

Education and gender equity: Role of secondary schools in promoting gender equity

Monicah Achieng' Odero

moniodero@gmail.com

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

<https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.3.49>

ABSTRACT

Gender equity in education continues to be a major issue as schools have a major influence on the values, identities, opportunities and future participation in society of the learners. While significant strides have been made in increasing access to education, gender gap remains evident in curriculum practices, classroom interactions, choice of subjects, leadership opportunities, and institutional cultures. The study focused on the role of the secondary schools in supporting gender equality, particularly in relation to curriculum practices, teachers' involvement, extra-curricular activities and school policies. The study was conducted using Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Judith Butler's Post-Structural Feminist Theory, which both describe how gender attitudes and behaviours are acquired, reinforced, and challenged in social and institutional environments. Qualitative design of desktop review was used. The sources of data were secondary such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, institutional reports and publications from international organisations like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Bank. Relevant literature was identified by employing the systematic document review approach to search publications from 2000 to 2024. The documents selected for analysis were thematised in order to detect any recurring themes that emerged in the field of gender responsive curriculum/teacher practice/ school culture/ extra-curricular activities/ and barriers to gender equality. It was observed that secondary schools are potential in achieving gender equity if they will work on the development of inclusive curriculum, gender responsive pedagogy, mentorship programmes, student leadership and safe learning environment. Despite the progress, however, the most concerning challenges that impede progress are cultural stereotypes, gender-based violence, inadequate teacher preparation, low participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, and weak institutional support systems. It is concluded that secondary schools can be a transformative environment if there are deliberate institutional and pedagogical changes. It suggests that teachers be strengthened in the field of gender responsive teaching, curriculum review to remove gender bias, equipping school children with the awareness of equity in school participation and activities, and collaboration among schools, families, communities and policy makers to ensure inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: Education, Fairness, Gender Equity, SDGs, Secondary Schools, Sub-Saharan Africa

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a right to every child and is crucial for the social, economic and political development of the individual, society and nation United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015). Education also has a profound impact on the social values, attitudes, norms and behaviours that affect people's interactions in society United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2020). Gender equality is one of the universal issues that education is tackling and it is still a theme of international concern because there are still inequalities that are evident in other societies. (United Nations, 2021) Gender equity in education is defined as ensuring equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal participation for all learners, boys and girls, in learning processes and outcomes (World Bank, 2018). But, gender inequalities are entrenched across many societies as a result of cultural, historical, social and economic norms that have long existed and continue to reinforce unequal gender relations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Improving access to schooling is, however, only part of the story of promoting gender equity in education; the learning environment must also be inclusive, equal classroom interactions, and gender-inclusive educational content must be developed (UNESCO, 2017).

Adolescents are at a period of identity formation as they grow up in secondary schools, the strategic positioning of which is crucial for the promotion of gender equity. Secondary schools have the greatest influence on the educational development of youths because during adolescence, young people start to develop a more complex worldview and social identity (Eccles, 2007). Likewise, Jin,(2023). note that the secondary schools give learners insights into what is expected of them in society, and they can absorb social stereotypes and biases into their everyday interactions. However, secondary schools have the potential to be agents of social transformation as well. They can offer environments where gender norms are challenged, redefined and questioned, and they can promote values of inclusivity and equality amongst

learners (UNESCO, 2017). However, the significance of the secondary schools role in fostering gender equity has increasingly come into focus in debates on the contribution of education systems to more inclusive and just societies (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Secondary schools continue to be significant arenas in efforts towards gender equity in Sub-Saharan Africa, where significant advancements exist alongside structural barriers. While there has been an improvement in school attendance in some countries, including Kenya and Ghana, where the free basic education has been implemented, there are inequalities between boys and girls that are exposed by the lower rates of retention and completion. According to UNICEF (2023), there is a gender gap in secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa, where only 34% of girls complete secondary education, compared to 39% of boys, and even more greater in the rural areas. Poor infrastructure in the school, lack of gender-segregated sanitation, financial limitations and opportunity costs that push girls into domestic work, early marriage or informal work are among the inequalities that are reinforced. For example, in Nigeria 43 per cent of girls are married under the age of 18, which accounts for significant disruptions to girls' education (UNICEF, 2021). Although there are policy commitments for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), the education systems continue to mirror wider patriarchal social systems which reinforce gender inequality.

Gender based violence (GBV) and insecurity continues to further undermine gender equity in African secondary schools. A study by UNESCO (2019) in six Sub-Saharan African countries found that about one-third of all girls had been sexually harassed, coerced or sexually assaulted in school settings, frequently by teachers or their school peers. Desalegne, (2019) observed some evidence of rape occurring within school premises (16%). This type of violence not only leaves learners vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse, but also leads to children leaving school due to their families' perceived need to keep them out for their safety, resulting in higher dropout rates. Weak GBV reporting mechanisms and social stigma associated with GBV cases contribute further to the problem. For instance, in Malawi, only 10% of GBV cases reported to the school are formal (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services [MCDSS, 2022). Some countries have taken steps to respond to this, including counselling programmes and anonymous reporting systems for incidents of 'speak out', but these are not always implemented and are not always effective in promoting a safe learning environment for girls.

The curriculum is also continuing to inculcate gender stereotypes rather than breaking them in many secondary schools in Africa. Educational content often neglects women's roles in leadership, governance, science, and technology and depicts girls as primarily in domestic and care giving professions (Blumberg, 2015). According to FAWE (2021), in Uganda, science textbooks had 70% images of males who were active learners and 30% of females who were active learners. These inequalities can be further exacerbated by teacher attitudes and classroom practices. Musso, et al., (2022). observed that Nigerian teachers spent almost one-third more of the teaching time with male students when teaching mathematics, reinforcing the notion of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) being a masculine field of study. Some countries, including Rwanda, have tried to incorporate gender into the education curricula, but many reforms are implemented in a piecemeal fashion and are not consistently enforced. If the curriculum is not adequately restructured and teachers continue to receive inadequate training on curriculum and implicit biases, schools stand the risk of perpetuating the same inequities or disparities they are trying to mitigate.

