

# Factors influencing academic achievement of girls in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools

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## Abstract

Despite considerable research on gender equality in education, there is limited research on why girls in rural areas continue to lag behind their male counterparts in academic performance. This qualitative multiple case study inquiry grounded in the Liberal Feminist theory explored factors that influenced the academic achievement of girls in two selected rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The sample consisted of twenty-two participants, who included two school heads, four teachers, and sixteen female learners, all of whom were purposively sampled from the selected schools. Data were gathered using unstructured interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed using thematic content analysis technique. The study established factors that influenced the academic achievement of girls included sexual violence, teachers' negative attitudes towards girls, parental negative attitudes and domestic responsibilities. The findings have far-reaching implications, given that most girls in Zimbabwe, and other developing countries, especially in Africa, attend rural secondary schools. Sexual violence, encompassing harassment, assault and abuse, has profound effect on girls' academic achievement. Teachers' biases and negative attitudes towards girls can perpetuate a hostile learning environment, affecting girls' academic achievement. The study recommends continuous use of awareness campaigns through seminars, workshops, and guidance and counselling programmes in rural secondary schools. By addressing these factors, teachers, policymakers and communities can work together empowering girls to achieve their full academic potential.

**Keywords:** *academic achievement, girl, secondary school, developing country*

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, gender disparities in education persist, with girls encountering unique challenges that impede their academic success, and Zimbabwe is no exception. The underachievement of girls exists in most nations, including developed ones, and is particularly severe in developing countries (Psaki et al., 2022). Various studies have consistently shown that girls' academic achievement is subpar from primary school to tertiary levels (Abitew, 2018; Geremow et al., 2023; Janvier & Andala, 2021; Mutiso, 2020). This poor academic performance poses a significant obstacle to girls' access to higher education and quality employment opportunities (Nyalusi, 2013), potentially leading to unemployment issues in the long run. Achieving gender parity in the workforce is feasible when women attain commendable academic results. Goal number five of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to promote gender equality and empower all women, as emphasized by the UNDP (2015), which highlights the importance of empowering women and advancing gender equality for sustainable development. The UNDP further asserts that eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a fundamental human right but also yields positive outcomes across various developmental domains.

Despite considerable research on gender equality in education across the globe, there is limited research on why girls in rural areas continue to lag behind their male counterparts in academic performance. Therefore, this research was conducted in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe to fill this research lacuna. This study was deemed imperative due to the multifaceted benefits of girls' academic success, which encompasses augmented socio-economic productivity, improved familial well-being, mitigated infant mortality rates, and accelerated progress towards attaining United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment). Consequently, it sought to investigate factors influencing the academic attainment of girls in the two selected rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

## 2. Literature review

Prior studies reveal that there are several factors that influence the academic achievement of girls in secondary schools (Ertl et al., 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018; Elwood, 2016; Sarwari & Adnani, 2024; Terrier, 2020). In developing countries, concerns

about these factors have sparked intense debate. This literature review explores the complex relationship between sexual violence, negative parental attitudes toward girls and gender roles, shedding light on factors affecting academic achievement of girls in Zimbabwean secondary schools. By examining diverse perspectives and empirical findings, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these issues impacting girls' academic achievement in these settings.

### ***2.1. Sexual Violence***

Prior studies reveal that there are several factors that influence the academic achievement of girls in secondary schools (Ertl et al., 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018; Elwood, 2016; Sarwari & Adnani, 2024). A recent mixed-methods investigation conducted by Sarwari and Adnan (2024) in Afghanistan uncovered a disturbing trend, where in the Taliban categorically disregarded the significance of female education, issuing decrees that exclusively permitted males to attend high schools and universities. Contrary to widespread national and international censure, women were systematically barred from accessing educational opportunities. Gendered discourses within religious settings enable men to define violence, leading to instances where girls are coerced into attending religious events during school hours or are denied access to education altogether. Some girls are subjected to sexual abuse within religious communities by men who act with impunity. Parkes et al. (2022) adopted a mixed method approach in their investigation of sexual violence against students in Uganda. Their survey unveiled that 23.8% (201 out of 844) of the female participants encountered sexual violence in schools. The study emphasised the lack of accountability and legal actions against sexual exploitation and harassment.

A qualitative case study by Altinyelken and Le Mats (2018) explored the experiences of teachers in a rural secondary school, uncovering disturbing evidence of widespread sexual violence in secondary schools and other societal settings in Ethiopia. As this study revealed, “the primary perpetrators of sexual violence were male students, teachers, and adults.” (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018: 661). Wet (2024) contends that sexual violence within an educational environment can markedly impede victims' academic prospects. Sexual harassment can obstruct numerous girls from achieving their aspirations and may induce temporary or prolonged stress and depression based on the individuals' psychological resilience, the nature of harassment, and the presence or absence of social support.

