Barriers and Enablers to Education in Libya

April 2024 | Libya

CONTEXT & RATIONALE

The educational infrastructure in Libya faces significant challenges, with around 160,000 children and 5,600 teachers in urgent need of support related to access or quality of education due to a decade of conflict and macroeconomic issues. Damaged schools, lack of maintenance, delayed supplies, and power outages contribute to these challenges.1 As identified in the Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA 2022),2 obstacles such as insufficient equipment, teacher strikes, outdated curricula, and electricity cuts hinder student completion rates, leading to dropout, non-enrollment, and non-attendance. Migrant and refugee children encounter the most difficulties accessing education, facing financial, documentation, social, and language barriers. The objective of this assessment is to inform the Education Cannot Wait consortium members and stakeholders about several factors influencing enrollment, dropout, and attendance in Libya.

KEY MESSAGES

Obstacles to access education:

• Infrastructure deficiencies within formal education institutions such as the absence of health and WASH facilities in schools hampers learning environments.
• The presence of armed actors in some Baladiyas compounds safety concerns and hinders access to education facilities.
• Financial constraints worsen access to education, especially for vulnerable populations, as some children reported that they work to help support their families.

Enablers to access education:

• Accessible, safe, and affordable transportation options facilitate regular attendance by alleviating the strain of long commutes and mitigating risks such as exposure to harsh weather and bullying occurring on the way to schools.
• Improved school infrastructure, including well-maintained facilities, access to technology, adequate classrooms, and air conditioning, ensure regular attendance.
• Promoting awareness on importance of education and providing psychosocial support within schools are crucial for addressing students’ physical and mental well-being.
METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

A Secondary Data Review by REACH compiled relevant sources on education in Libya, focusing on recent publications (2022 onwards).

Using qualitative methods, children aged 12-18 years old, teachers, and frontline workers were consulted to understand the barriers and enablers to education. Libyan and non-Libyan children have been consulted in non-formal education (NFE) centers through gender-segregated focus group discussions (FGDs). 9 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) have been conducted with teachers and 14 KIIs with frontline workers.

Data collection tools included semi-structured FGD tool for children 15-18 years old, another tool for children 12-14 years old conducted through a child-friendly, activity-based FGD, and a semi-structured KII tool for teachers and social workers.

Limitations

The assessment only included social workers and teachers from ECW consortia non-formal education centers, which may limit the insights gained regarding the formal education sector in Libya.

Although efforts were made to involve non-Libyan children in data collection, their participation was somewhat limited. As a result, the assessment may not have fully captured the experiences of this demographic.

The study’s scope is limited by the absence of quantitative data collection, which makes the findings indicative and should not be extrapolated to a country-wide level.

Geographical scope and sampling

The assessment covered eight Baladiyas (administrative level 3) among six mantikat (administrative level 2) in 3 regions, and it was also disaggregated by urban and rural areas.

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<th>Baladiya</th>
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Table 2: KIIs per Baladiya

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<th>Mantika</th>
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<th>Number of FGDs</th>
<th>Participants per FGD</th>
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Table 3: FGDs Per Baladiya

Ethical considerations were taken to ensure parental and child consent, while the enumerator team, comprised of teachers and social workers, was assembled to ensure that children feel safe and comfortable during consultations. The team received training on how to collect data with children, child protection, and referral pathways. The data collection was conducted inside non-formal education centers to ensure that children are familiar with their surroundings. The selection of children was done by the teachers and social workers, as they possess the necessary knowledge to determine who is most suitable for participation.
Physical access to schools

All participants groups across all the assessed Baladiyas consistently highlighted the transportation issues related to availability and cost. Multiple factors have contributed to the magnitude of this issue such as fuel unavailability, high fuel prices, low private transportation offer, and the absence of public transportation. This issue has been reoccurring continuously in the FGDs and KIIs. Children 12-18 also reported that the high costs associated with private transportation made daily commutes unaffordable.

“The scarcity or unavailability of fuel, coupled with high prices, leads children to drop out of school and not attend the center; those living in remote areas unfortunately cease their learning due to the lack of transportation. There were about 10 to 12 children who dropped out of school during the 2022-2023 academic year due to the transportation issue.”

~ Social worker in Ghat

Consequently, all participant groups reported that children often resort to walking long distances between their homes and educational institutions. These extended commutes also expose them to harsh weather conditions, thereby posing safety and security risks for children.

