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Addressing barriers preventing girls and women from accessing education

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Abstract
Gender has become one of the most central concerns in the design of programmes and development of education policies for civil society and other stakeholders working in education. Addressing the barriers that girls (girls 10–18 years currently enrolled at school) and women (young women 19–25 dropped out or completed school) face in accessing and continuing quality education is at the core of many organisations. Globally, girls and women not only suffer disproportionately in accessing education but also face gender-specific challenges. Promoting the right to education of girls and women, therefore, goes beyond mere access; it is about ensuring that girl learners are safe at school and can benefit equally from the opportunities that education should provide. With this research report I seek to provide an overview of the barriers to education of girl learners and women in South Africa and outline the impact of poverty, teenage pregnancy, curriculum content, sexual assault, child marriage, household duties, sanitation, scholar transport, and classroom discipline on their right to education. In this article I address the barriers that girls and women face in accessing education. I explore these barriers through a comprehensive literature review and interviews and propose strategies for overcoming them. I used feminist theory and human capital theory to analyse the systemic challenges that hinder access. Data were gathered through qualitative methods, mainly interviews. The findings suggest that improving gender-sensitive policies, providing financial support, and enhancing community awareness can significantly increase educational access for girls and women.

Keywords: access; barriers; gender; girls; right to education; women

Introduction
Education is a fundamental human right and a vital pillar for personal empowerment, economic growth, and societal development. Yet, despite significant progress in recent decades, a substantial gender gap persists in educational access, particularly in developing regions (Rugh, 2000). Progress in global efforts to bridge the gender gap in education has been notable over recent decades, driven by international commitments, policy reforms, and targeted initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in access to learning opportunities. Since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, there has been a concerted push to increase enrolment rates for girls worldwide. Data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicate that, in many regions, the global enrolment of girls in primary education has improved significantly, with some countries achieving near-parity in attendance and completion rates (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). For instance, in parts of Latin America and East Asia, the gender gap has narrowed considerably, reflecting successful interventions such as scholarship programmes, gender-sensitive curricula, and community engagement strategies that challenge entrenched cultural norms (UNICEF, 2019). Furthermore, numerous international agencies and governments have launched policies aimed at reducing barriers, such as subsidising school fees, establishing girl-friendly sanitation facilities, and promoting female teacher recruitment, all of which contribute to creating more equitable learning environments (World Bank, 2018).

Despite these positive developments, the expectation remains that all children, regardless of gender, should have unimpeded access to quality education. The global consensus underscores that education is a fundamental human right, essential not only for individual empowerment but also for fostering inclusive economic growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019). The expectations extend beyond mere enrolment; they encompass retention, completion, and the quality of education provided. For example, ensuring that girls remain in school through secondary levels and beyond, have access to safe and supportive school environments, and acquire relevant skills for life and work are essential benchmarks of progress (UNESCO, 2020). These expectations are justified by mounting evidence that educated girls are more likely to marry later, have healthier children, participate actively in civic and economic life, and contribute to national development (Chawla, 2014). The global community recognises that achieving gender parity in education is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for realising broader development goals (Chawla, 2014).

However, despite the progress, a substantial gender gap persists, and several justifications underpin its endurance. One of the primary reasons is the deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and traditional gender roles that assign different value to boys' and girls' education. In many societies, cultural beliefs and practices continue to prioritise boys' education over girls', perceiving girls primarily as future homemakers or caregivers rather than as individuals with equal rights to learning (Tembon & Fort, 2008; UNICEF, 2019). These norms often lead to early marriages, child labour, and household responsibilities that disproportionately remove girls from the classroom

(United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2017). Economic constraints further justify this gap; in impoverished families, the perceived cost-benefit analysis often favours investing in boys' education, as they are traditionally viewed as future breadwinners, whereas girls are regarded as future homemakers (Chawla, 2014). This economic rationale sustains a cycle of inequality, especially when poverty limits the ability of families to afford school-related expenses.

This disparity limits the potential of half the world's population and curtails progress towards achieving equality and SDGs. Addressing barriers that prevent girls and women from accessing education is not just a matter of social justice; it is imperative for broader economic and societal advancement (Tembon & Fort, 2008).