Psychologists and social workers affirm that severe sexual harassment can yield similar psychological effects as rape or sexual assault (Glass et al., 2020; Orfan et al., 2022; Shi & Zheng, 2021). Numerous studies conducted in South African schools have highlighted the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, which detrimentally affect female learners' mental well-being, social integration, and academic performance (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; De Wet, 2024; Macupe, 2021; Nini, 2022; Pillay, 2022; Smiley et al., 2021). Sexual violence within an educational context can severely impede victims' academic prospects.

### ***2.2. Teachers' and Parents' Negative Attitudes***

In Africa, particularly in developing nations, the determinants of girls' academic performance have long been a mystery. A series of studies conducted across Africa indicated that various factors such as teachers' negative attitudes, religious influences, cultural norms, gender disparities, and school-related issues have a detrimental impact on girls' academic success (Chekwurui, 2019; Gashaw, 2019; Marongedza et al., 2023; Mugala, 2020; Mutiso, 2020). Despite advancements in addressing inequalities, many African countries still face situations where females are excluded from certain spheres of life, notably education (Mhembwe, 2019). In African societies, the dynamics between females and males are largely influenced by patriarchal ideologies, which disadvantage women in favour of men. Mugala (2020) conducted a mixed-methods research study involving parents, students, and teachers in Zambia, and concluded that female students were allocated more time to domestic tasks than academic pursuits. Discrepancies in gender dynamics within and outside households are reflections of societal norms and practices rather than deliberate choices.

### ***2.3. Domestic and Gender Roles***

In Zimbabwe, the underachievement of girls has been a persistent concern. Despite efforts to address gender disparities in education, this issue remains unresolved. To add more, despite Zimbabwe being a signatory to various international gender equality agreements, the advancement of rural female students in secondary schools remains elusive (Chinyoka & Kufakunesu, 2018; Chikuvadze & Jacobs, 2021; Chikuvadze et al., 2023; Gutura & Manomano, 2018; Muzingili & Muchinako, 2016; Nyamanhindi & Mukoyi, 2023; Singh &

Mukherjee, 2018). Most rural female learners encounter societal disadvantages, resulting in distinct experiences of poverty as compared to males. It is evident that girls' rights are disregarded in areas where patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, particularly in rural settings. The process of gender socialization from the family to broader societal levels and the entrenched patriarchal norms in African culture, including Zimbabwe, where male dominance prevails, have significant implications for girls' academic performance in secondary schools (UNESCO, 2017). In Zimbabwean rural communities, interactions between females and males are shaped by patriarchal expectations which in return influence girls' educational outcomes (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018). When women are socialized within patriarchal societies, their individual choices regarding academic achievement are limited.

#### ***2.4. Theoretical Framework***

This study is grounded upon Liberal feminist theory. Liberal feminists contend that gender equality may be achieved by changing the distribution of labour through educational patterns and that women may assert equality with men based on a fundamental human ability (Ritzer, 2011). The demand for gender equality has always been the first component of the liberal feminist argument. All men and women are equal, according to liberal feminists. Gender equality and equality of opportunity are synonymous in liberal feminism (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). Liberal feminists believe that the denial of equal civic rights and educational opportunity is the primary cause of women's oppression. Prejudice, sexism, and socialization are the main causes of discrimination against women in education. Women are constrained by prejudices, biases, and attitudes toward women. According to liberal feminism, gender as a system of stratification results in a gendered division of labour, which is founded on culturally induced gender role socialization. Liberal feminists hold that as long as society eliminates social, legal, and cultural barriers, both men and women can improve their lives through their own accomplishments. The institution of education is crucial to the socialization of gender roles. In rural secondary schools, girls are more likely to be assigned subjects like food and nutrition, textile technology, and shona that encourage domesticity, while boys are more likely to be assigned subjects like science, mathematics, and technology that encourage industry. According to liberal feminism, all of these issues may be resolved by providing equal educational opportunities for boys and girls.