Moreover, the inadequacy of road infrastructure compounds these challenges, particularly in rural areas. Absence of clear signage, proper lighting, and speed reducing measures make the journey loaded with danger. The absence of designated pedestrian pathways forces children to share narrow roads with vehicular traffic.

“The school road is not suitable for walking as it lacks sidewalk, and it is very crowded. From time to time, students get run over by cars, in addition to teasing young people and saying inappropriate things.”

~ Adolescent girl aged 15-18

The presence of armed actors or tribal conflicts in certain regions such as Hay-Andalus, Ajdabiya, Sebha, and Ghat as reported by social workers, teachers and children 15-18 years old, further exacerbates security concerns on the road to education facilities. This situation instills fear and anxiety among students as all participant groups highlighted. In Sebha, a teacher emphasized how tribal conflicts in areas near school premises have caused some students to drop out or miss classes. Participants also highlighted bullying, harassment, and attempted kidnapping (mostly reported by girl children) along these routes. Non-Libyan adolescent boys aged 12-14 years old in Sebha and Ajdabiya also mentioned the fear of kidnapping. Migrants and refugees also face a substantial number of barriers on the way to the education facilities where they are at risk of arbitrary arrest or capture at checkpoints or on the streets by security forces, members of armed groups and private citizens.

Figure 1: illustration of the different implications of transportation issues.
Social workers reported that several INGOs had attempted to address this issue by providing school transportation services. However, taking full responsibility for the children’s safety meant the projects were not feasible. Transportation allowances were also considered but did not go ahead due to budgetary constraints.

_We were able to support some families of children with limited income, but unfortunately, it did not continue due to the lack of budget._

~ Social worker in Tripoli

### Schools’ infrastructure and equipment

Many schools lack proper WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities. Teachers, children aged 12-18, and social workers have all spoken up about this issue. Some schools have dirty toilets, and the water available is not always safe to drink.

The scarcity of education centers in rural areas presents a significant challenge as reported by children 12-14 years old and social workers in Ubari, Hay Andalus, Ajdabiya and Sebha. Limited access to schools hinders the availability of education for these children, impacting their ability to attend and engage in learning.

_The most important challenge is the lack of education facilities in addition to the severe shortage of teachers, especially in some subjects such as English or mathematics, where the student can pass the academic year without studying these subjects._

~ Social worker in Sebha

Furthermore, the transition to remote learning during Covid-19 outbreaks presents additional obstacles. Issues such as limited internet availability, slow internet speeds, and a lack of access to computers within schools pose significant challenges to engaging in online education.

Children aged 12-18 are concerned about the infrastructure status of their schools and their surroundings. The presence of adequate WASH facilities and their cleanliness at the school level is crucial for children’s education. Therefore, providing a clean and adequate WASH facilities in the formal schools in Libya will improve attendance and academic achievement.

Moreover, students have emphasized the need for proper classrooms with decent seatings and desks to provide comfortable learning environment.

Furthermore, providing computers, tablets, and internet is also considered particularly important to ensure that children have access to up-to-date learning materials and can participate in modern education. This need was explicitly mentioned in different FGDs across multiple municipalities, notably in Ubari and Ghat, where participants from both age groups (12-14 and 15-18 years old) and both girls and boys voiced similar concerns.

Additionally, some children aged 12-18 emphasized the necessity of air conditioning during hot weather. They also highlighted overcrowding issues in schools, caused by maintenance work as reported in the Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA 2022). Parents in KIIs recommended the need to address overcrowding and establish green...
Participants in almost all the assessed Baladiyas have highlighted regarding safety and security concerns. These encompass a spectrum of violence, including physical altercations, verbal abuse, bullying, harassment, corporal punishment, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

Both boys and girls highlighted these concerns related to the route and inside school. In Ajdabiya, one social worker highlighted the heightened risk of kidnapping and rape for females, while another noted families' anxieties over their daughters' safety due to harassment.

In Tripoli, an adolescent girl aged 15-18 years old expressed concerns regarding the safety of the routes leading to the education center. She noted feeling unsafe due to potential threats, impacting her willingness to participate regularly.

Similarly, a male participant in the same age group emphasized safety concerns coming from violence at school, such as conflicts and bullying from peers. These experiences heightened his concerns about his safety, affecting the overall educational experience as he remained vigilant and cautious.

The spread of bullying is a problem. We became a target of our classmates in school or on our way home. We are constantly subjected to constant use of profanity and verbal abuse, which negatively affects our self-confidence and increases our feelings of psychological stress.

