

SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON FEMALE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ZAMBIA: EXAMINING COMMUNITY AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

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Abstract. In Zambia, academic attainment is profoundly shaped by socio-cultural elements, including entrenched gender norms, community beliefs and familial roles. These dynamics significantly influence students' educational trajectories, either facilitating or hindering their development. This study investigates the socio-cultural factors that impact female academic achievement in Zambia, with a specific focus on the interplay of family and community dynamics. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory, this research explores how cultural values, familial expectations and community support systems shape the academic motivations and achievements of female students. Employing ethnographic methods and interviews with female students and parents, the study examines factors such as gender roles, religious beliefs and community-led educational initiatives. The findings indicate that robust family and community support are pivotal in fostering motivation and perseverance, especially in resource-constrained settings. This paper underscores the necessity of culturally responsive educational strategies that align with the lived experiences of female students to enhance academic outcomes.

Keywords: *Female academic achievement, socio-cultural influences, family dynamics, Sociocultural Theory, Southern Africa.*

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1. Introduction

Educational attainment in Zambia, as in other African nations, is heavily influenced by institutional support and policy, presenting a persistent challenge for educators, communities and policymakers. Despite concerted efforts to bridge the gender divide, the region continues to struggle with socio-cultural norms and family systems that disproportionately affect female academic achievement (Banda & Mwansa, 2024; Harris *et al.*, 2020). Zambian girls navigate a complex web of expectations and barriers rooted in traditional beliefs, gender roles and economic realities (Musonda, 2022).

Systemic benefits and drawbacks in promoting equitable academic achievement emerge through government initiatives, resource allocation and school management practices. A deeper understanding of these institutional frameworks reveals their impact on educational access and quality. Socio-cultural factors - such as community attitudes toward gender, customary practices like early marriage and the gendered division of household labor - play a crucial role in shaping educational opportunities for girls (Phiri & Chanda, 2024; Zander *et al.*, 2020). These influences are deeply embedded within family dynamics, where parental education levels, household responsibilities and support systems can either propel or hinder a girl's academic journey (Israel *et al.*, 2009).

Understanding these interconnected factors is critical as Zambia strives to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 5 (gender equality). Addressing the socio-cultural and familial barriers that excessively affect female learners is imperative. The evolving landscape of family dynamics, marked by increased female workforce participation and shifting power structures, presents both challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equity in education (Musonda, 2022).

This paper explores the socio-cultural influences and family dynamics affecting female academic achievement in Zambia, using Sociocultural Theory as a guiding framework. Through qualitative inquiry, the study illuminates the mechanisms by which community norms and family environments shape girls' educational trajectories. By contextualizing the Zambian experience within broader regional and global discourses, this research aims to contribute to the development of culturally sensitive interventions and policies that advance gender equity in education.

2. Literature review

Globally, the pursuit of gender equality in education has seen notable progress, yet significant disparities persist, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2022). Socio-cultural norms, including patriarchal attitudes, early marriage and gender-based violence, continue to impede girls' access to and performance in education (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Scholes, 2020). In many societies, the value placed on female education is often secondary to traditional roles, with girls expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over academic pursuits (Aimin, 2013; Ameri, 2020).

In developing nations, higher socioeconomic status often correlates with better educational opportunities for women, as families with more resources can invest in their daughters' education (Kobra *et al.*, 2025). Recent studies indicate that family structure and the number of siblings can influence female academic performance, with larger families often resulting in reduced educational support for girls (Pierre & Faustin, 2024).

Research from Asia, Latin America and the Middle East reveals similar patterns: where community norms favor boys' education, girls are more likely to experience higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement and limited career prospects (Peters-Burton *et al.*, 2014). Interventions that challenge harmful cultural practices and promote positive attitudes toward girls' education have improved outcomes, highlighting the importance of community engagement and policy support (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

Within Africa, the intersection of socio-cultural practices and educational attainment is particularly pronounced. Studies across the continent reveal that gender norms, early marriage and household labor demands are significant barriers to girls' schooling (Menda *et al.*, 2023; Scholes, 2020). For instance, a study in Rwanda found that domestic responsibilities and family dynamics significantly influence female academic performance, with 86.4% of respondents agreeing that domestic work negatively impacts education (Pierre & Faustin, 2024). In rural areas, where traditional and religious beliefs are often more entrenched, girls face heightened risks of school dropout due to early marriage and pregnancy (Menda *et al.*, 2023).