Simultaneously, various interventions undertaken in secondary schools in Africa show that when adequate support systems are in place, secondary schools can play a positive role in promoting gender equality. School attendance for girls has increased by about 11% through community-based programmes, including the Sanitary Towels Initiative in Kenya. By contrast, the gender responsive pedagogy framework in Rwanda has led to a 15% increase in girls' performance in science. Likewise, the Queen Mothers Programme in Ghana has leveraged on the tradition of the local leadership to promote girls' education, resulting in a child marriage rate drop by 22% in the communities engaged in the programme (MOE, 2021). Notwithstanding these accomplishments, many similar interventions have a strong reliance on donor resources and partnerships, which makes continuity difficult. Insecurity remains a barrier to education, especially for girls, in conflict-affected countries like the Sahel, with girls' participation in education in Niger dropping sharply as a result of Boko Haram-related insecurity (UNICEF, 2023). To ensure sustainable progress, government commitment, policy consistency, and increased investment in gender-responsive educational reforms are needed.

Moreover, lack of equality between genders in secondary education overlaps with other forms of marginalisation, such as poverty, disability, geographical location, climate vulnerability and sexual identity. The figures of 12% for girls with disabilities and 28% for girls without disabilities in secondary school in Tanzania indicate that girls with disabilities are 4.5 times less likely to attend secondary school than their peers without disabilities (Wang, et al., 2024). Girls' education is also underrepresented in the effects of climate-related crises. According to UN Women (2022), many girls are compelled to collect water and to work in domestic work during droughts, leaving them with less time for schoolwork, and the impact of that is several hours a day. Further, many of the legal and social frameworks around the world are regressive, and LGBTQ+ learners are typically excluded, discriminated against, and experience hostile learning environments in many African countries (Amnesty International, 2021). Addressing gender equity in

secondary schools, thus, calls for multi-sectoral and cross-cutting strategies that also incorporate disability inclusion, climate resilience, anti-discrimination policies and safe learning environments. Therefore, in order to realize equity within the walls of the African school, one must break the cycle of interconnected systems of oppression, not simply include girls in already unequal educational systems.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Globally, secondary schools play an important role in either reinforcing or reducing gender inequalities among learners. Although international frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education and Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality have promoted gender equity, inequalities still persist in many educational systems. Beyond academic instruction, secondary schools shape learners' attitudes, values, subject choices, and perceptions about gender roles within society.

Despite increased attention to gender equity in education, most reforms and studies have focused more on access and enrolment, particularly at the primary level, while less attention has been given to how secondary schools themselves reproduce or challenge gender inequality through curriculum, teacher practices, school culture, and institutional policies. However, secondary education is a critical stage where adolescents develop identities, career aspirations, and social values that influence their future lives.

Gender inequities in secondary schools continue to appear through gender stereotypes, unequal participation, underrepresentation of girls in STEM subjects, gender-based violence, and limited institutional support systems. Therefore, this study examines the role of secondary schools in promoting gender equity by exploring existing strategies, persistent barriers, and possible approaches for creating more inclusive and gender-sensitive learning environments.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine the role of secondary schools in promoting gender equity through curriculum practices, teacher engagement, extracurricular activities, and institutional policies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Gender Equality is the practice of treating everyone equitably, irrespective of gender, and with fairness, aimed at eradicating any gender-based discrimination as well as equal opportunities for all pupils. Gender equity in education is not just access to education. It involves tackling systemic, cultural and institutional inequities that affect learners' engagement, performance, confidence, leadership opportunities, interests in subjects and future pathways. Measures of gender equity, thus, aim to disrupt and dismantle patriarchy that perpetuates gender disparities in schools (Unterhalter, 2007).

Gender stereotypes are learned and perpetuated through an important framework for understanding observational learning, as proposed by Bandura. Bandura (1977) states that people can learn behaviours, beliefs and values from other people in their social environment. In secondary schools, learners see the gendered behaviours from teachers, peers, parents, school leaders and media. If learners continually link specific subjects, leadership roles or activities to a particular gender, gender norms may become established in their values. However, without intentional efforts to encourage inclusive classroom practices, equitable participation and gender-sensitive school cultures, schools are likely to perpetuate gender stereotypes. (Devor, 2004).

In terms of gender equity in education, Butler's post-structural feminist theory is also of great importance. Therefore, according to Butler (1990), gender is not something that is fixed within the biological makeup of an individual, but is rather something that is socially and culturally created through repeated social practices, language, expectations, and institutional norms. In secondary schools, gender identities are formed in the classroom, through school policies, teachers' expectations, fellow peer relations, courses and leadership roles. With this in mind, schools with inclusive curricula and gender responsive practices could help to shift limiting gender norms and build gender inclusive learning environments.

While Bandura's theory accounts for the internalization of gendered behaviours by the learners during the observation and reinforcement process, Butler's theory accounts for the externalization of the gendered process of producing the categories of masculinity and femininity that the learners see. These theories point towards the need to consider visible role models and deeper discursive structures in the implementation of gender equity interventions in secondary schools. Implementing curriculum change without altering class discussion may thus not be enough to create effective gender equity.