~ Child aged 12-14

Another psychological factor affecting children’s well-being is coping with stress and anxiety, particularly associated with exams, mentioned by children aged 15-18 years old. The pressure of academic exams, especially at the national level like the high school national exam, intensifies stress levels. Many students expressed difficulty managing this anxiety, impacting their ability to perform optimally.

One proposed solution by social workers, teachers, and children 12-14 is the promotion of awareness and the establishment of a legal framework to address issues of bullying, violence, and corporal punishment.

Moreover, all the participant groups have emphasized the necessity of providing psychosocial support for children within educational facilities. This support includes treatment sessions and support programs, as private psychiatric treatment options are often costly and inaccessible, especially for issues arising from wars, conflicts, and the emotional challenges associated with academic assessments.

Financial constraints: Barriers for children of low-income families

High fees for remedial courses in private non-formal education centers have been reported among children aged 15-18. This is especially significant as they require more focus and additional academic assistance to successfully pass their national exams. Children from low-income families cannot have access to this privilege which will possibly lead their success rate to be lower than the general population.

Moreover, teachers and social workers reported that due to the lack of financial resources for educational or living necessities, children in this precarious situation often resort to engaging in paid income-generating activities. These activities range from assisting caregivers in making and selling sweets and performing basic shop tasks, to engaging in physically intensive activities such as carpentry, blacksmithing, carrying vegetables, herding sheep, or trading, as reported by social workers and teachers.

They study and work in other jobs after school hours. Some even work full-time throughout the year, including summer holidays, to meet their needs during the academic year.

~ Teacher in Ajdabiya

Teachers and social workers reported that balancing work commitments and children’s school attendance is difficult, due to overlapping schedules between work and school, which affects attendance and leads to fatigue. This situation affects their ability to concentrate and perform well academically as reported by children aged 15-18. Additionally, teachers and social workers stated that older adolescent boys are more likely to work compared to younger adolescent boys and especially to younger adolescent girls.

Furthermore, when resources are stretched thin across multiple children, families may find it challenging to provide adequate financial support for education. This situation restricts the educational opportunities available to each child within the household as reported by children 15-18.
Financial Support
The provision of stationery and uniforms serves as enablers to access to education as reported by children 12-18. By ensuring that students have the necessary tools such as notebooks, pens, school bags, and other stationery items, it will support them engaging with studies.

Additionally, having uniforms promotes a sense of belonging among students as reported by social workers and teachers. Students who receive uniforms are better able to participate in classroom activities without fear of stigmatization or exclusion.

Financial support serves as a motivator for families facing economic hardships, alleviating the burden related directly and indirectly (such as food and transportation) to educational expenses as reported by all participant groups.

Providing vocational training, as recommended by social workers, represents a forward-looking approach to build resilience. Offering vocational training opportunities is seen as empowering for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This can help them generate additional income for their households, enabling them to support themselves in their educational pursuits.

Other reported barriers
Teachers and teaching methods
All participants noted the teacher shortage, either generally or specifically for subjects like mathematics and physics. Not taught or unfinished lessons, will leave students exposed to exams that they did not prepare for properly, specifically the national exam.

Another barrier identified by children 15-18 years old is the absence of assistance with challenging subjects. The lack of additional academic support appeared highly relevant and impactful.

Additionally, the lack of recreational activities within educational settings deprives students of much-needed outlets for physical and mental stimulation.

Family environment impact on attendance and enrollment
When parents are not fully aware of the importance of education for their children or lack the motivation, it becomes an obstacle, potentially restricting the fulfillment of the child’s academic potential as reported by teachers and social workers.

Other barriers identified for accessing education include the health issues of a family member. Children find themselves aiding in the care of a sick family member. Sometimes if a parent is unwell, there may be no one available to take the child to school.

Issues with time management have surfaced as an extra obstacle, consistently mentioned by participating children from diverse backgrounds. These challenges in allocating time involve concerns such as organizing lesson and exam schedules, having restricted time for homework, and balancing other responsibilities like household chores, assisting with family work or labor.

Access to education for vulnerable groups
Migrants and refugees.
In Libya, children including refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, face significant challenges in obtaining birth registration, residence permits and other civil documentation, as highlighted by UNHCR. This lack of documentation, as reported by social workers and teachers in the KIIs and supported in reports by UNICEF, prevents them from registering in the national education system. Many formal education schools ask for specific paperwork, which is difficult for numerous families to provide, leading to their exclusion.

Even if they manage to provide the required documents, these children often face another obstacle — the need to pass a test conducted in Arabic, a language unfamiliar to many non-Libyan children.

