

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND SCHOOLS IN FEMALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract. In Zambia, educational outcomes are profoundly shaped by institutional support and policy direction. Government initiatives, resource distribution and school-level management collectively influence access to and the quality of education. A deeper understanding of how these institutional frameworks function reveals systemic advantages and obstacles in fostering equitable academic achievement across diverse socio-economic contexts. This study investigates the influence of institutional support and policy frameworks on female academic achievement in Southern Africa, with a specific focus on Zambia. Grounded in Systems Theory, the analysis explores the interactions between policy, resources and community engagement and their collective impact on female students' performance. Through policy analysis and case studies from various educational institutions, the study evaluates the efficacy of policies concerning curriculum development, teacher training and resource allocation. The findings illuminate both the supportive functions and the limitations of current policies in improving academic outcomes. The study concludes by proposing targeted policy reforms to foster a more cohesive and responsive educational system, underscoring the necessity for context-sensitive strategies to enhance female academic achievement.

Keywords: *Academic achievement of girls, institutional support, education policy, systems theory, Zambia.*

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1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of national development, social equity and individual empowerment. In Zambia, the pursuit of gender parity in education has become a central focus for policymakers, educators and civil society, reflecting both global commitments and local needs. Over the past decade, substantial policy interventions have been implemented to improve female academic achievement, driven by the understanding that educating girls yields significant economic, health and social benefits. Despite these efforts, persistent disparities in educational attainment between male and female students, particularly at higher educational levels, remain a serious concern.

This study emphasizes the dual role of government and schools in advancing female academic achievement through institutional support and policy frameworks. Government initiatives such as the 2011 Education Act, the Re-Entry Policy for pregnant girls and the 'Keeping Girls in School' initiative have sought to dismantle barriers to girls' education by monitoring attendance, providing financial support and promoting inclusivity. Concurrently, schools are increasingly adopting gender-sensitive practices, including

mentorship programs, gender-responsive curricula and the strategic placement of female teachers as role models. These efforts are often bolstered by social organizations that play a critical role in policy advocacy and implementation.

Notwithstanding these advances, Zambia continues to face systemic challenges that curtail the effectiveness of its institutional support systems. Gaps in implementation, insufficient resources and deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, such as early marriage and gendered domestic expectations, consistently impede progress toward educational gender equality. The interplay of these factors underscores the complexity of achieving sustained improvements, necessitating a comprehensive, multi-level approach that extends beyond policy formulation to include robust implementation, community engagement and effective monitoring.

The primary research gap this study addresses is the limited comprehension of how institutional support and policy frameworks interact to shape female academic achievement in Zambia, particularly within the context of implementation hurdles and socio-cultural barriers. While existing literature documents various policies and interventions, few studies scrutinize their practical effectiveness at the school level or the degree to which they meet the unique needs of female students across diverse socio-economic settings. By employing a systems-based perspective, this research disentangles the dynamic relationships among policy, institutional practices and educational outcomes, offering evidence-based insights to guide future strategies for promoting gender parity in Zambian education.

2. Literature review

Globally, the pursuit of gender equality in education remains a central objective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4 and 5). While notable progress has been made in girls' primary school enrolment in many regions, recent studies indicate persistent disparities in secondary and tertiary education, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2024). The 2024 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report notes that despite policy reforms and increased investment, girls continue to encounter significant barriers related to poverty, cultural norms and inadequate school infrastructure. Interventions such as conditional cash transfers, gender-sensitive curricula and mentorship programs have demonstrated positive effects, though their success often hinges on rigorous implementation and community buy-in (Desmond *et al.*, 2023).

In high-income nations, institutional support for female students has increasingly addressed subtle forms of gender bias in classroom dynamics, promoted participation in STEM fields and ensured safe, inclusive learning environments. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that even in these contexts, policy frameworks must continually evolve to address emerging challenges like digital divides and intersectional inequalities (Desmond *et al.*, 2023).