2.1.1 Limitations of the Theories

Although Bandura's observational learning theory explains how learners imitate gendered behaviours, it pays greater attention to individual learning processes than to broader structural inequalities. The theory may explain why girls avoid STEM subjects after observing limited female participation. Still, it does not fully address the effects of poverty, policy gaps, inadequate infrastructure, cultural expectations, or limited institutional support. Therefore, the theory should be understood alongside wider structural factors that shape learners' educational experiences.

Similarly, Butler's post-structural feminist theory strongly emphasizes discourse, identity, and representation but gives less attention to material realities affecting learners. For example, girls may experience educational disadvantages not only because of gendered social expectations but also due to poverty, menstruation-related challenges, insecurity, lack of sanitary facilities, or domestic responsibilities. Consequently, promoting gender equity in secondary schools requires addressing both discursive and material barriers that affect learners' participation and achievement.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Historical Context of Gender Inequality in Education

Educational systems in the past have perpetuated and reinforced gender inequalities globally. Girls' access to education was restricted, and women were largely denied access to higher education or professional careers, in many traditional African societies and in the early formal education systems. While significant strides have been taken in achieving gender parity in education at various stages around the world, disparities still exist at the secondary and higher education levels, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and some regions in the Middle East (UNESCO, 2019).

Education inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa are shaped by poverty, culture, child marriage, child labour, domestic duties and social norms which have a stronger focus on boys' learning than girls'. Girls from low income countries are more likely to drop out of school as a result of being pregnant, participating in household chores, and financial constraints. Girls' educational opportunities and future career prospects are still curtailed in many communities where women are regarded as the bearers of domestic responsibilities and marriage.

Access to secondary education has greatly improved in more developed Europe and North America. Gender differences persist, though, in the tracking of subjects and expectations for careers. Gender biases exist and female students are frequently clustered in "female" subjects, including teaching, social sciences and humanities, and males are concentrated in engineering, mathematics and technical courses (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Such patterns help strengthen stereotypes of gender abilities and suitability to career.

Access to school is not the only form of gender inequality in education. Existing teaching and learning approaches, as well as traditional classroom dynamics, have been found to contribute to the development of gender stereotypes, favouring male learners over female learners, in the classroom (Lingard, 2009). This frequently manifests itself in biased texts, in the absence of women in the history book, in biased expectations of women in subjects like mathematics and science (Sadker & Sadker, 2010). It is also possible that, unconsciously, teachers encourage male students more in the STEM fields, and female students more in the humanities or domestic fields (Francis & Skelton, 2001). These behaviours perpetuate inequitable learning experiences and affect student behaviours outside school.

2.2.2 The Role of Secondary Schools in Promoting Gender Equity

Secondary schools are crucial in influencing the understanding of gender roles, relationships and social norms of learners. Adolescence is a period of identity development and adolescents are starting to forge their aspirations, abilities, and social responsibilities. Therefore, secondary schools must resist negative gender stereotypes and promote gender justice in schools. Curriculum reform is one of the significant approaches that could be taken by a school to encourage gender equity. Learning materials can be adapted to reflect a balance of women and men by schools. For example, literature teachers can introduce literature written by women and have students discuss the depiction of gender in literature. Likewise, science teachers could mention the names of women scientists like Marie Curie, Ada Lovelace and Rosalind Franklin who excelled in science and technology (Blickenstaff, 2005). These methods can help to break down the stereotype of scientific and technical subjects as male.

The curriculum is an important factor that reinforces or challenges gender gaps. Many traditional curricula tend to ignore women's success in politics, leadership, science and history, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes (Sadker and Sadker, 2010). The textbook often gives more emphasis on males than females, especially in leadership and in professions (Sleeter, & Grant, (2017).). Incorporating gender diversity into education then may help to foster inclusive learning environments. In addition, pedagogy is pivotal to addressing gender inequality in secondary schools, and is considered gender responsive. Provide equitable opportunities for participation in classroom discussions, allow both boys and girls to try a more difficult task, and ensure that the materials and language used to teach are not gender biased (Blossfeld, et al., (2023).). Gender-aware pedagogy is the need to reflect on personal biases and one's pedagogy to prevent perpetuating gender inequalities in classroom interactions, as stated by Paechter (2003).

2.2.3 Teacher Practices and Gender Equity

Teachers play an influential role in shaping learners' attitudes toward gender and equality. Their beliefs, expectations, language, and classroom interactions significantly influence how learners perceive themselves and others within educational settings (Concannon, & Barrow, 2009). As role models and mentors, teachers can either reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes. Professional development is essential in preparing teachers to address gender-related issues effectively. Many teachers enter the profession without adequate training on gender-responsive pedagogy or strategies for identifying classroom bias. Cohen and Wise (2005) note that professional development programmes focusing on gender issues can positively influence teachers' attitudes and classroom practices by equipping them with skills for promoting inclusive learning environments.

Teacher expectations may also influence learners' confidence, academic performance, and career aspirations. Research indicates that teachers sometimes unconsciously provide greater encouragement to male learners in mathematics and science while directing female learners toward arts and humanities subjects (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Such expectations reinforce stereotypes regarding gender capabilities and professional suitability. Positive teacher-student relationships further contribute to gender equity. Teachers who create respectful, supportive, and inclusive classrooms help learners develop healthy perceptions of gender diversity and equality. Through fair treatment and inclusive practices, teachers can encourage learners to challenge restrictive gender norms and develop mutual respect.

2.2.4 Extracurricular Activities and Student-led Initiatives

The role of extracurricular activities in gender mainstreaming in secondary schools is an important one. Sports, debate, drama, music, clubs and leadership programmes give pupils the opportunity to delve into interests and capabilities beyond the stereotypes of gender. In the traditional concept of gender norms, a task such as leading sports activities has been linked to male gender, and a task such as caring for children, performing an artistic activity to be linked to the female gender (Swain, 2005).

