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Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Press Office
Stand No. 1901 Barrassie Rd,
Off Shamva Road
Box 350
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Telephone: ++263 8 677 006 136 | +263 779 279 912
E-mail: zegupress@admin.uz.ac.zw
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The purpose of the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation Review and Advancement*, is to provide a forum for community engagement and outreach.

CONTRIBUTION AND READERSHIP

Sociologists, demographers, psychologists, development experts, planners, social workers, social engineers and economists, among others whose focus is on community development.

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The journal is a forum for the discussion of ideas, scholarly opinions and case studies of community outreach and engagement. Communities are both defined in terms of people found in a given locale and defined cohorts, like the children, the youth, the elderly and those living with a disability. The strongest view is that getting to know each community or sub-community is a function of their deliberate participation in matters affecting them by the community itself. The journal is produced bi-annually.

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Language: British/UK English

Title: must capture the gist and scope of the article

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Abstract: must be 200 words

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Italicise *et al.*, *ibid.*, words that are not English, not names of people or organisations, etc. When you use several scholars confirming the same point, state the point and bracket them in one bracket and ascending order of dates and alphabetically separated by semi-colon e.g. (Falkenmark, 1989, 1990; Reddy, 2002; Dagdeviren and Robertson, 2011; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2012).

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ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AMONG GIRLS IN RURAL CHIREDDI DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE: REASONS AND INTERVENTIONS IN ADDRESSING POOR RESULTS

BENJAMIN MOYO¹ AND SHEPHERD GUMBO²

Abstract

Global trends on academic performance show that overall, girls outperform boys at primary and secondary school levels. Some have attributed this to affirmative action policies and practices. Even the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) reports show similar trends for over 10 years up to 2023. Surprisingly, the trend was different in Chiredzi rural primary schools, thus compelling the study ingrained in the feminist lens, to establish the reasons for the discrepancy with the view for corrective interventions. Drawing from the documented school-based and public Grade Seven academic results from 2020 to 2023 and the girls' academic records, a qualitative case study constituting two school heads and four of teachers, girls and schools parent board members equitably selected from two primary schools was instituted for face-to-face interviews. The thematic content analysis shows ethnicity, gendered teacher deployment, negative effects of the donor community involvement in girl child socialisation and maternal parent emigration as the major reasons for the poor academic performance among the girls in Chiredzi. School-community based donor activities regulatory framework, community resocialisation on migration and gender rights, streamlining of gender in teacher deployment and site-based evaluation of gender policies and practices, are recommended.

¹ Guiding Star High School, Neshuro, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

² Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1820-0767>.

Keywords: *cultural practices, educational equity, ethnicity, gender equality, gender hegemony, sustainability,*

INTRODUCTION

The current narrative from both the Global North and the Global South about academic acumen and achievement between girls and boys at both primary and secondary school levels is that, unlike in the past, the former are increasingly outperforming the latter (Samukange and Fusire, 2017; Ullah and Ullah, 2019). Studies carried out by Mensah and Kieman (2010) in Britain, DiPrete and Buchamann (2013) in America and Datta (2014) in Britain, affirm that girls were outperforming boys in academia at both secondary and tertiary education levels, especially from backgrounds where the parents were poor and lowly educated. Spaull and Makaluza (2019) in a study in South Africa also report that despite the academic performance gap between boys and girls, there was evidence that both sexes were improving as compared to the yester period, when the boys had an upper hand. Prior to this gendered shift in academic performance, scholars have attributed girls' underperformance to, *inter-alia*, gendered domestic roles, gendered pedagogy, negative effects of stereotypical views of the society on females, females' attitudes towards education (Faiji and Garutsa, 2023; Garutsa, 2023). Gender equality policies have been hailed for bridging the gender differentiated academic gap in various countries (Lyness and Judiesch, 2014; Karpowitz *et al.*, 2023;). In Zimbabwe, the gender policy stipulates that both girls and boys ought to have access to education and treated equally at school (Zimbabwe Gender Policy, 2017). In that regard, girls only and boys only schools have been done away with although there are a few such schools with disproportionate distribution of the sexes (Dzimiri, 2019).