Liberal feminists are primarily concerned with ensuring that boys and girls have equal access to, retention in, and study areas within the educational system. To ensure that students receive equitable treatment, liberals have urged for educational institutions to implement gender-sensitive teaching practices. They support equal access to economic and educational opportunities, equal accountability for family activities, the eradication of sexist messages in the media, in the home, and in schools, as well as individual resistance to sexism in day-to-day interactions (Ritzer, 2011). Liberal feminism holds that a liberal agenda for everyone may be advanced through social structures like education (Lorber, 2010). Liberal feminists have advocated for equality in employment and education, for example, but their efforts have been in vain because these rights have not been realized and are only available on paper. This is mostly because the playing field is still heavily skewed toward men rather than women (Gumbo, 2020). The liberal feminist hypothesis is pertinent to this study because it contends that gender inequality in the educational system, including discrimination against women, gender stereotypes, and the socialization of gender roles, among other things, contributes to girls' low academic performance. Liberal feminists feel that there are ways to help girls succeed academically, which is why they were selected to serve as the theoretical framework for this study.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study utilised a qualitative multiple case study methodology, characterised by an in-depth, grounded examination of selected cases to garner nuanced insights. This selection was made due to the advantageous nature of utilizing two or more cases for comparison, theory-building, or to gain an in-depth understanding of the social phenomenon, that is underachievement of girls in the selected two secondary schools, as outlined by Leedy and Ormrod (2015). The two chosen rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe served as the cases under scrutiny. Additionally, the study involved 16 ordinary level girls (divided equally between the two schools), four teachers (two per school), and two heads (one per school). These selections were made using criterion sampling, a purposive technique where cases fitting a specific criterion are chosen for study, as described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018).

Data collection instruments utilised in this study included unstructured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), enabled spontaneous formulation of questions based on the context of the discussion. Unstructured interviews were conducted with four teachers and two

school heads from two selected rural secondary school in Zimbabwe. These interviews were 45 minutes long and they were held during lunch time hour to avoid disturbances of lessons in these schools. FGDs were conducted with 16 (8 per group) female Ordinary Level girls to gather insights on factors influencing their academic achievement in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools. The proceedings of these interviews and FGDs were tap recorded for accuracy.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data from unstructured interviews and FGDs. The six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed for identifying, analysing, and reporting the qualitative data that were gathered. This process includes ‘transcript creation, data familiarization, keyword identification, code selection, theme development, conceptualization through interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes, and the development of a conceptual model’ (Naeem et al., 2023:1). Thematic analysis offers a concise description of emergent themes and patterns within a dataset, serving as a foundational phase of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Prolonged member verification and triangulation were conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. The research strictly adhered to ethical standards by obtaining authorisation from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) to carry out this investigation in the two designated rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Prior to data collection, participants were fully informed and provided their consent before participating in research. Privacy and confidentiality protocols were upheld throughout the study, with voluntary participation being encouraged.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

This study identified several factors hindering girls’ academic achievement in selected two rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. These include teachers’ negative attitudes and gender bias towards female students, domestic responsibilities that disproportionately burden girls, sexual violence and parental preference of boys’ education.

##### ***Theme 1: Teachers’ Negative Attitudes towards Female Students***

Attitudes: Biases, stereotyping and diminished encouragement

Effects on girls: Lower expectations, limited opportunities and disparities in academic outcomes

The findings of this study indicated that female students are often stereotyped and marginalized particularly by teachers of science and practical subjects. In one of the interviews, Head 2 highlighted the following concern:

*We have received complaints from students, especially girls, regarding the treatment they receive from their teachers. They report being frequently dismissed from classes, particularly in Mathematics, and at times their work is left unmarked for reasons unknown.*

A female teacher interviewed at one of the two selected secondary schools expressed the following sentiment:

*Girls are still perceived as the weaker gender, believed to be incapable of handling the complexities and rigorous demands of subjects such as Mathematics and the Sciences.*

In the FGD, participant 1 from Group A articulated the following viewpoint:

*Our teachers, particularly the mathematics teacher, hold the belief that boys outperform girls, leading to a sense of defeatism among female students in their mathematics performance. Consequently, girls often approach their final exams with diminished confidence due to these negative stereotypes.*

A participant from Group B emphatically stated that female teachers at their school treated girls disparately from boys.

*Specifically, the female Geography teacher insults them, alleging poor hygiene and frequently dismissing them from class, resulting in missed educational opportunities.*

This study established that girls were adversely impacted by teachers' negative attitudes towards them during the learning process, ultimately hindering their academic accomplishments. These findings are mirror of a qualitative research conducted by Mapuranga and Chapungu (2015) in Zimbabwean schools which revealed that negative stereotypical attitudes have adverse effects on girls' academic achievement. It is important to recognise that within Zimbabwean rural communities, interactions between males and females are often influenced by patriarchal expectations (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018), a dynamic that can extend to teachers in secondary education. The negative stereotyping of female students by teachers contributes significantly to their underperformance academically. Gender-biased perceptions



held by teachers, favouring male students in certain subjects and discouraging female students from pursuing the same courses, significantly influence academic outcomes. Previous studies on gender stereotypes consistently revealed that females struggle with mathematical tasks, with diminishing interest when confronted with the stereotype of women being less skilled in mathematics (Delaney & Devereux, 2019; Ebru, 2022). This study emphasizes how teachers' negative perceptions and gender stereotyping dissuade female learners from pursuing STEM subjects, resulting in academic underachievement among those who do opt for such disciplines.

