity. The state must move beyond simply issuing re-entry letters and start investing in the practical support that makes staying in school possible.

6.4 Knowledge production and future research

Establishing an evidence base for sustainable scaling

- There is a need to document, pilot, and evaluate emerging models of support for girl-mothers such as ‘sanctuary’ approaches before undertaking comparative analysis. Once established at sufficient scale, comparative research can assess their effectiveness relative to more exclusionary or compliance-driven school environments to inform national policy and funding priorities.
- Further research is needed to examine the attitudes and roles of male peers, including both adolescent boys and young fathers, in shaping responses to pregnancy and re-entry. This should inform strategies that address stigma, clarify expectations around shared responsibility (including caregiving and financial support), and reduce gendered impunity.
- Research should investigate how teacher attitudes, expectations, and everyday practices influence the reintegration experiences of pregnant and parenting learners. This includes mapping patterns of differential attention, exclusion, or discouragement to better understand the mechanisms of ‘slow push-out’ and identify critical intervention points.
- Research should investigate how practical sexual health literacy can be integrated effectively into highly religious environments without triggering doctrinal resistance. This includes identifying the community-level actors, framing strategies, and institutional entry points that have enabled faith-consistent reproductive health programming in comparable contexts, to generate an actionable model that can be replicated across Kenya’s diverse religious landscape.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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Citation

Wamahiu, S.P., Onguko, E., Wangui, E., Ramadhan, N. and Sankori, S. (2026) *Education for girl-mothers in Kenya: the influence of faith and gender norms on school re-entry*. ALIGN partner report. London: ALIGN/ODI Global.

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Students playing outside their school in rural Kenya, 2015.
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ALIGN is led by ODI and currently supported by a range of international donors.