For Zimbabwe, girls have been outperforming boys in Grade Seven public examinations for many years (Ministry of Primary and

Secondary Education, 2023). Grade Seven examinations mark the end of primary school education in Zimbabwe and the results are used for secondary school enrolment. Since secondary schools select Form One candidates on the basis of the quality of the results, those who would have performed poorly at that level would normally find it difficult to secure Form One places at high performing schools, irrespective of their financial status. The entrance into Form One thus becomes a starting point for stratifying learners into specific secondary school environments. The secondary schools which enrol high flyers usually offer a better curriculum than those that accommodate every other learner. Learner performance at the Grade Seven level is thus significant as it determines the future occupation of the child. On that note, therefore, poor performance by one sex should be treated jealously as it marks the foundation of gender inequality. Table 1 illustrates the magnitude of the differences in performance between boys and girls from 2020 to 2023 in Zimbabwe’s public examinations.

Table 1: Zimbabwe’s Grade 7 Public Examinations results by gender and percentage (ZIMSEC analysis reports)

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boys	34.4	37.48	36.22	41.21
Girls	39.7	44.56	43.66	49.56

Although national statistics indicate that Zimbabwean girls were performing better than the boys for the four consecutive years, Chiredzi District rural-based girls have never recorded a percentage pass rate higher than that of the boys at Grade Seven Level (Nyangwe, 2024). Unfortunately, when one glances over the national statistics without paying particular attention to the circumstances of each geographical and demographic distribution of the population, futile corrective policies may be formulated translating into perpetual disadvantage to the overshadowed population. It would seem like scholars have been obsessed with this euphoria about the gender shift in academic performance but paying little attention to the performance

outcomes of the specific groups within the various populations. In that regard, gender equality policies (DiPrete and Buchamann, 2013), boys' indiscipline and drug abuse (Mwangi, 2016), influence of the media, entertainment, among other variables, have been attached to the boy's underachievement.

While acknowledging those efforts by other scholars, it is felt that the current study is significant because it challenges the generalisation that girls are now outperforming the boys by pointing out that the situation is different in Chiredzi district of Zimbabwe and also by seeking the reasons for that disparity. By narrowing the academic performance gender gap analysis to some specific group, Chiredzi rural girls in this case, the study findings illustrates, to a greater extent, what ought to be considered as the sources of policy proclamations. Also, the study occupies a space in the global Gender Equity Policy and Strategy 2016-2020 components 2 and 4, namely attention to multiple inequalities to reach the most disadvantaged girls and boys and strong evidence and country level data, respectively (Global Partnership for Education, 2017).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The case for females can better be understood from the feminist lens because feminists advocate female emancipation (Dzimiri, 2019). The position of feminists is that female failure in society has a social origin, the domineering, destructive and undermining tendency of males over females (Garutsa, 2023). While it is acknowledged that feminism has branches which include radicalism, liberalism, Marxist-socialist, black, among others (Blom and Hewitt, 2020), the current study borrows ideas largely from the liberal lens to understand the reasons for poor academic achievement among girls in Chiredzi district. The liberal feminists call for equity and equality between females and males (Eriksson *et al.*, 2020). As argued by Freidain, a proponent of the feminist liberal school of thought, there should be a legislative

structure that accords equal social status to both males and females (Eagly *et al.*, 2020). The argument by liberal feminists is that if females and males are regarded in equal terms in society, then any difference in performance and achievement can be attributed to individual motivation and hard work (Eriksson *et al.*, 2020). The liberal feminist lens therefore, helps to locate the origins of the poor academic achievement among the girls in rural Chiredzi district schools. The major focus was to establish whether the Chiredzi community treated both boys and girls equally and fairly as advocated by liberal feminists, with the ultimate goal of finding reasons for the gendered differences in academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study was invoked by the academic underperformance of girls in Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe, coming at a time when both national and international academic performance statistics show the academic dominance of girls over boys at both primary and secondary school levels. Literature on the gender phenomenon, global milestones on gender and education, factors impeding gender rationalisation, Zimbabwe's progress on gender harmonisation and the importance of gender equity and equality was sought.