### ***Theme 2: Teachers' Negative Attitudes towards Female Students***

Domestic responsibilities: Rigid expectations and domestic chores

Effects on girls: Narrow career aspirations limited and decreased academic engagement

Insights from teachers, school administrators, and students involved in this study unveiled that girls are predominantly engaged in domestic duties as compared to boys. These domestic obligations detrimentally affect their academic achievement. In interviews conducted, Head 2 asserted that:

*Girls face considerable disadvantages at home, as the tasks assigned to them differ significantly from those given to boys. Girls are designated as the caretakers of the household, burdened with various responsibilities such as cooking, fetching water, washing dishes, and cleaning the premises before and after school. These demands prove overwhelming for them, leading to potential tardiness for school activities. Some girls may even miss initial lessons due to prior domestic duties like cleaning and meal preparation for family members remaining at home.*

A member of Focus Group A highlighted that:

*Domestic chores significantly impede our learning progress, leaving us with insufficient time to complete assignments at home due to these responsibilities. Consequently, teachers may overlook us in the classroom, presuming a lack of interest in academics. Some students may even be absent from school to care for younger siblings, particularly during agricultural seasons when mothers are occupied in the fields.*

The findings of this study highlighted the distinctive roles assigned to girls as compared to boys. These domestic responsibilities impede girls' educational pursuits by consuming the time allocated for studying. Typically, gender-specific roles deter rural female students from allocating themselves with sufficient study time, yet secondary education demands rigorous preparation through academic engagement (Chikuvadze, 2020; Chikuvadze & Jacobs, 2021). These findings align with previous studies by Juma and Simatwa (2014), Manwa (2014), and Mulugeta (2014), which emphasized how the burden of household chores on female students in day schools hindered their academic pursuits. At home, female students are burdened with chores such as collecting firewood, household cleaning, dishwashing, and caring for younger siblings. Disparities in gender roles within and outside the household reflect societal norms rather than individual choices. Domestic chores are traditionally assigned to females, who are raised to embrace these roles from a cultural standpoint. Researches indicated that girls are overwhelmed by domestic duties which significantly reduce their study time as compared to their male counterparts (Mathias, 2009; Manwa, 2014). The extensive workload at home diminishes female students' study time, leading to fatigue and inadequate study hours, thus ultimately resulting in academic underperformance (Mulugeta, 2014).

### ***Theme 3: Sexual Violence and Romantic Entanglements***

Sexual violence: Harassment, assault and abuse

Effects on girls: Decreased motivation, absenteeism, emotional trauma and poor academic achievement

The investigation revealed that sexual harassment significantly impacts the academic achievement of female students in the selected secondary schools. As this study revealed, consequences of sexual harassment on girls' academic performance encompassed early pregnancies, early marriages, and subpar academic outcomes, all of which hinder their future prospects. In the current study, one of the School Heads who were interviewed (Head 1) remarked this:

*The academic achievement of these girls is greatly compromised by romantic entanglements, leading to distraction and absenteeism from studies. Some students even skip their studies to meet romantic partners in nearby townships. Incidents of sexual harassment among girls are prevalent in local communities, exerting a detrimental influence on their learning and academic success.*

A female teacher who participated in in-depth interviews further added:

*Numerous cases of sexual harassment have been reported, yet these issues are often overlooked as teachers seek to shield one another. Instances of girls dropping out of school due to early marriages or taking exams while pregnant from prior relationships have been noted, indicating a negative impact on their academic accomplishments.*

A participant from Focus Group B who was harassed at one point shared her own views:

*The harassment by tutors and fellow students had a profound impact on my wellbeing, inducing feelings of perpetual unease and despair, cultivating resentment towards men, undermining my concentration and academic drive, resulting in recurring absences from school.*

This study revealed that sexual harassment and romantic involvements within the selected secondary schools had adverse effects on the academic achievements of girls. Female learners perceive these school environments as unsafe due to intimidation, threats, and abuse. Furthermore, the study also revealed a prevalent culture of sexual violence within schools. Instances of sexual violence and harassment negatively impacted the academic achievements of female learners in the selected rural secondary schools. These findings resonate with similar studies conducted in South African schools, which also highlighted the pervasive nature of sexual violence against female learners, which detrimentally affected their academic success (De Wet, 2024; Macupe, 2021; Naidoo, 2020; South African Council of Educators (SACE), 2017). Perpetrators of sexual violence include teachers, coaches, caregivers, taxi drivers, and fellow students. These findings corroborate researches by Chinyoka et al. (2016), Mugabe (2021) and Chinyere (2015) in Zimbabwe, which underscored the prevalence of harassment and abuse against girls in educational settings. This impeded their academic achievements.