Despite educational advancements among Muslim women in South Africa, socio-cultural influences, particularly patriarchal interpretations within religious institutions, systematically exclude them from leadership roles, impacting their academic and professional achievements (Essop, 2025). Conservative interpretations of religious teachings and patriarchal cultures significantly hinder female academic achievement in

Muslim communities, underscoring the need for inclusive policies in Islamic education (Maula *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, cultural practices like female genital mutilation and early marriage act as significant barriers to girl-child education in communities such as the Ilchamus, reflecting broader socio-cultural challenges across various African Muslim contexts (Lempassy *et al.*, 2024).

Family dynamics further compound these challenges. Parental education levels, especially mothers', are strong predictors of girls' academic success (Banda & Mwansa, 2024). Households that value and support education tend to foster conducive learning environments, while those with limited resources or conservative beliefs often restrict girls' educational opportunities (Israel *et al.*, 2009).

Community attitudes also play a crucial role. In many African societies, community leaders and elders wield significant influence over educational decisions, either reinforcing or challenging gender biases (Phiri & Chanda, 2024). Community-led interventions, such as mentorship programs and awareness campaigns, have successfully shifted attitudes and increased girls' school participation (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

In Zambia, socio-cultural influences and family dynamics are pivotal in shaping girls' educational achievements. The historical influence of missionary schools has created long-standing gender disparities in educational attainment, effects of which persist today (Chiseni & Bolt, 2024). Although Protestant missions provided slightly better gender parity than Catholic schools, overall female enrolment remained low. While educational access has improved since independence, historical disparities continue to affect outcomes, particularly in areas with less missionary activity (Chiseni & Bolt, 2024).

Zambia exemplifies many regional trends. Cultural beliefs and traditional practices in rural areas contribute to misconceptions about contraceptives, leading to teenage pregnancies that adversely affect academic achievement. Teenage mothers face stigma, economic hardships and discrimination, which impact their educational opportunities and success (Menda *et al.*, 2023; Zander *et al.*, 2020). These norms are often perpetuated by family members and community leaders, creating a cycle of limited educational attainment for girls.

Contemporary studies reveal that family income and education levels significantly impact children's educational opportunities. Supportive family environments, characterized by educated parents and an equitable division of household labor, are associated with higher academic achievement among girls (Harris *et al.*, 2020; Banda & Mwansa, 2024; TP & Bhatnagar, 2024). Conversely, girls from impoverished or culturally conservative households are more likely to be burdened with chores and face challenges in keeping up with schoolwork (Banda & Mwansa, 2024).

Community attitudes toward female education vary widely across Zambia. In some regions, progressive leaders and organizations have spearheaded efforts to promote girls' education, resulting in increased enrollment and retention rates (Phiri & Chanda, 2024). However, in areas where traditional beliefs remain dominant, girls continue to face significant barriers to academic success (Menda *et al.*, 2023). In such societies, educated women are often viewed negatively, discouraging families from supporting their higher education aspirations (Patrick *et al.*, 2025).

Parental education particularly that of mothers, is consistently linked to girls' academic achievement (Israel *et al.*, 2009; Banda & Mwansa, 2024). Educated parents are more likely to value education, offer academic support and advocate for their daughters' schooling. In contrast, parents with limited education may emphasize

traditional gender roles, limiting girls' opportunities for academic advancement (Mpolomoka *et al.*, 2023; Banda & Mwansa, 2024).

Household responsibilities also play a significant role. Girls are often expected to contribute to domestic labor, including childcare, cooking and cleaning, which can detract from their study time and school attendance (Menda *et al.*, 2023). These responsibilities are frequently assigned based on gender, reflecting broader societal expectations and norms (Zander *et al.*, 2020) and disproportionately fall on girls, limiting their study time and engagement in school activities.

While these socio-cultural factors present significant challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for community engagement and educational reforms to support female academic achievement in Zambia. Holistically addressing these issues could improve educational outcomes for girls and foster a more equitable society.

Substantial research has explored the impact of socio-cultural and family factors on female education, yet several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative analyses, with limited attention to the lived experiences and perspectives of girls, parents and community members (Menda *et al.*, 2023). Second, there is a need for context-specific studies that account for the diversity of cultural practices and family structures within Zambia and the broader Southern African region. Moreover, few studies have examined the interplay between evolving family dynamics, such as increased female workforce participation and girls' educational outcomes (Musonda, 2022). This study addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative approach to capture the nuanced ways in which socio-cultural and family dynamics shape female academic achievement in Zambia. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory, the research offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the barriers to girls' education.

3. Theoretical framework

Sociocultural Theory, primarily developed by Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development and learning processes. This theory posits that learning is inherently a social process where knowledge is co-constructed through interactions with others (Peker *et al.*, 2024). It provides a robust framework for understanding how learning and development are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts. Central to this theory is the concept that cognitive development is not an isolated process but is deeply embedded in interactions with more knowledgeable others, such as parents, teachers and peers within a specific cultural milieu (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024; Rahmatirad, 2020).