Girls' engagement in sports, science clubs and student leadership programmes can develop their confidence, leadership skills and access to public space. Similarly, supporting boys to participate in activities such as art, counselling and care-taking can disrupt limiting definitions of manhood. It helps break rigid gender boundaries and promote respect among learners as suggested by Budde, & Rieske, (2023). Student-led activities like gender awareness clubs, peer mentorship programmes, and anti-gender-based violence campaigns also provide opportunities for students to openly discuss issues related to discrimination, consent, gender identity and respectful relationships. Peer-led programmes can reinforce inclusive school cultures and motivate learners to be actively engaged in the promotion of gender equity, (Gadow et al., (2026).

2.2.5 Barriers to Gender Equity in Secondary Schools

Secondary schools have the potential to foster gender equity, but there are a number of challenges that still remain. A big problem is the perpetuation of cultural beliefs and traditional gender norms on acceptable behaviors and responsibilities of boys and girls. These expectations can affect learners' decisions about their subject choices, engagement and aspirations. Gender inequalities can also be perpetuated through institutional practices. Gendered learning experiences can result from school rules, e.g., dress codes, and disciplinary measures, which may be more severe for girls than for boys (Pomerantz & Raby, 2015). Likewise, poor policies to deal with gender-based violence and harassment can create unsafe learning environments which may put learners, especially girls, at risk.

A lack of teacher training in gender-responsive pedagogy is also a significant challenge. There is a lack of knowledge and skills of many teachers in identifying and responding to gender bias in classrooms. As a result, teachers can unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes in their interactions and expectations within the classroom. Conservative social and religious attitudes can also be a barrier for implementing gender-inclusive education reforms in some communities, while hindering the advancement of equality in schools. Other factors such as financial constraints and inadequate sanitation facilities, early marriages, poverty and limited institutional support systems also continue to impact girls' participation and completion rates in secondary school, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The barriers illustrate that gender equity is not possible without comprehensive institutional, cultural and policy interventions.

2.3 Summary of Literature Gaps

The issue of gender parity and access to education has been studied thoroughly in the past, especially at the primary level. Fewer studies, however, have taken a comprehensive look at the way secondary schools as a whole achieve gender equity in curriculum practices, pedagogy, teacher engagement, school culture, and extracurricular activities. Most of the available research also tends to be fragmented and examines separate issues like participation in STEM, gender-based violence and curriculum bias without offering a comprehensive view of the interplay of these issues in secondary schools. Further, few sources exist that offer a general overview of the role of secondary schools in reinforcing and questioning gender inequality in various social, cultural and institutional environments in Africa. The

study thus fills an existing void in literature by offering an integrated overview of the position of secondary schools in the drive for gender equity and identifying current challenges, institutional practices and potential interventions in African educational contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative desktop review design supported by document analysis. The design was appropriate because the study sought to examine the role of secondary schools in promoting gender equity through the review, interpretation, and synthesis of existing literature. The review focused on how curriculum practices, pedagogy, teacher engagement, school culture, institutional policies, and extracurricular activities contribute to or hinder gender equity within secondary schools.

The following research question guided the review:

How do secondary schools contribute to the promotion or reinforcement of gender equity through curriculum practices, pedagogy, institutional culture, teacher practices, and extracurricular activities?

3.2 Sources of Data

Data for the study were obtained from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, policy documents, institutional reports, conference papers, and publications from international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, the World Bank, and FAWE. These sources provided information on gender inequality in education, gender-responsive pedagogy, curriculum reform, teacher influence, school culture, extracurricular programmes, and barriers to gender equity in secondary schools.

3.3 Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using electronic academic databases and online repositories, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories. Key search terms included "gender equity in secondary schools," "gender-responsive pedagogy," "gender inequality in education," "teacher practices and gender," "school culture and gender equity," "girls' education in Africa," "gender stereotypes in schools," and "gender-inclusive curriculum."

The review focused mainly on literature published between 2000 and 2024 in order to capture contemporary discussions and policy developments related to gender equity in education. However, a few earlier foundational studies and theoretical works were included because of their relevance to the study, particularly those related to gender theory and social learning theory.

3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were purposively selected based on their relevance to the study objective and research question. Included sources were those that:

- discussed gender equity in secondary education,
- examined curriculum, pedagogy, teacher practices, school culture, or extracurricular activities,
- focused on gender-responsive educational practices,
- addressed barriers to gender equity in schools, and
- provided empirical, theoretical, or policy-related insights relevant to secondary education.

The review excluded sources that:

- focused exclusively on primary or tertiary education without relevance to secondary schools,
- lacked clear relevance to gender equity,
- were unpublished opinion pieces without scholarly grounding, and
- contained insufficient methodological or contextual information.

A total of 86 sources were initially identified through database searches. After screening titles, abstracts, and relevance to the study objective, 54 sources were assessed for eligibility. Finally, 46 sources were included in the review based on relevance, credibility, and alignment with the study focus.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through a systematic review and document analysis of relevant literature. The process involved searching, reading, evaluating, and synthesizing scholarly literature and policy documents related to gender equity in education. Document analysis was used to identify both explicit and implicit discussions concerning curriculum practices, classroom interactions, institutional culture, teacher influence, and school-based gender interventions.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically. The reviewed literature was examined to identify recurring themes, patterns, debates, contradictions, and knowledge gaps related to gender equity in secondary schools. The major themes identified included historical gender inequality in education, curriculum reform, gender-responsive pedagogy, teacher influence, extracurricular activities, school culture, and barriers to gender equity. The findings were then interpreted and synthesized in relation to the study objective and theoretical framework.