This study also revealed that cases of sexual harassment have been reported, yet these issues are often overlooked as teachers seek to shield one another. Similarly, a study by Sayeed et al. (2022) in Afghanistan uncovered a disturbingly broad spectrum of harassment experience by female students perpetrated by diverse individuals, including taxi drivers, unknown persons, peers, and academic instructors, with varying degrees of severity. Notably, these female students opted not to disclose these incidents, citing multifaceted reasons, including fear of

retribution, social stigma, institutional inefficacy and cultural constraints. The findings of this study are also a mirror of a plethora of studies conducted in Africa (Gwirayi, 2013; Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Nyamanhindi, 2015; Ramabu, 2020; Sanjeevi et al., 2018), concluding that in many African nations, especially in sub-Saharan region, child sexual abuse seemed to be institutionalised and has often gone unreported. For Obong'o et al. (2020), beyond trauma of abuse, survivors feared further harm through social stigma, blame, doubt, physically harm and disrupted family and educational experiences. The absence of accountability for male perpetrators and the normalization of such behaviours perpetuates a hostile environment for female students, thus impacting on their well-being. The failure to address such behaviour as sexual harassment poses a significant threat to the girls' emotional welfare and academic fulfilment, emphasising the critical need for intervention and awareness within educational settings.

#### ***Theme 4: Parental Biases Against Girls' Education***

Attitudes: Cultural and social norms and internalised stereotypes

Effects on girls: Reinforced gender traditional roles and decreased academic motivation

The study uncovered lingering negative perceptions within local communities, where some parents and community members maintained outdated and pessimistic views regarding girls' education. concluded that families and communities harbour negative attitudes towards education, fostering a sense of hopelessness among female students, thus impeding their academic performance. This was elaborated by one participant from Focus Group B who said:

*Our parents prioritize boys' education over girls', arguing that girls are destined for marriage and therefore investing in their education yields minimal returns. Consequently, girls' education is undervalued, resulting in delayed fees payments and subsequent missed lessons. In our school, during the initial weeks of the academic term, girls are often sent home due to outstanding fees, adversely affecting their academic progress.*

Discussions with student groups revealed a prevailing undervaluation of girls' education within society, with some members discouraging girls from pursuing academic endeavours. These findings mirror a study conducted in Pakistan by Suleman et al. (2015) which exposed the unequal opportunities provided to girls in comparison to males. The majority of parents in rural areas harbour negative attitudes towards girls' education (Suleman

et al., 2015), and they deem it insignificant and futile. The prevailing sentiment suggests that numerous parents feel disillusioned investing in their daughters' education, fearing potential outcomes such as early pregnancies leading to dropouts and increased familial responsibilities. The findings of this study echo those of Ketema et al. (2022) in Ethiopian schools who similarly concluded that parents' low expectations regarding female academic performance detrimentally impacted their educational achievements. The society perceives girls as domestic caretakers and expects them to remain at home tending to familial duties. Attending classes would disrupt their domestic responsibilities, leading to frequent absence and subsequently, poor academic achievement. These testimonies highlighted the prevalent negative attitudes towards girls' education within various communities.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study investigated factors that influenced the academic achievement of girls in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The research identified various factors impacting academic performance, including sexual harassment, teachers' negative attitudes towards girls, parental biases against girls' education, domestic responsibilities, gender roles, and cultural practices. The situation faced by secondary school girls in this study was not unique given that the factors that negatively affected their academic performance were also reported in previous studies that were conducted in different countries, particularly in Africa. Therefore, it is imperative for the teachers in classrooms to promote inclusive education, addressing social and cultural barriers faced by the girls.

Based on the research findings, recommendations were proposed to enhance girls' academic performance in secondary schools. MoPSE and other stakeholders are urged to conduct regular one on one counselling sessions with girls to help them to strive for academic excellence. This study advocates parenting workshops to educate parents on how to support their daughter's academic success. Given that females are, globally, among the mostly vulnerable and marginalized groups, there is a call for dedicated funds to empower girls and enhance their academic achievements. Furthermore, the study proposes the collaboration of MoPSE and local stakeholders that provide resources, support and opportunities for girls.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Research Council of Zimbabwe. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance by Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

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