The theory suggests that social interaction is fundamental to learning. Through guided participation, learners acquire new skills and knowledge by engaging with individuals who possess greater expertise (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024). In the context of female academic achievement, this underscores the need for innovative pedagogical interventions that focus on intentionality and meaningful engagement in instructional practices.

Sociocultural Theory also emphasizes the role of cultural tools and symbols, such as language, traditions and values in mediating cognitive processes (Aimin, 2013; Ameri, 2020). Learning is thus viewed as a culturally situated activity, shaped by the norms and practices of the surrounding community. For Zambian girls, the cultural context includes both enabling factors, like progressive attitudes toward education and constraining factors, such as restrictive gender norms.

While Sociocultural Theory offers valuable insights into the social dimensions of learning, it is not without limitations. Critics argue that its emphasis on social context may overlook individual cognitive processes and agency (Ameri, 2020). For instance, girls who succeed academically despite adverse socio-cultural environments demonstrate resilience and personal agency that may not be fully accounted for by the theory. Additionally, the theory often assumes a relatively uniform cultural context, which may not reflect the diversity and complexity of real-world communities. In Zambia, cultural norms and family dynamics vary widely across regions and ethnic groups, necessitating a nuanced application of the theory.

Despite these limitations, Sociocultural Theory remains a powerful tool for understanding the interaction between social, cultural and individual factors in educational achievement. By integrating both social and individual perspectives, researchers and practitioners can develop more effective interventions to support female education.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the socio-cultural factors affecting female academic achievement. This approach enabled the capture of participants' lived experiences, perceptions and motivations, providing rich insights into the socio-cultural and familial dynamics at play (Menda *et al.*, 2023).

Data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. FGDs were conducted with female students from rural and urban schools in Zambia's Central Province, allowing for the exploration of shared experiences and collective perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were held with parents, teachers and community leaders, providing a multi-faceted view of the factors influencing girls' education.

Participants were selected purposively to ensure representation from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, regions and cultural groups. In total, the study involved 40 female students, 20 parents, 8 teachers and 5 community leaders. The students were from four schools - one operated by a Catholic agency and three by the government - representing varied social, cultural, religious and economic backgrounds.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data. Transcripts from FGDs and interviews were coded iteratively, with themes emerging through constant comparison and refinement. Key themes included gender-based expectations, early marriages, parental influence and community support. To enhance integrity and validity, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants and peer debriefing sessions were held with colleagues familiar with the research context. Ethical considerations - including informed consent, confidentiality and participant anonymity - were rigorously observed throughout the study.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Gender-Based Expectations

A dominant theme emerging from the data was the pervasive influence of gender-based expectations on girls' educational experiences. Many participants reported that societal norms dictate females should prioritize domestic responsibilities - such as cooking, cleaning and caring for siblings - over their academic endeavors. These

expectations were often reinforced by family members and community leaders, creating a double burden for girls who must balance schoolwork with household chores (Banda & Mwansa, 2024; Zander *et al.*, 2020).

Several participants shared that they performed house chores after returning from school, which tremendously affected their academic performance due to exhaustion. Unlike their male counterparts, who faced fewer domestic demands, female learners were at a distinct disadvantage. One student from a rural school stated:

Every day after school, I have to help my mother with housework before I can start my homework. Sometimes I am too tired to study.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants who described how domestic responsibilities limited their time and energy for academic activities. The findings align with previous research indicating that the gendered division of labor remains a significant barrier to girls' education in rural Zambia and across Africa (Menda *et al.*, 2023; Scholes, 2020). Addressing these expectations requires community-wide efforts to challenge traditional norms and promote the value of girls' education.

5.2. Teenage pregnancies and early marriages

Teenage pregnancies and early marriages emerged as critical barriers to female academic achievement. Participants recounted instances where girls in their communities were withdrawn from school to marry after falling pregnant, often at the urging of parents or relatives. Reasons included the belief that the child needed the mother's attention and fear of peer discrimination upon returning to school, despite government readmission policies. Early marriage not only curtails educational opportunities but also exposes girls to health risks and limits their future economic prospects (Menda *et al.*, 2023).

Lack of comprehensive sex education was identified as a primary cause of adolescent pregnancies, leading to school dropouts. Some interviewees noted that social media influence has had a detrimental effect on girls in urban areas, who may choose to embrace lifestyles represented online while ignoring real-world teachings. A parent from an urban area observed:

Some families believe a girl should marry young rather than continue in school, especially if they are struggling academically and financially.