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, governments have rolled out diverse policies and programs to promote female academic achievement, with mixed results. Moyo and Ndlovu (2024) observe that while girls' enrolment rates have improved in several countries, significant gaps remain in retention and completion, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. Interventions such as free primary education, re-entry policies for pregnant girls and targeted bursaries have helped narrow the gender gap, but their impact is often diluted by resource constraints, weak implementation and socio-cultural resistance (Moyo & Ndlovu, 2024; Mwansa & Banda, 2024).

A study of policies in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda reveals growing commitment to gender equality and improved female enrolment. However, challenges persist, including underrepresentation in STEM fields and a discernible disconnect between policy objectives and student outcomes, which limits overall success (Hailu *et al.*, 2023). This indicates that gender disparity, particularly in Ugandan higher education and STEM, remains a concern. Furthermore, an emphasis on numerical targets often overshadows the structural issues that underpin these challenges.

A comparative study by Mwansa and Banda (2024) found that nations with strong institutional support systems, characterized by gender-sensitive teacher training, effective school management and active community involvement, tend to achieve better outcomes in female academic achievement. However, the continued predominance of male teachers and administrators in higher education perpetuates gender imbalances, limiting the availability of female role models and mentors for aspiring students (González & Ledesma, 2015).

Social organizations and non-governmental actors have been instrumental in advocating for girls' education, supplementing government efforts through community mobilization, scholarship programs and policy advocacy (González & Ledesma, 2015). Yet, entrenched cultural practices such as early marriage, gender-based violence and expectations surrounding domestic labour remain formidable barriers to girls' educational attainment, especially in rural and marginalized communities (Desmond *et al.*, 2023).

In Zambia, the government has established several policy frameworks to promote gender equality in education. The 2011 Education Act mandates school attendance and penalizes non-compliant parents, while the Re-Entry Policy permits pregnant girls to return to school, underscoring a commitment to inclusivity and retention (Mulenga-Hagane & Mwanza, 2018; William, 2022). The 'Keeping Girls in School' initiative, launched with international partners, offers financial support to vulnerable girls, thereby improving access to secondary education (William, 2022).

Despite these initiatives, recent studies indicate that policy enactment alone is inadequate for achieving gender parity. Thelma (2024) stress the importance of robust implementation and monitoring mechanisms, noting that many schools lack the necessary resources, trained personnel and infrastructure to fully realize policy objectives. School-based support systems, such as mentorship programs, gender-sensitive curricula and the deployment of female teachers, have shown positive impacts on girls' academic performance, however, their scope and effectiveness are frequently constrained by funding shortages and inconsistent application (Phiri, 2023; Mwansa & Banda, 2024).

The persistence of cultural barriers, including early marriage and gendered domestic expectations, continues to undermine efforts to promote girls' education, particularly in rural areas (Desmond *et al.*, 2023). While government policies provide a crucial foundation, their ultimate success depends on effective school-level management, community engagement and sustained investment in capacity-building and infrastructure (Thelma, 2024; Mwansa & Banda, 2024).

A review of the literature reveals several salient gaps that justify this study. Although numerous studies document gender-focused policies in Zambia, few examine the practical implementation challenges at the school level, especially in resource-poor and rural settings (Thelma, 2023). Existing research often treats government policies and school-based interventions as separate entities, with limited exploration of how their interplay shapes female academic achievement across different socio-economic contexts (Mwansa & Banda, 2024). Furthermore, a scarcity of qualitative research capturing the

perspectives of female students, teachers and administrators hinders a nuanced understanding of the barriers and facilitators of academic success. Finally, Thelma (2024) highlight a lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess intervention effectiveness and ensure accountability at both governmental and school levels.