The term 'gender' is extensively used in feminism literature so much so that with limited critical reading, one may be tempted to believe that it is about females, yet it connotes both males and females. Gender is a social construct in which a particular society ascribes roles as either for males or for females (Zimbabwe National Gender Policy, 2017). The stratification of roles on gender lines is a global issue (Makondo and Makondo, 2023). As argued by Dzimiri (2019), in a highly gendered society, females are prohibited from taking positions or carrying out duties that are socially defined to be under the domain of males and vice versa (Blom and Hewitt, 2020). The argument put forward by those who advocate gender stratification is that males and females are

biologically different such that the former are masculine and stronger than the latter. From the biological difference perspective, therefore, the females' place is in the domestic sphere, where there are soft duties, while males go out in the private sphere to occupy more strenuous positions that are too harsh for the weaker sex (Dzimiri, 2019; Asante *et al.*, 2023).

The gender equality movement, however, challenges the biological reference to the discrepancies that exist between males and females in occupational placements. One of their major arguments is that there are females who are physically stronger and intellectually sharper than some males, hence there is no occupation that should be entirely reserved for a particular sex. Liberal feminists who call for equal treatment between males and females, assert that gender is exploitative, unfair and ill-treats females, thereby taking away their rights. On the basis of liberal feminists' arguments and on the need to ensure that the rights of all are respected as enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), the current study was carried out in the Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe to avert the gender inequality that manifests in the academic performance between boys and girls.

Although gender remains one of the global hindrances to development, there is evidence at the international leadership level that work to resolve the problem was started long back and is in progress (Eagly *et al.*, 2020). For the purposes of serving space, this article only identifies without articulating the detailed scope of some international policies that aimed to redress gender inequality and these include; the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the Jomtien World Conference (1990); the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995); and the Dakar Framework of Action on Education for All (2000) (UNESCO, 2006; 2013; 2016).

In response to the international declarations on measures to reduce gender inequality in society, various nations have also crafted country-based policies for the same cause, some of which are being implemented. While Matanda *et al.* (2023) put the figure of women serving in various boards at 24.5% worldwide, women in the United States held 31.3% of board positions in 2022. Other countries with positive percentage figures for women in high positions include Australia at 36.4% (Blom and Hewitt, 2020; Australian Institute of Company Directors 2023). Schuler *et al.* (2018), argue that countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan have more female parliamentarians than males owing to the education policies which promoted females to pursue studies even in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics historically males' domain. These reported successes for females should motivate every other nation and even the females themselves to appreciate that they can also make it if adequate and appropriate effort is made and that should include girls in the Chiredzi district of Zimbabwe, whose life trajectory lookss doomed due to academic underperformance.

Gender rationalisation in education continues to face some obstacles relating to socio-cultural, religious and technological underpinnings (Garutsa, 2023). Schuler *et al.* (2018) note that although feminism is increasingly re-socialising females to value themselves, in Bangladesh, patriarchy still defines a model family in which females remain custodians of religion, culture and family lives, while males are considered breadwinners. Due to society's hegemonic influence on females to accept that their place was in the home, there is therefore, little motivation for the girl child to pursue education. The perception of gender in Bangladesh shares similarities with experiences in Senegal where Ndiaye (2015) observes that society encourages boys more than the girl child to pursue education because the boys are regarded as future family breadwinners, while girls need to be nurtured for marriage.

In their global education monitoring report, UNICEF (2019) reveals that gender disparity in academic performance is linked to poverty and one's location. In the UNICEF (2019) report, girls are found to lag behind in poor and rural communities of Burundi and Malawi. Also, it is observed that academic performance is positively correlated to completion rates because where the rate was at 20%, such as in Tanzania and Chad, girls did not do well, while they performed better in the countries that recorded completion rates of over 45%, such as in Mongolia, the Philippines and Vietnam. It seems the majority of factors that impede girls' achievement in education emanates from the girls' social environments (UNESCO, 2013; 2016). However, it may not be enough to make such general conclusions without getting down to the specific communities where the girls live to get first-hand information about their experiences. The social lives of the girls in Chiredzi district are thus scrutinised to establish how they could be contributing to their poor academic performance compared to the boys.