3.7 Limitations of the Review

This study relied entirely on secondary data and therefore did not include direct perspectives from students, teachers, parents, or policymakers. The review also relied mainly on English-language sources, which may have excluded relevant literature published in other languages within African contexts. In addition, the study may have been affected by publication bias since studies reporting positive outcomes are more likely to be published and accessible. Furthermore, because the review synthesized studies from different countries and educational contexts, some findings may not be fully generalizable across all secondary school settings.

In addition, the study did not undertake a formal quality appraisal of all included sources, which may have resulted in variations in the reliability and methodological strength of the reviewed literature. The rapidly changing educational and policy environment also means that some institutional reports and policy documents cited in the review may not fully reflect current realities and reforms related to gender equity in education.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied on secondary sources, no human participants were directly involved. However, ethical standards were observed through proper citation and acknowledgment of all consulted sources. The study maintained academic integrity by avoiding plagiarism, accurately representing authors' ideas, and using all reviewed materials strictly for scholarly purposes.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Persistent Gender Disparities in Secondary Schools

One of the key findings of this review is that there is continued gender inequality in secondary schools despite the global and national initiatives to achieve gender equity. While substantial progress has been made in some countries to close the gap on access to education, there are significant differences in the quality of learning, enrolment, provision of subjects, leadership opportunities and attainment of learners. In secondary schools, gender inequity is no longer confined to school enrolment, but also expressed in school practices, classroom interactions, curriculum content and school culture.

The review confirmed that learners continue to experience gendered expectations which impact negatively on their learning and career aspirations. Many schools still have a gendered view of STEM subjects and a gendered view of subjects that are care and/or humanities-based. These perceptions can impact on learners' confidence, engagement, and career aspirations early in their learning. (Sadker & Sadker, 2010) claim that schools may unwittingly perpetuate gender disparities in classrooms through a range of practices and institutional structures that privilege male students over female students.

The findings also indicated that there is a higher level of gender differences in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa where lack of education, insufficient educational resources and patriarchal cultural system still affect educational opportunities. Nevertheless, girls continue to be at higher risk of early marriage, early pregnancy, domestic work and school dropouts, which impact their school attendance and completion rates (UNICEF, 2023). As a result, while education is more widely available in many areas, it is difficult to gain gender equity in secondary schools.

4.1.2 Traditional and Cultural Attitudes as Barriers to Gender Equity

The review confirmed that some of the biggest stumbling blocks in trying to get gender equity in secondary schools remain the traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes. Gender norms are entrenched in many societies and influence the expectations held for the roles and responsibilities of girls and boys. Girls are perceived as domestic workers, care takers and marry young, boys are seen as providers and decision makers. These beliefs affect learners' educational goals, choice of subjects, and involvement in educational settings.

The reviewed literature suggested that there are certain subjects that are male stereotyped and communities often discourage girls from studying these subjects like mathematics, physics, engineering and technology.

Consequently, girls might lack confidence in STEM-related subjects even though they perform academically at the same level as boys. Likewise, boys might not participate in artistic or care giving activities because they don't want to be perceived as “less of a man.” These stereotypes create unequal participation as well as restrict learners' opportunities to pursue careers based on their interests and abilities, instead of gender stereotypes (Riegler-Crumb et al., 2019). Also, the findings showed that the cultural attitudes are likely to influence the parental investment in education. Education of boys is given more importance than that of girls in resource poor families because girls are considered temporary family members who will marry and be incorporated into other families. These practices lead to unequal education opportunities and continue to contribute to the gender disparity in secondary schools (Durrani, & Kataeva, 2025).

In addition, the review confirmed that gender stereotypes have also been found within the school context, as a result of teachers' attitudes, interactions and institutional practices. Male students can be encouraged more actively by teachers during science and mathematics lessons, and female students during other classroom activities. Boys may be supported more actively by teachers, without their understanding, in science and mathematics lessons, while other girls are supported passively or in a supportive way during other classroom activities. The importance of teacher expectations on learners' self-esteem, confidence and subject selections has been emphasized by Francis and Skelton (2001). Schools, therefore, can perpetuate inequality if they are not purposeful in tackling stereotypes.

4.1.3 Underrepresentation of Girls in STEM Subjects and Leadership

In another key finding of this study, girls continue to be underrepresented in secondary school in STEM courses and leadership positions. Although there has been a persistent campaign to encourage girls to study science and technology-based subjects, girls' participation in such subjects as mathematics and physics, engineering and computer studies, is still low (Clark Blickenstaff (2005). This is one of the factors of the wider gender gaps in the higher education and employment fields related to science and technology. Many school environments are found to have negative stereotypes of girls' abilities in STEM subjects (Charles, & Bradley, 2009). It is possible that girls have been socialized to think that science and technical subjects are not easy or for boys. This mindset can impact their confidence and hinder active engagement in classroom discussions, hands-on activities, and leadership roles in STEM initiatives. The absence of female role models in the scientific and technical professions is also a discouraging factor affecting girls' interest in STEM careers (Blickenstaff, 2005).

This imbalance is also reflected in textbooks and curricula, where often women are represented in domestic or supportive roles, and men as scientists, inventors, leaders, or innovators. The gendered representation affects learners' perception of competence in intellectual and professional environments, as posited by Sleeter, & Grant, (2017). It also found that there are gender stereotypes that influence school leadership opportunities. Boys are overrepresented in leadership roles like head prefects, debate leaders, sports captains and girls are frequently given roles involving support or welfare. The lack of this balance hinders girls' confidence and leadership growth. Thus, schools must establish purposeful mentoring schemes, leadership opportunities for girls and supportive learning contexts that will empower girls to take an active role in leadership and STEM related activities.