By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide a comprehensive, systems-based analysis of the role of institutional support and policy frameworks in promoting female academic achievement in Zambia, with the goal of informing more effective, context-sensitive strategies for achieving gender parity in education.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in Systems Theory, which posits that educational outcomes result from complex interactions among various institutional components, including policy frameworks, resource allocation, community engagement and school management (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Thelma, 2024). This theoretical lens offers a holistic view of how different elements of the educational ecosystem interact to influence female academic achievement, recognizing that changes in one component can produce ripple effects throughout the entire system.

Systems Theory is built on four key principles: interconnectedness, holism, feedback loops and adaptability. The tenets of these principles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Tenets of Systems Theory

Principle	Tenets
Interconnectedness	All components of the educational system - government policies, school practices, community norms - are interrelated; a change in one area can affect others.
Holism	The system must be understood as an integrated whole, rather than as a collection of isolated parts, to fully grasp the dynamics influencing educational outcomes.
Feedback Loops	Continuous feedback mechanisms are essential for monitoring progress, identifying challenges and adapting interventions to changing circumstances.
Adaptability	Effective systems are characterized by their ability to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, ensuring long-term sustainability and resilience.

In applying Systems Theory, this study examines how government policies (e.g., the Education Act and Re-Entry Policy), institutional support mechanisms (e.g., mentorship programs and gender-sensitive curricula) and community engagement collectively shape female academic achievement in Zambia. The framework helps identify points of synergy and conflict among different actors and interventions, highlighting the importance of coordinated, multi-level strategies for sustained progress.

By adopting a systems perspective, the study moves beyond linear, cause-and-effect models to capture the dynamic, context-dependent nature of educational change, yielding a more grounded understanding of the factors that enable or hinder gender parity in education.

4. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on selected private, grant-aided and government schools in Zambia, as well as relevant government bodies, to explore the relationship between institutional support, policy frameworks and female academic achievement.

The study involved a comprehensive review of key policy documents, including the *2011 Education Act*, the *Re-Entry Policy* and the *Keeping Girls in School* initiative. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female students, teachers (male and female) and school administrators to gather diverse perspectives on the efficacy of institutional support and policy initiatives. Additionally, an analysis of academic performance data from selected schools was undertaken to identify trends in female enrolment, retention and achievement.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select schools representing a variety of socio-economic contexts (urban, peri-urban and rural), ensuring diversity in institutional capacity and community involvement. Participants were chosen based on their roles and direct experiences with gender-focused educational policies and interventions.

Data analysis involved thematic analysis and data triangulation. Interview transcripts and documentary sources were coded and analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to institutional support, policy effectiveness and barriers to female academic achievement. Data triangulation was employed to cross-validate findings from different sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the results.

Ethical due diligence was maintained throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement and all data were anonymized to protect the identities of participants and institutions.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Government policies and female academic achievement

The Zambian government has demonstrated a sustained commitment to gender equality in education through significant policy interventions. These include free primary and secondary education, the *Re-Entry Policy* for pregnant girls and targeted financial assistance programs like the “*Keeping Girls in School*” initiative. Collectively, these measures have contributed to a noticeable increase in the enrolment and retention of female learners nationwide. Recent academic records from selected urban and peri-urban schools show a steady rise in the number of girls completing both basic and secondary education (Mwansa & Banda, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

However, the positive impact of these national policies is moderated by significant implementation challenges. Interviews with school administrators and teachers consistently revealed that many schools, particularly in rural and underserved areas, face substantial obstacles such as insufficient funding, a shortage of trained staff, scarce learning materials and limited infrastructure (Phiri, 2023; Thelma, 2024). Even where

policies like the Re-Entry Policy are widely publicized, their practical application is often inconsistent. Some schools lack clear guidelines or effective support systems for reintegrating girls after pregnancy, leading to considerable regional variation in outcomes.

This uneven landscape aligns with current literature, which acknowledges the role of government interventions in boosting enrolment while also pointing to a pronounced implementation gap, especially in resource-scarce rural areas (Mwansa & Banda, 2024). UNESCO's (2024) analysis of global education frameworks corroborates these findings, emphasizing the need for robust mechanisms to translate policy ambitions into effective action, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Thus, while the trajectory for girls' education in Zambia is improving due to supportive policies, the persistent implementation gaps prevent the full realization of their intended benefits. This study adds qualitative precision to existing literature by highlighting the regional disparities and implementation-specific challenges that persist across the country.