Zimbabwe has made some positive strides toward committing herself to redressing gender imbalance (Makondo and Makondo, 2023). Notably, the country has appended her signature to some international instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Faiji and Garutsa, 2023). At the national level, the major instruments to guide realisation of gender parity include the National Gender Policy (NGP) of 2004.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe amendment 20 of 2013 and the 2017 revised National Gender Policy stipulate that boys and girls in Zimbabwe need to be treated equally in line with the proclamations of Chapter 2 of the constitution on fundamental objectives and Chapter 4

on the bill of rights. With specific reference to education, the Education Act Chapter 25:04 spells out that every child ought to receive education irrespective of their gender. The positive discrimination policy has been enacted. By operation, entry point levels for enrolment at institutions of higher learning for some science programmes such as in engineering and medicine, have been lowered for the girls as an incentive and to redress historical imbalances. This idea of positive discrimination is, however, challengeable, first on the ground that it does not consider other social backgrounds that militate against both sexes to excel in the sciences such as rurality and availability of resources, including laboratories at the school where one could have attended. It is observed that the positive discrimination policy benefits only girls who attend boarding schools or schools in towns, where resources, such as internet connectivity, science laboratories and libraries, are available while the rural girl, mostly affected by patriarchy, is disadvantaged (Matope *et al.*, 2014; Tabassum, 2023). In the context of this study, the key question one would ask is, does the positive discrimination policy aid girls in poor schools, such as those in rural Chiredzi district enrolling for the Sciences Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programmes? Getting down to the concerned district and interacting with the communities would greatly illuminate how representative such policies are to various social groups in the society.

There are more gains than losses the society can realise through enacting and practising gender equality policies (Faiji and Garutsa, 2023). The gender equity and equality framework aim to address three major areas strongly linked to both national and international development, and these are the social, economic and political concerns. Zimbabwe's Gender Inequality Index was recorded at 0.583 against the ideal of 0 by 2011, showing that the country's reproductive health, empowerment, access to, control and ownership of economic resources and opportunities and participation in decision-making was very low

(Zimbabwe National Gender Policy, 2017). Since 2011, little improvement has been achieved.

It has been found that in communities where gender equality is practised more, there are less incidences of gender-based violence, culminating into healthy relations in families and that helps to bind the society together since the family is the primary unit of society. Stable families tend to raise healthy children (Blom and Hewitt, 2020). Unfair treatment of either sex brings with it suspicion and antagonism between the sexes, thereby retarding participation in political issues. Gender equality ensures that there is fair competition between males and females in the production and execution of ideas, hence aiding development (Matope *et al.*, 2014). As argued by UNICEF (2019), benefits to the mainstreaming of gender is not limited only to income, sexes, material goods or food for consumption or sale, but also status, power, respect and recognition.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a case study design informed by the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research approach. Both the interpretive paradigm and the qualitative approach suit studies that call for the production of data generated from first-hand experiences of the subjects (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Ten Grade Seven girls, four teachers, two school heads and four parents in school leadership who had adequate information about educational experiences of both boys and girls in the rural Chiredzi district area participated. All participants were purposively and conveniently selected to ensure that the reasons for poor performance among girls in rural Chiredzi district could be extracted from an informed sample. The 10 girls participated through focus group interviews which had five participants from each of the two sampled schools. The teachers, school heads and parents were interviewed by the researchers. Prior to the interviews and focus group discussions, academic records, namely exercise books,

Individual Progress Records and Grade Seven results, were analysed to establish performance trends. Consent was sought from all the participants and education authorities prior to the study. The researchers sought assent too from the learners before their involvement in the study. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and all their rights and freedoms to participate were spelt out. Also, schools where the study was done were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy, thus were named school A (SA) and school B (SB). The participants were identified using codes and the following are illustrative: G1SA-Girl 1 School A; P3SB-Parent 3 School B; HSA- Head School A; T2SB-Teacher 2 School B. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and this was done as data collection was going on in line with Creswell and Creswell (2018)'s advice that in qualitative research, emerging themes from data ought to be captured early while the researcher is in the field to ensure that pertinent data are not lost. The excerpts from the interviews were recorded verbatim. The recorded data were repeatedly read until related themes emerged and these were recorded as key factors to which the findings subsisted.