Some families of this population settle for NFE centers run by INGOs as an alternative. The UNICEF’s report indicated that 9,072 children of which 4,700 girls were supported with non-formal education in Libya throughout the period of January 2022 to December 2022.
Furthermore, when resources are stretched thin across multiple children, families may find it challenging to provide adequate financial support for education. This situation restricts the educational opportunities available to each child within the household as reported by children 15-18.

All participants emphasize the vital role of INGOs in enriching educational opportunities for this demographic. NFE centers stand as the sole accessible option for these children to receive education without financial barriers, as other alternatives are either expensive or inaccessible.

Social workers advocate for interventions to alleviate barriers, such as eliminating documentation requirements in educational facilities, simplifying access for children. A few examples of interventions by social workers in various Baladiyas are:

- In Hay-Andalus, social workers coordinate the registration of children in public schools, if they can provide the required documents.

- In Ajdabiya, children lacking documentation are referred to the Legal Affairs Office at the Norwegian Refugee Council for assistance.

- In Abu-Selim, families facing document-related challenges receive legal advice and assistance in obtaining identification documents through a dedicated lawyer.

- In Tripoli Educational Facilitators, as highlighted by social workers, play pivotal roles in guiding students through registration processes, whether in formal educational institutions or centers.

This legal support has provided successful registration within formal education, where UNICEF reported a total of 130 children (62 girls, majority of children being Sudanese, Syrian, Chadian and Egyptian), were enrolled in formal education in 2022 through this support.11

Moreover, teachers propose offering Arabic courses to facilitate children integration into the formal education system, recognizing the necessity of Arabic proficiency for enrollment tests.

**Children with special needs**

Children with special needs encompass those who have particular physical, mental, sensory or intellectual impairments, such as speech or language impairments, intellectual or developmental disabilities, behavioural disorders.

A major obstacle for this group is the lack of specialized educational programs, noted by social workers and teachers. Teachers in Ajdabiya mentioned that this absence hinders attendance as the mainstream curriculum may not meet their specific learning needs, and teachers may lack the required skills. This need for training was also highlighted by teachers, and is aligned with the findings from JENA (2022).12

"We lack of the necessary capabilities to integrate children with special needs and include them in our educational programs with regular students."

~ Adolescent girl aged 15-18

In addition, teachers, children aged 12-14 years old, and social workers underscored the role of facility infrastructure negatively impacting access for this population. The infrastructure inadequacy includes, but is not limited to, classrooms that lack necessary accommodation for students with special needs, such as wheelchair ramps.13

Furthermore, bullying, reported by social workers, teachers and children 12-14 years old constitutes a significant and detrimental barrier. Children experiencing differences in abilities often become targets, leading to emotional distress and a reluctance to attend school as reported by a teacher in Hay Andalus. The fear of bullying can significantly impact a child’s mental well-being and sense of safety, creating a hostile learning environment. This emotional toll may result in decreased attendance as children may avoid school to escape bullying situations.14

Teachers and social workers emphasize that integration and inclusivity are paramount, and advocate for environments that promote a sense of belonging within the school. They also underscored that awareness campaigns are essential for reaching out to parents and the community, educating them about the rights of children with special needs and the significance of education.

Additionally, inclusive infrastructure (including WASH facility and entrance) was deemed essential by social workers, teachers, and children aged 12-14 to ensure children with special needs’ access to education.

Social workers emphasize the importance of eliminating school fees to remove financial barriers to education. Also, teachers and social workers advocate for psychosocial support along with the provision of transportation services to integrate this population of children effectively.
A social worker in Tripoli highlighted the importance of ongoing awareness sessions for individuals with special needs and their families, motivating them to overcome challenges and prioritize education. Similarly, a teacher in Ghat shared the inspiring story of a child with special needs whose parents were fully committed to his education. Despite obstacles such as frequent visits to treatment centers, the child excelled academically, showing that when these factors combine, regular attendance and academic achievement can be attained.

Adolescent girls

Adolescent girls’ fears for their safety can impact their school attendance. These fears are often rooted in the risk of harassment or violence during their commute or at school. Teachers, social workers, and adolescent girls aged 15-18 have reported concerns about adolescent girls kidnapping on the way to and from school or NFE centers. Social workers in Hay Andalus particularly emphasize that migrant and refugee communities are at higher risk.

Furthermore, social norms play a pivotal role in dissuading adolescent girls’ education as reported by teachers, social workers and adolescent girls aged 15-18 years old. They stated that there are some societal constructs that undervalue the importance of girls’ education.