4.1.4 The Role of Teachers and School Practices in Addressing Gender Equity

The review found that teachers are key stakeholders in both advancing and impeding gender parity in secondary schools. Teachers affect learners by their attitude, language, expectations, discipline and interactions with learners both when they are teaching and when they are not (Mhewa, 2025). Positive teacher practices can thus contribute to the development of inclusive classrooms which promote equal participation for all learners, irrespective of gender. The result was that a pedagogy of gender responsiveness makes a significant contribution to creating an equitable learning environment. When gender gaps are reduced in the classroom, this happens when teachers actively recruit male and female students to engage in academic competition, participate in leadership programs, and be involved in discussions. Gender-responsive teaching methods also enable learners to defy the stereotypes linked to specific careers or subjects (Berhanu et al., 2025).

Many teachers, however, were found to be lacking in the training of gender responsive teaching practices during the review period. If not, teachers can unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes in their interactions with and in their approach to teaching students (Berhanu, et al., 2025). Some teachers, for instance, might ask more complex questions in science class to the boys than to the girls, who might be given less challenging tasks in the classroom. These practices have an impact on learners' confidence and academic self-perception over time. The results also indicated that institutional practices such as discipline rules, dress code, and classroom management can indirectly impact the learning performance of girls. Pomerantz and Raby (2015) note that some school policies are more likely to monitor girls' behaviour than boys' behaviour, thus further reinforcing gender inequalities in schools. Therefore, schools must review institutional policies to make it fair and inclusive to all learners, and ensure equal participation.

4.1.5 Extracurricular Activities and Gender Equity

The review confirmed that extracurricular activities are valuable to encourage gender equality in secondary school. Learners participate in various school activities including sports, debate, drama, music, student leadership, and science clubs, which enables them to interact outside the classroom and challenge gendered norms (Wang et al., 2024). The promotion of girls' involvement in sports, science clubs, and leadership programs was found to boost their confidence, decision-making ability, and self-esteem (Anjum, 2021). Likewise, by allowing boys to explore art, counselling and care giving, rigid notions of 'masculine' and 'masculinity' are undermined. Budde, & Rieske (2023), suggest that engaging in a variety of extra-curricular activities can allow students to learn more about expanding their social identities and intergender respect.

Additionally, student-led activities like gender clubs, mentorship schemes, and anti-gender-based violence campaigns were seen as significant opportunities to raise awareness about gender issues. These efforts offer students opportunities to have conversations about issues of consent, respectful relationships, discrimination and harassment in a safe space. (Gadow et al., (2026) point out that peer-led programmes can contribute to building an inclusive school climate and motivating learners to actively take up the challenge of gender equality in their schools. The review did find, however, that sometimes stereotypes and inequitable distribution of resources affect participation in extracurricular activities. Boys' sport programmes may be more institutionally supported and recognised than girls' programmes. Likewise, girls might be limited in their activities which are seen as traditionally male. Thus, there should be equal support, opportunities and recognition for learners in all aspects of activity irrespective of gender at the school.

4.1.6 Strategies for Promoting Gender Equity in Secondary Schools

Several strategies, which are considered to be effective in promoting gender equity, were identified by the review which are applicable in secondary schools. A key strategy is the development of gender responsive policies in schools which have the aim of providing gender equality in access, participation and protection to all learners. Schools should have policies and procedures to address gender based violence, bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination, in order to foster safe and supportive learning environments. Another intervention that came forth was curriculum reform (Psaki, et al., 2022). Incorporating inclusive education and gender content into the curriculum can bring about an understanding of equality, diversity and human rights issues. It is also important that schools push students towards careers based on their abilities and interests instead of their gender (López et al., 2026).

Other effective strategies identified for empowering learners, especially girls were mentorship programmes and role modelling. Approaches that include successful women in leadership, science, technology, business and politics to mentor girls can inspire girls to pay more attention to their educational and career opportunities. Peer mentorship programmes can also assist learners to deal with academic stress, gender stereotyping and discrimination in school settings. Further, it was noted that teacher training and professional development are also crucial to encourage gender-responsive pedagogical practices. Governments and educational institutions should ensure ongoing training programs that enable teachers to gain knowledge and skills on how to uncover and correct gendered bias in classrooms. Such interventions can contribute significantly toward creating inclusive and equitable learning environments (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021).

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this review support Bandura's observational learning theory by demonstrating that learners acquire gendered behaviours, attitudes, and expectations through observation and social interaction within school environments (Bandura, 1977). Classroom practices, teacher expectations, curriculum representation, peer interactions, and extracurricular activities all contribute to how learners internalize ideas about masculinity and femininity. For example, the continued underrepresentation of girls in STEM-related subjects and leadership positions reflects how schools may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes through everyday practices and institutional cultures. The findings also align with Butler's post-structural feminist theory, which views gender as socially constructed through repeated discourse, institutional practices, and social norms (Butler, 1990). The review established that gender inequalities are reproduced not only through access barriers but also through language, school rules, cultural expectations, subject streaming, and classroom interactions that define certain behaviours and careers as masculine or feminine. This suggests that gender equity interventions must go beyond improving enrolment and address the deeper social and institutional structures that sustain inequality.

At the same time, the findings reveal that schools can act as transformative spaces when inclusive curricula, gender-responsive pedagogy, mentorship programmes, and supportive learning environments are implemented effectively. Therefore, the study demonstrates that gender equity requires both structural reforms and changes in everyday school practices. Addressing curriculum bias alone may be insufficient if classroom interactions, disciplinary policies, and institutional cultures continue to reproduce unequal gender expectations. The review further highlights the importance of intersectionality in understanding gender inequality within secondary schools. Factors such as poverty,

disability, cultural beliefs, rural location, and gender-based violence interact with gender to shape learners' educational experiences differently. This implies that gender equity policies should adopt broader and context-sensitive approaches rather than relying on uniform interventions across different educational settings.