FINDINGS

The major focus of the current study is to establish the reasons that militated against academic excellence among girls in Chiredzi district of Zimbabwe, with the view to come up with workable policy realignment and suggestions for practices that promoted gender equity and equality to ensure sustainability and development. Ethnicity, gendered teacher deployment, negative effects of the donor community involvement in girl child socialisation and maternal parental emigration, stood out as the major findings.

The Chiredzi rural district community had some cultural beliefs and practices that discouraged positive motivation among girls in the academic field. As argued by HSA,

'[The] pass rate among the girls was largely affected by some societal factors such as reverence in marriage.'

One teacher participant revealed that,

[The] Shangan', an ethnic group in the Chiredzi district area, initiate the young girls into woman-hood through 'khomba', a cultural training conducted by old women where the girls are taught how to handle men during sexual encounters.' (T3SB).

T1SA also weighed in and said that,

'Other than taking up the girls' schooling time, the 'khomba' trainings and ceremonies introduced the young girls into early sexuality as they would want to experiment what they would have been taught.'

While the educators perceived the marriage preparatory trainings and ceremonies as impediments to educational access and performance among the girls, the parents were in support of the practice because,

'... it defines who we are as the Shangani people. Marriage is at the centre of the family and it is good that the young girls are specially prepared for it.' (P3SB).

Even the girl participants reiterated in the focus group interviews that,

'We practise '*kuhlaya munawo*' at school under the watchful eyes of other girls.' (G4SB).

As argued by one girl,

'*Kuhlanya munawo*' is a physical activity or dance- like movement mimicking sexual activity styles that is done to show one's readiness for marriage.' (G1SA).

The girls reported that,

'We usually practise '*kuhlanya munawo*' during lunch and break times.' (G2SB, G3SB).

Emphasising the importance of the '*kuhlanya munawo*' practice, P4SA said,

'The law of the Medes and Persians in the *Shangani* culture is loud and clear that if one fails '*kuhlanya munawo*' one would be beaten by the senior girls'.

However, T2SA castigated the cultural practice on the grounds that,

'Those failing capturing the '*munawo*' may be absent from school fearing to be tortured by the senior girls, hence miss the lessons, contributing to poor performance.'

Some learner participants blamed teacher placement procedures which seemed to suggest that females had no place in the academic arena because,

‘... at this school, all the teachers are males and it is the same with our neighbouring schools.’ (G3SA).

Another learner, G4SB, said that,

‘Male teachers may not attend to all our special needs such as menstrual periods, so things to do with womanhood remain [the] preserve of the home.’

The other reason that limited the girls from regular school attendance, leading to poor academic performance, was the way the girls were treated by male teachers during sports at school. G5SB complained that,

‘When we go for sports, some male teachers have the tendency to want to improperly associate with you, so the better thing is to absent oneself from school during such days.’

The possibilities of improper association were also feared by P4SB who reasoned that,

‘We do not have female teachers at our school and no one would want her daughter to mingle with the male teachers, especially at sports, it’s scary, so you don’t allow them to attend school on such days.’

The gendered teacher placement patterns were also castigated by the school heads who believed that,

‘It demotivated the girls from attending school since they do not come in contact with possible role models.’ (HSB).

HSB’s counterpart, HSA, weighed in and stated that,

The male only teachers’ environment sends a wrong picture about the place of females in school and it justifies the cultural belief in this community that women are for the domestic sphere.’

To enhance full participation of girls in the academic arena, Ndiaye (2015) observes how in Senegal, communities arranged conferences

and sought the services of well-schooled females, including medical doctors and lawyers, to discuss contemporary issues such as human rights and others affecting females in the communities and possible ways to solve them. The Senegal strategy could also be employed in the rural Chiredzi area so as to ensure that the girls attended school regularly, thereby increasing the chances of academic success.

Elsewhere, literature shows that boys were increasingly underperforming than girls, especially at the primary school level, because that level was largely manned by female teachers whose presence in the classroom gave more positive learning impetus to the girl child than to the boy (Haugen *et al.*, 2011; Erikson *et al.*, 2020). A related finding was also found in Tanzania by Nyalusi (2013) who establishes that girls did well academically when taught by female teachers because their presence helps dispel some stereotypical gender views of the girls, thereby motivating them to learn. The scarcity of such role models in the rural Chiredzi district of Zimbabwe's primary schools could thus be a factor in the poor academic performance witnessed among the girls.