This practice is particularly prevalent in rural areas, where poverty and traditional beliefs intersect to perpetuate early marriages, aligning with Phiri and Chanda's (2024) study. Despite awareness of legal implications, parents in these communities often surreptitiously support this practice. These findings corroborate studies highlighting the detrimental impact of early marriage on girls' education in Zambia and other African countries (Menda *et al.*, 2023; Banda & Mwansa, 2024). Effective interventions by various stakeholders must address both the economic and cultural drivers of early marriage, providing families with alternative pathways for supporting their daughters.

5.3. Parental influence

Parental education and attitudes toward female education emerged as another dominant theme. Participants observed that:

Females with educated, supportive parents reported higher levels of academic engagement and achievement. Teachers from both rural and urban schools

submitted that when parents were fully involved and valued education, female learners were more likely to perform well and remain in school.

Conversely, girls from households where parents had limited education or held traditional views about gender roles faced greater obstacles to academic success (Banda & Mwansa, 2024; Israel *et al.*, 2009).

Several studies confirm a strong correlation between positive parental involvement and advanced female education. Emphasis is increasingly placed on the role of family social capital in fostering motivation, resilience and academic success among girls (Harris *et al.*, 2020; Banda & Mwansa, 2024).

5.4. Community support

Community attitudes and support systems were identified as key determinants of female academic achievement. In some communities in Central Zambia where leaders and organizations actively promoted girls' education, participants reported higher enrollment and retention rates. In Senior Chief Chamuka's Chieftdom of the Lenje-speaking people in Chisamba, initiatives such as mentorship programs, scholarships and awareness campaigns were cited as effective in creating supportive environments for girls. One community leader noted:

In our rural area, the impact of such initiatives is clear. When the whole community comes together to support girls' education, it results in real change. This act encourages females and motivates them to succeed.

However, in communities where traditional beliefs remained dominant, girls continued to face significant barriers. These findings underscore the need for context-specific interventions that engage community leaders and address local norms and practices (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Menda *et al.*, 2023; Phiri & Chanda, 2024).

5.5. Interpreting the findings: Alignment with existing research

The results of this study are consistent with existing research on the socio-cultural and familial determinants of female academic achievement in Zambia and Southern Africa (Banda & Mwansa, 2024; Scholes, 2020; Zander *et al.*, 2020). The interplay between gender norms, early marriage, parental influence and community support creates a complex landscape that shapes girls' educational trajectories. More importantly, the findings highlight the agency and resilience of girls who navigate these challenges and the potential for transformative change when families and communities actively support education. This study affirms the value of Sociocultural Theory in understanding the social and cultural dimensions of learning, while also acknowledging the significance of individual agency and community diversity.

5.6. The need for multifaceted interventions

Improving academic performance among females requires a multifaceted approach that blends policy reforms, robust community sensitization and targeted support mechanisms. This approach must recognize the varied experiences across different regions and communities. Participants highlighted key strategies aligned with the thematic areas:

Community Sensitization: Engaging community leaders and members in dialogue to challenge harmful gender norms and promote the value of girls' education.

Parental Engagement: Providing parents with information and resources to support their daughters' schooling.

Policy Reforms: Developing and enforcing policies that protect girls from teenage pregnancies, enhance school retention rates after pregnancy, prevent early marriage and ensure equitable access to education.

This analysis aligns with Akyildiz and Ahmed (2021), who advise that overcoming such academic challenges requires context-specific, culturally and religiously sensitive interventions. Establishing mentorship programs, scholarships and safe spaces for girls is essential to enhance their academic engagement and provide a clear support system for girls' education.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the socio-cultural influences and family dynamics that shape female academic achievement in Zambia, drawing on qualitative data and Sociocultural Theory. The findings reveal that gender-based expectations, early marriages, parental influence and community support are critical determinants of girls' educational outcomes.

Socio-cultural norms and traditional beliefs continue to pose significant barriers to girls' education, particularly in rural and conservative communities. Early marriage remains a pervasive challenge, cutting short the educational journeys of many girls and limiting their future opportunities. Parental education and attitudes play a decisive role in shaping girls' academic engagement, with supportive families providing the encouragement and resources necessary for success.

Community support systems, including mentorship programs and awareness campaigns, have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting girls' education and challenging harmful practices. However, sustained progress requires a holistic approach that addresses both cultural and systemic barriers.

Empowering families and communities to support girls' education is essential for achieving gender equity and sustainable development in Zambia and the broader Southern African region. By fostering environments that value and invest in girls' education, stakeholders can unlock the potential of future generations and contribute to the realization of national and global development goals.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive interventions and policies that recognize the diversity and complexity of socio-cultural and family dynamics. Continued research and collaboration among educators, policymakers and community leaders are vital for advancing gender equity in education and ensuring that all girls have the opportunity to achieve their academic and personal aspirations.

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