Globally, millions of girls and women remain (UNICEF, 2019) out of school due to a myriad of challenges including socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and inadequate policy support. In many communities, traditional gender roles and norms dictate that education is less valuable for girls and women than for boys, leading to early marriages, child labour, and prioritisation of household responsibilities over schooling (UNGEI, 2017). Such contextual barriers often force families to allocate limited resources toward educating boys, creating a cycle of inequality that is difficult to break. Furthermore, these cultural inhibitions are often exacerbated by poverty, which impedes families' ability to absorb educational costs. For instance, school fees, uniforms, and learning materials can be prohibitively expensive; in economically disadvantaged households, girls and women may be viewed as less deserving of investment in education compared to boys (Chawla, 2014).

Moreover, physical barriers to education cannot be overlooked. For many girls and women, the journey to school itself poses numerous challenges, ranging from long distances to unsafe travel routes (Morley, 2019). In regions plagued by conflict or instability, the situation is further exacerbated, as schools may be destroyed or rendered inaccessible. Even in more stable environments, issues such as inadequate sanitation facilities, particularly for menstruating adolescents, can severely hinder school attendance (Unterhalter & North, 2017). The absence of gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as private restrooms, can lead to feelings of shame or embarrassment, ultimately pushing girls and women out of the educational system.

Policy frameworks also play a critical role in shaping educational access for girls and women. In many countries, existing policies may be insufficient, poorly implemented, or even discriminatory. For example, laws that ostensibly promote gender equality in education may fail to eliminate systemic barriers that impede access for girls and women. Some educational institutions may lack female teachers, who serve as crucial role models and sources of support for young girls and women (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). Additionally, curricula that perpetuate gender stereotypes or fail to address the unique challenges faced by female learners can further alienate girls and women from the educational process.

In recognition of these multifaceted barriers, various stakeholders – including governments, non-governmental organisations, and community leaders – must prioritise the development and implementation of comprehensive strategies to promote gender equity in education (UNESCO, 2020). These strategies must be holistic, addressing not only educational access but also the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and political challenges that impede girls' and women's educational journeys. Solutions may include financial assistance programmes targeted at families, community awareness campaigns that challenge traditional gender norms, and targeted initiatives that provide safe and supportive learning environments for girls and women (World Bank, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical pathway to personal and societal advancement. However, girls and women worldwide continue to face multifaceted barriers that prevent them from accessing quality education. With this theoretical framework I elucidate the complex dynamics that contribute to gender disparities in education, grounded in feminist theory, intersectionality, and social capital theories.

Feminist theory

Feminist theory offers a foundational lens through which to examine the systemic inequalities faced by girls and women in education (Hirudayaraj & Shields, 2019). It highlights how traditional patriarchal structures influence educational access, often relegating girls' education to a lower priority compared to boys. According to educational feminist scholars like bell hooks (2000), the liberation of women entails addressing systemic injustice and dismantling oppressive educational practices. This theory asserts that educational institutions are embedded within cultural norms that perpetuate gender roles, leading to various forms of discrimination (Tyler, 2007).

For example, in many societies, cultural beliefs dictate that a woman's primary role is domestic, limiting opportunities for formal education (Better, 2006). Additionally, educational content often reflects male perspectives, neglecting women's experiences and contributions, which can reinforce stereotypes and discourage girls from pursuing education (Hackman, 2010; Pasque, 2011).

Therefore, feminist theory encourages the re-examination of curricula and institutional policies to promote gender equity in educational settings.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberli Crenshaw, further complicates the understanding of educational disparities by accounting for the multiple identities and social categories that intersect to shape individual experiences (UN Women, 2018). Girls and women do not exist in a vacuum; their access to education is influenced by various intersecting factors, including race, socio-economic status, religion, and geographic location. This theory posits that the barriers to education are not uniform; for instance, a rural girl from a low-income family may face different challenges than an urban girl from a wealthy background (Andrews, 2010).

Thus, intersectionality urges policymakers and educators to consider the unique circumstances of diverse groups of girls and women, advocating for tailored interventions that address specific barriers (UNESCO, 2020). For instance, programmes aimed at empowering girls and woman in low-income regions might focus on providing financial support, safe transportation, and community engagement to address local norms that devalue female education.

Social capital theory

Social capital theory, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, emphasises the importance of networks, relationships, and social resources in accessing opportunities, including education (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). In the context of gender, women often have less social capital due to historical marginalisation and reduced access to influential networks. This lack of social capital can manifest in limited encouragement from family and community, fewer role models, and less access to information about educational opportunities (Andrews, 2010). Consequently, these social barriers may hinder girls' and women's ability to pursue and succeed in education. Social capital theory refers to the resources and advantages that individuals gain through their networks, relationships, and social connections. These social resources can include access to information, support, mentorship, and opportunities that facilitate personal and professional development.