While the participants reported the existence of some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the district to advance the educational welfare of the girl child, they cited some practices which they thought were defeating the organisations' noble cause. Justifying their poor performance when compared to the boys', the girls raised the concern that,

'Some concepts were introduced while some of us were attending workshops sponsored by the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)' (G1SB).

Another girl also lamented that,

'Our poor performance was a result of absenteeism that we could not control and I think the workshops should be done during the weekends or *during* the holidays because teachers teach even when you are away attending the workshops.' (G3SA).

The school heads also felt that,

‘the donors impose their time tables on us. They would observe how they want to meet their reporting timelines, so in most cases, they take the children even against our will.’ (HSB).

HSA blamed the donors on the grounds that,

‘They take us back by channelling the girls into gendered occupations because the girls report that in some of the workshops, they are taught sewing, cooking, hair dressing and other skills related to the historically feminine trades.’

Commenting on the effectiveness of NGOs in advancing the education of the girl child, one parent sceptically stated that,

‘CAMFED gives the girls everything, books, fees, pens, under garments and even sanitary wear. To me, that breeds laziness on the girls and contribute to academic failure.’ (P3SA).

P1SA also remarked that

‘CAMFED provides high quality uniforms to the selected girls and unfortunately, the girls use those uniforms to show off, rarely would you see a CAMFED beneficiary doing well in school work.’

One teacher also observed that,

‘Although it is a good idea to empower the girls, giving them everything instils a sense of dependency and belief that as girls, theirs [is] to be supported, so they do not work hard, hence high rate of failure’ (T3SB).

Even the HSA suggested that,

‘Donors should not select a specific gender but be inclusive because those selected, especially in receiving some items, would think that they are special and you know what happens with the youngsters, it discourages them from working hard.’

Eriksson *et al.* (2020) express the idea that for gender equity to be realised in modern-day societies, there is need to embrace gender egalitarian values, a recommendation also made by Akanbang *et al.* (2023) in their study in Ghana, where the focus was to examine the effectiveness of CAMFED support on the girl learners’ enrolment and progression trends in school. Since Zimbabwean girls have demonstrated that they can do well in academia overall, the same can apply to the Chiredzi groups if both sexes were treated equally in the social environments in which they live.

G5SA and most of the girl participants reported that,

'I rarely attend school fit since I lose a lot of energy working in the house to fill the gap left by my emigrant mother.' (G5SA).

Her counterpart from another school also revealed that,

'It's me who prepares food and does all the chores before coming to school' (G2SB).

The girl further lamented that,

'I even wash clothes for my male siblings, because I am the only girl in the family and our mother is away in South Africa.'

The girls' sentiments about the extra duties at home to fill the gap left by their emigrant mothers was corroborated by the teachers who raised the concern that

'Some of the girls come to school infrequently and they rarely complete their school work because they have other responsibilities at home to cover up for their mothers who are in the diaspora.' (T3SA).

T3SA's observation was shared by his counterpart from school B, who stated that,

'Parental migration has affected the education of the girl learners more than the boys', because the former have no time to rest as they have to see to it that their siblings feed before coming to school.' (T3SB).

The teachers and learners' narratives about the parental emigration and its impact on the education of the girl child showed that the Chiredzi community did not treat the boys and the girls in the same way, hence practised gender segregation. However, P1SA seemed not to see any negative implications on the education of the girl child,

'Girls need to work in the home to prepare themselves for marriage, so those with absent mothers are in better positions because their extra involvement in domestic chores means more experiences and usually such children become hard working wives.'

One of the parents further justified the differential treatment of boys and girls by stating that,

'The river flows in one direction.' (P2SB).

By 'the river flows in one direction', P2SB explained that,

'There are certain responsibilities and practices in our culture that can never be exchanged between males and females.'

Another parent, P4SB, shared her experience with the girls in the community,

‘We have noted that divorce cases are rare in marriages involving these girls with absent parents because they are hardened already so they know how to protect themselves from any form of abuse from their husbands.’

There were divergent views between the parents and school authorities regarding the education of the girls with absent parents. HAS complained that,

‘Members of the school board are the culprits, they do not represent these girls well hence we do not see them competing with the boys when it comes to academic work.’