The manifestation of these societal constructs has been reported by participants through assigned gender-biased roles, such as household chores or attributing early child-rearing responsibilities.

“I have had difficulties due to social pressures to devote myself to household tasks and to the belief that my role is limited to caring for family.”

“I was influenced by the societal expectations of girls, that my role is at home, which affected my ability to concentrate at school.”

~ Adolescent girls aged 15-18

A teacher in Tripoli has stated that one of the reasons for dropout for adolescent girls is due to the mentality and thinking of some parents. The participant elaborated that there are some caregivers who consider girls education as not important. This also has been confirmed by an adolescent girl aged 15-18 years old in Tripoli stating:

“I was affected by the concept of girls’ education being insignificant compared to boys, which affected my confidence in my academic abilities.”

~ Adolescent girl aged 15-18

Another teacher from Ajdabiya mentioned that some parents have ideas that early marriage and staying at home helping the family is better than studying.

Additionally, social workers have reported receiving consistent complaints about the mixing of boys and girls, with requests to separate them within NFE centers run by INGOs, particularly in washrooms and classrooms. These requests originated from parents and some adolescent girls. These complaints can escalate as an adolescent girl aged 15-18 years old in Ajdabiya has reported the incident where her friend refused to attend the community center because of gender mixing.

In the same context, the scarcity of female teachers poses a challenge for some adolescent girls who prefer being taught by woman teacher.

Moreover, a teacher in Ajdabiya reported that low-income households are increasingly turning to girls’ child marriage, this was reported also in MSNA2021. Another teacher in Tripoli specified that immigrant fathers marry off their daughters early as they believe she will be in a better situation when she gets married.

“Girls sometimes get married as early as fifteen years old; marriage does not prevent girls from going to school, but with the accumulated responsibilities and pregnancy, girls often end up discontinuing their education; This phenomenon is prevalent in the region and represents a significant barrier, as the rate of child marriage is relatively high among both Libyans and migrants in Ghat region.”

~ Teacher in Ghat

Effective communication with both adolescent girls and their parents has been reported by social workers as one of their strategies to promote enrollment. This involves establishing open channels for dialogue to identify concerns and address them, provide guidance, and provide encouragement when needed.

Additionally, social workers and teachers underscored the significance of awareness campaigns and advocacy aimed at adolescent girls, their parents, and the wider community. Such initiatives serve to reduce the barriers that have been socially constructed and have been obstacles to reducing gender disparities since a trend showing a lack of retention of female students progressing in education levels after primary school.

Teachers and social workers also emphasized the importance of the establishment of Girls Clubs. These clubs serve as a platform to engage in various educational and social activities. The initiative aims to create a supportive space where girls can share experiences, build friendships, and access additional educational resources.
Segregated classrooms based on gender are also advocated for by a minority of children aged 15-18 years old while other children aged 12-14 have proposed to remove this segregation.

Children from rural areas

Teachers and social workers highlight the intrinsic motivation of both caregivers and children as a key enabler in overcoming barriers for this population.

As an illustration, a teacher in Misrata has reported that five migrant siblings (three girls and two boys) used to live far away and had no means of transportation. They used to walk to the education facility, and remarkably, they have had no absences.

"In the winter and the extreme cold, some children do not have clothes to protect them from the cold, but despite that, you find them present in school seats; Thanks to her enthusiasm and desire to study and the center’s environment that helped her do so."

~ Teacher in Ghat

The optimal scenario is to have both parents and children aware and motivated to pursue education. A teacher in Ghat reported where he found parents urging their children to go to school under any circumstances.

In some scenarios, either the children or a parent is motivated, and the worst-case scenario is when neither. A teacher in Tripoli has elaborated on the state of mind of parents where he stated that there are those who are determined to ensure their children receive an education, and there are those who are not. The teacher then illustrated a case involving a girl whose family wanted her to cease studying and start working to help support the family. She rejected this and preferred to continue her education.

To support the motivation of learners and parents, social workers have emphasized the significance of conducting awareness campaigns consistently, using strategies aimed at empowering both parents and children to value and actively pursue education.

ENDNOTES

3 OHCHR. Desperate and Dangerous: Report on the human rights situation of migrants and refugees in Libya. 2018
7 UNHCR. Universal Periodic Review Submission on Libya 36th Session. Octobre, 2019
8 UNICEF. Annual Results Report Libya. 2022
9 UNICEF. Libya CER. 2022.
10 UNICEF. Libya CER. 2022
13 UNESCO. Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying. 2019.