Educational institutions can play a pivotal role by creating environments that actively build and leverage social capital through mentorship programmes, inclusive communities, and collaborative learning, thus empowering girls and women. By understanding and harnessing social capital across its three dimensions – structural, relational, and cognitive – educational initiatives can help bridge social gaps, expand opportunities, and promote greater access and empowerment for girls and women.

Educational institutions also play a crucial role in fostering social capital. Schools that actively cultivate a supportive and inclusive environment can empower girls and women by providing mentorship programmes, collaborative learning experiences, and community connections (UN Women, 2018). By harnessing the potential of social capital, educational initiatives can create pathways for girls and women to not only access education but also leverage educational outcomes for future empowerment and a shared language and understanding of three dimensions mentioned above (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). An individual can invest in personal relationships to build their social capital.

Policy implications

The synthesis of these theoretical frameworks underscores the need for comprehensive and nuanced policy interventions to dismantle the barriers that hinder girls and women from accessing education (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2015).

Efforts to increase educational access may involve implementing scholarships for female learners, establishing safe transport and childcare options, developing community awareness programmes to challenge gender stereotypes, and ensuring that educational policies are inclusive and responsive to the voices of the girls and women themselves (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, collaboration among governments, NGOs (non-profit organisations that operate independently of any government, typically one whose purpose is to address a social or political issue) and community organisations is essential to create a cohesive strategy that addresses the multi-layered barriers to education.

In conclusion, addressing the barriers preventing girls and women from accessing education requires an integrated approach that leverages feminist theory, intersectionality, and social capital. By examining the systemic, cultural, and social factors that intersect to perpetuate educational inequities, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions that promote gender equity and empower girls and women to realise their full potential through education.

Literature Review

Access to education is a fundamental human right (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996) that is crucial for the empowerment of individuals and communities, particularly for girls and women. Despite significant advances in educational policies and increased awareness of gender equality, numerous barriers continue to hinder the educational opportunities available to girls and women worldwide. With this review I explore the various barriers that girls and women face in accessing

education and the strategies implemented to overcome these obstacles (Khan, 2018).

Historical context

The historical context of gender inequality in education can be traced back to patriarchal structures and societal norms that prioritise the education of boys over girls (McCullough, 2014). In the 19th and early 20th centuries women and girls were largely excluded from formal education systems, with few exceptions. The introduction of laws mandating universal education had a positive impact, yet cultural attitudes regarding gender roles persisted (Tyler, 2007). The 1990 World Conference on Education for All signified a turning point, emphasising the need for gender parity in education, but progress has been uneven (UNESCO, 2021).

Economic barriers

One of the most significant barriers to girls' and women's education is economic inequality. Families in low-income countries often prioritise resources for boys' education due to perceived future returns on investment (Fiala, 2022). Costs associated with schooling, including tuition, uniforms, textbooks, and transportation, disproportionately affect girls, who may be required to contribute to household responsibilities (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). Conditional cash transfer programmes have emerged as a strategy to alleviate these economic burdens, offering financial incentives to women in exchange for sending their daughters to school.