Even T2SB showed concern about the members of the school board’s understanding of their role to link the community and the school, thus,

‘I learnt the other day that two of the girls did not come to school because they had gone catching fish in the company of two women in the school board, surprisingly these women’s biological children were attending school.’

The findings of the current study share similarities with Dida *et al.* (2014)’s study in Kenya, but inconsistent with those found by Chingwe (2023) in a study in Bulilima and Mangwe districts in the Western part of Zimbabwe, where the focus was to compare academic performance of learners with emigrant parents and those with parents based in the country. In that study, Chingwe (*ibid.*) found that parental migration had no significant effect on the academic performance of the learners.

While the national academic performance statistics show that the boys trailed the girls for four consecutive years, the opposite was true for the two sampled rural primary schools in Chiredzi district.

Table 2: School A and School B Grade Seven Percentage Pass Rates. 2020-2023 (Schools analysis reports)

School	2020		2021		2022		2023	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
A	13.4	40.6	17.6	37.7	14.3	44.6	11.9	49.7
B	23	38.9	20.3	35	22.4	48	20.8	54.5

Table 2 shows the overall Grade Seven results for the two sampled schools in the public examinations for the four consecutive years. The results were drawn from the results analysis files from the two schools. In both cases, the boys in Chiredzi district outperformed the girls in the district with very huge margins. Other than showing an upper hand on their classmates, the Chiredzi boys were even smarter than the national performance for either gender, with the exception of 2021, where the national statistics show that girls were better. These results were also corroborated with the performance seen in the children's exercise books, fortnightly and termly academic reports, that also reveals that girls were not performing and, in most cases, did not write the work given by the teachers.

DISCUSSION

The thrust of the study was to find the reasons for the poor academic performance at Grade Seven level among the girls in rural Chiredzi district in Zimbabwe. The search was inspired by the fact that of late, literature has shown that girls were outperforming boys in public examinations at both national and international levels (Eriksson *et al.*, 2020). The major findings emerging are ethnicity, gendered teacher deployment, negative effects of donor community, socialisation and parental emigration. With respect to ethnicity, the study reveals that girls in Chiredzi were outperformed by the boys because the former lacked adequate time in school as they engaged in cultural practices meant to prepare them for marriage. Despite the time away from school, cultural activities also influenced the girls to develop negative attitudes toward education, leading to poor participation and, ultimately, failure. The findings of the current study echoes what is also found in a related study in the Gambia by Njie1 *et al.* (2015) who establish that although schools exposed the girls and boys to similar curricula and learning conditions, the girls' attitude toward schooling remained largely negative because of the impact of the influence of society that viewed them in some stereotypical feminine ways. One

conclusion one can draw from such findings is that complete and broader gender socialisation programmes involving all social sites of the learners, need to be employed if ever the girls are to be fully respected in society.

Parental emigration, especially the emigration of the mother, transferred the burden to the girl child to fulfil domestic duties in the home (Makondo and Tabane, 2023). Also, such practices are related to some cultural beliefs that the women who are supposed to be the custodians of the home. All that infringed on the rights of the girl child. While NGOs such as CAMFED were doing a good job socialising the girl child in the Chiredzi area, there was need for the workshops to be streamlined such that they did not interfere with their school time table since encroachment into the school time disadvantaged those who attended because lessons would not stop during the period of absence. The donors' tendencies to impart skills to the girls in trades traditionally conceived as feminine was frowned upon since it discouraged the girls to work hard in the academic field, resulting in failure.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study reveals that the major reasons for gender inequality practices were entrenched in the communities' cultural beliefs. Secondly, poor communication between schools and some NGOs contributed to academic failure by some female learners. There is need to ensure gender equity and equality in the education sector since education afforded individuals some positive attitude, knowledge and skills which are indispensable, to redress the gender imbalances in the economic, social and political spheres. Furthermore, it ought to be realised that it is not enough to ratify international policies on gender harmonisation, without practically practising what those policies demand. International, national and community implementation frameworks need to be established and closely monitored to ensure

that set target goals on gender equality are met. Both females and males need to participate in endeavours that aim to promote gender equity and equality since they both needed one another's experiences for the prosperity of the whole society.

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