Access to education in many African countries is still highly unequal, despite substantial educational investments and increasing enrollment rates since independence. Girls from poorer families living in rural areas are far more likely to receive little or poor quality schooling (Odusola et al., 2017). The roots of these inequalities lie in the past, with different educational policies and investments made by colonial rulers (Bolt and Bezemer, 2009; Lloyd and Hewett, 2009). In former British colonies for example, colonial authorities outsourced the provision of education almost completely to missionaries (Frankema, 2012; Woodberry, 2004). This missionary education was often exclusionary and uneven (De Haas and Frankema, 2016; Lloyd et al. 2000; Nunn, 2014; Sutton, 1965). Not every African had access to the same educational opportunities and higher education was only available to those who were to assume certain enlightened responsibilities in the colonial government (De Haas and Frankema, 2016; Sutton, 1965). Further, the provision of missionary education was uneven for boys and girls specifically within Catholic congregations which resulted into higher illiteracy rates for girls and women (Adams, 2006; Becker and Woessmann, 2008; De Haas and Frankema, 2016; Nunn, 2014). Finally, Johnson (1967) reveals that there was an apparent regional unevenness in the provision of missionary education with as a consequence that many areas remained unreached.

In this paper, we take a fresh look at the historical roots of contemporary inequality in education. Using so far unexplored colonial and missionary sources we built a new longitudinal dataset on regional educational development in Zambia covering the period 1890 -1960. Albeit enrolment rates for both primary and high school education have increased in Zambia since independence, there remain huge disparities in education with regards to gender, region and social class (Odusola et al., 2017). A recent report by Camfed indicates that girls face the highest rates of exclusion from education, more so in rural areas relative to urban areas (Camfed, 2017). By linking our new historical panel dataset to contemporary regional educational outcomes in Zambia, we are able to shed light on the role of history in explaining contemporary educational outcomes.