5.2. School-level interventions: Mentorship, gender sensitivity and role models

The study finds that school-level interventions are instrumental in shaping female academic achievement. Schools that proactively adopt gender-sensitive approaches report higher achievement levels and reduced absenteeism among female students. Specifically, mentorship programs, the deployment of female teaching staff as role models and the integration of gender-sensitive curricula have proven pivotal (Moyo & Ndlovu, 2024; Mwansa & Banda, 2024). Female learners in these settings emphasized the value of having female mentors and teachers who provided both personal and academic guidance, helping them navigate challenges with greater confidence.

Mentorship emerged as a particularly effective strategy for boosting girls' self-confidence, fostering leadership skills and stimulating interest in traditionally male-dominated subjects like STEM (Phiri, 2023). School administrators reported observable improvements in classroom participation, examination performance and completion rates among girls involved in structured mentorship programs at two girls' boarding schools. Nonetheless, the reach and impact of these initiatives are hampered by chronic underfunding, a shortage of trained female staff and logistical difficulties, especially in remote rural schools.

These observations are supported by wider research. Moyo and Ndlovu (2024) and Mwansa and Banda (2024) similarly identify gender-sensitive mentoring, positive role modelling and curriculum reforms as crucial drivers of girls' educational attainment. This study enriches the discussion by detailing the specific operational constraints schools face in scaling up such interventions, underscoring that sustained success requires not only policy authorization but also consistent material support and human resource development.

5.3. Community engagement and socio-cultural barriers

Community involvement emerged as a critical factor in the effectiveness of policies and school-based interventions aimed at improving female enrolment and retention. Schools that actively collaborate with parents, local leaders and NGOs consistently exhibit higher rates of female attendance and academic progression. Structures such as Parent-Teacher Committees (PTCs), local awareness campaigns and civil society

partnerships have been instrumental in challenging and gradually shifting traditional attitudes that previously discouraged girls' formal education (González & Ledesma, 2015).

Despite measurable progress, deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers continue to pose formidable challenges. Practices such as early or forced marriages, entrenched gender roles prioritizing domestic labour and incidents of gender-based violence remain major obstacles to achieving educational parity (Desmond *et al.*, 2023). Interviews with female students and teachers frequently identified early marriage and teenage pregnancy as primary causes of school dropout, echoing findings across sub-Saharan Africa.

These results are strongly aligned with contemporary research. González and Ledesma (2015) emphasize the pivotal role of community engagement not only in increasing enrolment but also in creating environments where girls can thrive. Furthermore, Desmond *et al.* (2023) argue that without targeted strategies to address socio-cultural drivers, policy interventions alone are insufficient for sustained progress. This study corroborates these insights while providing evidence of successful local adaptations, such as context-sensitive awareness campaigns and NGO collaborations that are beginning to make a transformative impact in both rural and urban communities.

5.4. Monitoring, evaluation and sustainability

A prominent finding is the underdevelopment of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms within Zambia's education system. While policy frameworks are robust, the lack of systematic M&E leads to inconsistent implementation, untracked progress and limited institutional learning and accountability. School administrators and teachers frequently expressed the need for improved data collection, continuous feedback loops and clear accountability pathways (Thelma, 2024).

Furthermore, concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of key interventions are prevalent. Many school-based initiatives depend on short-term donor funding or NGO support, making them vulnerable to funding cycles and threatening their continuity. Administrators stressed the necessity for increased government investment not only in material resources but also in the professional development and long-term capacity building of school staff.

The literature substantiates these findings. Thelma (2024) argues that inadequate monitoring hinders both the effectiveness and replicability of successful models. Similarly, UNESCO (2024) highlights the risks associated with reliance on external aid, noting that sustainable progress requires institutionalized governmental commitment, embedded within national budgeting and strategic planning cycles.