4.2.2 Comparison with Global Literature

The findings of this review are consistent with global literature showing that gender inequality in education persists despite increased access to schooling in many countries. Similar to studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, the review established that girls continue to experience barriers related to cultural expectations, early marriage, poverty, gender-based violence, and unequal participation in STEM-related disciplines (UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2023). The findings also agree with research from developed countries, indicating that gender disparities extend beyond school access and continue through subject specialization, leadership opportunities, and career pathways. Charles and Bradley (2009), for example, observe that even in countries with high levels of educational access, women remain underrepresented in engineering, mathematics, and technical disciplines, while men dominate leadership and scientific fields. This demonstrates that gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted across both developed and developing educational contexts.

However, the review also identified contextual differences between African and Western educational systems. In many African contexts, gender inequities are strongly linked to structural challenges such as poverty, inadequate sanitation facilities, child labour, early pregnancies, and limited institutional resources. In contrast, literature from Western contexts tends to focus more on issues related to workplace representation, hidden curriculum, subject streaming, and subtle institutional biases. These differences suggest that strategies for promoting gender equity must consider local cultural, economic, and institutional realities rather than applying universal approaches (Muraya, et al., (2021).

The review further revealed contradictions within existing literature regarding the effectiveness of school-based interventions. While some studies report that gender-responsive pedagogy, mentorship programmes, and curriculum reforms significantly improve girls' participation and confidence, other studies suggest that progress remains slow because broader societal and cultural attitudes continue to influence learners outside school environments. This indicates that schools alone may not fully eliminate gender inequality unless wider community engagement and policy interventions support educational reforms (Psaki et al., 2022). Overall, the findings demonstrate that gender equity in secondary schools remains a global challenge requiring continuous institutional, cultural, and policy transformation. Although progress has been made in expanding educational access, achieving meaningful gender equity requires addressing both visible inequalities and the underlying social structures that continue to shape learners' experiences across different educational contexts.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that secondary schools play a pivotal role in fostering gender equality as they influence learners' attitudes, values, relationships, choice of subjects and aspirations. The review found that gender gaps exist not only in access to learning opportunities, but also in the curriculum and teaching, as well as in societal stereotypes, choice of study subjects, and the low representation of girls in STEM subjects and in safe school settings. Learners continue to suffer from these inequalities in participation, confidence, learning and future prospects. The research also confirmed that the gender inequality can be reproduced or challenged in the secondary schools based on the institutional practices, pedagogical approaches and policies that are being adopted in school environments. Schools with inclusive curricula, gender-sensitive teaching models, mentoring schemes, and extracurricular activities, as well as those with nurturing learning environments, are more likely to foster gender equality across the school community. Gender equity, therefore, cannot be realised in schools without an intentional focus on providing equitable environments where all learners are respected, supported and empowered, irrespective of their gender.

The review also highlights the need to use a multifaceted approach to promote gender equity, rather than relying on single interventions. To achieve progress, there is a need for a partnership between schools, teachers, governments, parents, communities and policy makers to tackle cultural stereotypes, institutional barriers, gender-based violence and inequitable learning opportunities. Secondary schools are essential and continue to be significant contexts for changing social attitudes and fostering inclusive learning experiences. Empirical and longitudinal study should be considered for future research to explore the effectiveness of gender responsive pedagogy and school based gender interventions in secondary schools in Africa. The current literature is largely descriptive, correlational, or qualitative, and a poor understanding exists of the long-term effectiveness of specific gender equity interventions on students' academic achievement, involvement, leadership development, and career trajectories.

5.2 Recommendations

The study suggests that there is a need for a greater emphasis on gender-integrated curriculum reforms in secondary schools, so as to adequately reflect male and female contributions in all subject areas. Gender education should also be embedded in the curriculum in schools to foster inclusivity, respect and awareness of gender equality among students. Gender-responsive pedagogy should be a regular part of teachers' professional development, so that they can recognise when there is bias in the classroom, encourage children to participate equally and help children without reinforcing gender stereotypes. Schools should also continue to encourage non-gendered career guidance, by actively supporting girls' enrollment in STEM-related courses and ensuring boys are not deterred from enrolling in humanities, care giving and art courses.