Therefore, while the development of progressive policies and interventions is commendable, the study concludes that stronger M&E systems and sustainable funding models are urgently needed. This finding adds practical urgency to the existing literature by demonstrating that the success of well-conceived interventions is fundamentally dependent on continuous oversight and reliable resourcing.

5.5. Alignment with existing studies

The findings of this study align with recent literature advocating for multi-level, systems-based approaches to promoting female academic achievement (Mwansa & Banda, 2024; Moyo & Ndlovu, 2024). Effective policies require not only sound design but also context-sensitive implementation, active community engagement and continuous

monitoring and adaptation. The persistence of gender disparities in education, despite significant policy efforts, underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that tackle both structural and cultural barriers.

Simultaneously, the study identifies points of divergence from existing research. While previous studies have documented the existence of gender-focused policies, this research provides new insights into the practical implementation challenges, the importance of school-level leadership and the critical role of community engagement in sustaining progress toward gender parity in education.

5.6. Recommendations

To build on existing progress and move closer to achieving gender parity in education, thereby unlocking the full potential of female students and contributing to national development, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen Policy Implementation and Resource Allocation:** The government should prioritize bridging the policy-practice gap by increasing funding to schools, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. This includes targeted investment in teacher training, infrastructure and learning materials to ensure all schools can effectively implement gender-focused policies.

- **Enhance Community Engagement and Cultural Change:** Schools and government agencies should collaborate with local leaders, families and community organizations to address socio-cultural barriers. Community awareness campaigns, strengthened parent-teacher associations and NGO partnerships can help challenge harmful norms and promote the value of girls' education.

- **Invest in Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability:** Develop robust M&E systems to track progress, identify challenges and scale successful models. This involves establishing clear indicators for female academic achievement, implementing regular data collection and creating feedback mechanisms to inform policy and practice.

- **Expand School-Based Support Systems:** Schools should be encouraged to adopt and expand mentorship programs, gender-sensitive curricula and the deployment of female teachers as role models. These interventions have proven effective in improving girls' academic performance and reducing absenteeism, especially when tailored to local community needs.

- **Promote Sustainability and Local Ownership:** Ensure interventions are designed for long-term viability by building local capacity, securing sustained government funding and fostering ownership among school staff, students and communities. This will reduce dependence on short-term donor projects and ensure program continuity.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the role of institutional support and policy frameworks in promoting female academic achievement in Zambia, drawing on recent literature, policy analysis and qualitative data from selected schools and stakeholders. The findings highlight the significant progress made in increasing female enrolment and retention through government policies and school-based interventions, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Initiatives such as the 2011 Education Act, Re-Entry Policy and “Keeping Girls in School” have contributed to narrowing the gender gap, while

mentorship programs and gender-sensitive curricula have fostered more inclusive learning environments.

However, persistent challenges remain, especially concerning policy implementation, resource allocation and socio-cultural barriers. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, continue to grapple with funding shortages, insufficient trained staff and inadequate infrastructure, limiting their capacity to fully support female students and realize policy objectives. Deeply entrenched cultural practices, including early marriage and gendered domestic expectations, continue to undermine educational efforts, underscoring the need for sustained community engagement and cultural transformation.

The study addresses a key research gap by exploring how institutional support and policy frameworks interact to influence female academic achievement across diverse socio-economic contexts. Through a systems-based perspective, it provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationships among policy, institutional practices and educational outcomes, offering evidence-based insights to guide future strategies for achieving gender parity in Zambian education.

In conclusion, sustainable progress in female academic achievement demands a multi-level, systems-based approach that integrates robust policy design, effective school-level management, proactive community engagement and continuous monitoring and adaptation. Only through such coordinated, context-sensitive efforts can Zambia overcome the enduring barriers to gender equality in education and fully unlock the potential of its female students.

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