Moreover, schools should ensure safe and supportive learning environments by adopting anti-bullying and anti-gender-based violence policies, counselling services and supporting pregnant learners and young mothers, and setting up confidential reporting systems for incidents of harassment and discrimination. Community activities like peer support, mentorship clubs, student leadership, sports and debate clubs should also be encouraged and enhanced to promote confidence and challenge stereotypes among learners. Lastly, there should be efforts by the government, the education authorities, parents and communities to ensure that secondary schools are well-resourced and have gender sensitive facilities, policy support, and ongoing awareness programmes, so that they can act as inclusive spaces that effectively promote gender equity.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. (2021). *"This is what we die for": Human rights abuses against LGBTQ+ people in sub-Saharan Africa*. Amnesty International.
- Anjum, S. (2021). Impact of extracurricular activities on academic performance of students at secondary level. *International Journal of Applied Guidance and Counseling*, 2(2), 7–14.
- Berhanu, K. Z., Ayele, W. G., & Naidoo, P. (2025). The role of teachers' language usage in the relationship between their awareness toward the concept of gender equality and gender pedagogy practice in upper primary schools. *BMC Psychology*, 14(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-03827-1>
- Blickenstaff, J. C. (2005). Women and science careers: Leaky pipeline or gender filter? *Gender and Education*, 17(4), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500145072>
- Blossfeld, P. N., Pratter, M., & Uunk, W. (2023). Editorial: Gender-specific inequalities in the education system and the labor market. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, Article 1254664. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1254664>
- Blumberg, R. L. (2007). *Gender bias in textbooks: A hidden obstacle on the road to gender equality in education*. UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001555/155509e.pdf>
- Budde, J., & Rieske, T. V. (2023). Boys, masculinity, and education: An introduction. *Boyhood Studies*, 16(2), 1–6.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Charles, M., & Bradley, K. (2009). Indulging our gendered selves? Sex segregation by field of study in 44 countries. *American Journal of Sociology*, 114(4), 924–976. <https://doi.org/10.1086/595942>
- Cohen, D., & Wise, T. (2005). Gender-sensitive teaching: Practical approaches for implementing inclusive educational practices. *Educational Practice and Theory*, 27(2), 7–20.
- Concannon, J. P., & Barrow, L. H. (2009). A cross-sectional study of engineering students' self-efficacy by gender, ethnicity, year, and transfer status. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 18(2), 163–172.
- Desalegne, Z. (2019). Gender-based violence and its associated effects on female students: The case of Gozamin and Nigus T/Haimanot Secondary Schools in the East Gojjam Administrative Zone, Ethiopia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7).
- Devor, H. (2004). Gender identity and the social construction of gender. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 507–511.
- Durrani, N., & Kataeva, Z. (2025). STEM teachers' agency for gender equality in STEM education: A mixed-methods study. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 131, 102585.
- Eccles, J. S. (2007). Gender and schools: The role of socialization. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The development of gender roles*. Academic Press.

- Forum for African Women Educationalists. (2021). *Gender-responsive pedagogy in Uganda: Impact evaluation*.
- Francis, B., & Skelton, C. (2001). Men teachers and the construction of heterosexual masculinity in the classroom. *Sex Education*, 1(1), 9–21.
- Gadow, F., Robertson, H., & Rossner, M. (2026). Peer-led approaches to gender-based violence prevention education in higher education: Insights from the Rights, Relationships and Respect program. *JANZSSA—Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*.
- Jin, X. (2023). How gender stereotype in education impact female students' development in secondary school. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 229–234.
- Lingard, B. (2014). *Politics, policies and pedagogies in education: The selected work of Bob Lingard*. Routledge.
- López, K., Cabanas, A. M., Pinazo, F., & Zambrano, N. (2026). Educational strategies for integrating gender perspectives in health professions training: A systematic review to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. *BMC Medical Education*, 26(1), 612. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-026-08963-9>
- Mcilongo, M., & Strydom, K. (2021). The significance of mentorship in supporting the career advancement of women in the public sector. *Heliyon*, 7(6), e07321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07321>
- Mhewa, M. M. (2025). Shaping equity in the classroom: Investigating gender sensitivity in classroom interaction in Tanzanian secondary schools. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2563710>
- Ministry of Community Development and Social Services. (2022). *Annual report on gender-based violence in Malawian schools*.
- Ministry of Education. (2021). *Queen Mothers' Program: Mid-term evaluation report*.
- Muraya, K., Ogutu, M., Mwadhi, M., Mikusa, J., Okinyi, M., Magawi, C., Zakayo, S., Njeru, R., Haribondhu, S., Uddin, M. F., Marsh, V., Walson, J. L., Berkley, J., & Molyneux, S. (2021). Applying a gender lens to understand pathways through care for acutely ill young children in Kenyan urban informal settlements. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 20(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-01349-3>
- Musso, P., Ligorio, M. B., Ibe, E., Annese, S., Semeraro, C., & Cassibba, R. (2022). STEM-gender stereotypes: Associations with school empowerment and school engagement among Italian and Nigerian adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 879178.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2020). *Education at a glance 2020: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing.
- Paechter, C. (2003). Masculinities and femininities as a discursive field: Implications for gender, identity and schooling. *Gender and Education*, 15(3), 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025032000117392>
- Pomerantz, S., & Raby, R. (2015). Gendered subjectivities in high school. In J. C. Hughes & G. P. Peterson (Eds.), *Gender in education: An encyclopedia* (pp. 421–426). ABC-CLIO.
- Psaki, S., Haberland, N., Mensch, B., Woyczynski, L., & Chuang, E. (2022). Policies and interventions to remove gender-related barriers to girls' school participation and learning in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review of the evidence. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18(1), e1207. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1207>
- Riegle-Crumb, C., Peng, M., & Buontempo, J. (2019). Gender, competitiveness, and intentions to pursue STEM fields. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 11(2), 234–257.
- Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (2010). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. Simon & Schuster.
- Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2017). Race, class, gender, and disability in current textbooks. In *The politics of the textbook* (pp. 78–110). Routledge.
- Swain, J. (2005). Masculinities in education. In *Handbook of studies on men and masculinities* (pp. 213–229).
- UN Women. (2022). *Gender, climate change, and education in Africa*.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives*.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Gender equality in education*.
- UNICEF. (2021). *Child marriage in West and Central Africa: Statistical update*.
- United Nations. (2021). *Gender equality and education*.
- Unterhalter, E. (2007). Gender and education: A global perspective. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(4), 409–428. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.02.002>
- Unterhalter, E. (2019). The many meanings of quality education: Politics of targets and indicators in SDG 4. *Global Policy*, 10, 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12591>
- Wang, W., Li, W., & Yao, J. (2024). The relationship between participation in extracurricular arts and sports activities and adolescents' social and emotional skills: An empirical analysis based on the OECD Social and Emotional Skills Survey. *Behavioral Sciences*, 14(7), 541. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14070541>
- World Bank. (2018). *World development report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise*. World Bank.
- World Economic Forum. (2021). *The global gender gap report 2021*.