Economic barriers significantly hinder girls and women from accessing quality education worldwide, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting socio-economic development (Baker, 2021). One of the primary obstacles is poverty, which forces families to prioritise immediate survival needs over long-term investments like education. In impoverished households, resources such as money for school fees, uniforms, transportation, and learning materials are often unavailable or insufficient, leading to girls being kept out of school to reduce household expenses or for them to work and contribute income. The opportunity costs of educating girls, according to Banerjee and Chaudbury (2010), is also substantial; when girls are needed at home for chores, caregiving, or labour, the time and resources spent on their education are seen as less valuable. Beyond household poverty, systemic economic barriers exist within education systems themselves, such as the high costs of tuition and ancillary expenses that many families cannot afford. In regions where education is not fully subsidised, tuition costs act as deterrents, particularly for marginalised girls from low-income backgrounds (Ogina & Ramare, 2019). Moreover, economic instability and unemployment can exacerbate these issues, as families face uncertainty and are less willing to commit resources to education. The gendered wage gap also influences economic perceptions of women in education; if women are expected to earn less or face limited employment opportunities even after schooling, families may deprioritise their education, perceiving it as less economically beneficial (Hackman, 2010). Additionally, economic barriers intersect with other social determinants, such as rural residency, which often correlates with higher poverty rates and limited access to schools, transportation, and infrastructure. Girls and women in these settings face compounded disadvantages, including safety concerns and a lack of educational facilities nearby. Internationally, inadequate government funding for education, especially in developing countries, results in poorly resourced schools and insufficient support for marginalised groups, including girls. This economic neglect perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality, preventing many girls from realising their full potential (Khan, 2018). Addressing these economic barriers requires multifaceted strategies, such as targeted financial assistance, conditional cash transfer programmes, reducing school-related costs, and promoting economic empowerment for families. Only through comprehensive efforts that tackle both the direct costs of education, and the underlying economic disparities can equitable access for girls and women be achieved, unlocking their capabilities and fostering broader social progress. The economic construct significantly influences women's access to education by shaping societal perceptions of gender roles and economic value. When families view investing in girls' education as a less worthwhile expenditure due to anticipated limited economic returns, women are systematically deprived of opportunities that could empower them economically and socially. This economic marginalisation perpetuates gender inequalities, as women with limited education often face restricted employment prospects, lower wages, and reduced economic independence (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). The impact on women is profound: without access to quality education, women are more likely to experience poverty, have limited decision-making power, and remain reliant on male family members for financial support (World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, the cycle of economic deprivation can lead to increased vulnerability to exploitation, early marriage, and health disparities, reinforcing gendered inequalities across generations. Only through comprehensive strategies that address the immediate costs of education and the broader economic disparities can gender equity in education be achieved, ultimately enabling women to realise their full potential, contribute meaningfully to economic development, and break the cycle of poverty (UNESCO, 2019; Unterhalter & North, 2017).

Cultural and social norms

Cultural perceptions of gender roles significantly impact girls' and women's educational opportunities. In many societies, girls are expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities over education, which can lead to increased dropout rates (Andrews, 2010). Early marriage is another critical barrier; girls who marry young are often expected to leave school and focus on family life (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Community mobilisation and awareness campaigns that challenge these cultural norms are essential for fostering environments where girls are encouraged to pursue education (Malala Fund, 2021).

Safety and security issues

Safety concerns pose another significant barrier to girls' education, particularly in conflict-affected and unsafe environments. Fear of violence, harassment, and exploitation can deter families from sending their daughters to school (UN Women, 2018). In regions experiencing armed conflict, schools may be attacked or occupied by armed groups, further disrupting education (International Rescue Committee, 2019). Multi-sectoral approaches that address security concerns and create safe learning environments are crucial in these contexts. Programmes that include training teachers and community leaders on gender-based violence and developing school-police partnerships have shown promise (UNICEF, 2019).

Girls and women face numerous safety and security challenges that hinder their access to quality education worldwide. In many regions, cultural norms and societal attitudes often undermine their rights, resulting in restrictions on mobility and participation in educational activities (Khan, 2018). Fear of harassment, violence, or assault – whether on the way to school, within school premises, or in the community – deters many girls from attending regularly or enrolling at all. In conflict or unstable areas, the risk escalates, with girls vulnerable to kidnapping, forced marriage, or exploitation, which severely disrupts their educational opportunities (Ogina & Ramare, 2019). Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as poorly lit routes, a lack of safe transportation, and absence of secure school facilities, further compromise their safety. In some contexts, gender-based violence and discrimination within schools – such as sexual harassment by peers or teachers – create an unwelcoming environment, leading girls to drop out or avoid school altogether. Socio-economic factors also intersect with safety issues; impoverished families may prioritise immediate survival over education, especially when girls are perceived as more vulnerable or less likely to benefit from schooling. Furthermore, societal stigmas and cultural practices, like early marriage, often occur in tandem with safety concerns, further restricting girls' educational access. The absence of protective policies and enforcement mechanisms exacerbates these issues, leaving girls and women exposed to risks that threaten their physical safety and emotional well-being (Baker, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach – improving infrastructure, implementing stringent safety policies, raising community awareness, and fostering gender-sensitive environments within schools. Ensuring that girls and women feel safe and secure is essential – not only for their individual development but also for advancing broader social and economic progress (Pasque, 2011). Removing safety and security barriers is crucial to achieving inclusive education and empowering girls and women to reach their full potential.

Accessibility and infrastructure

Physical access to schools can also limit girls' educational opportunities. In many rural areas, schools are located far from home, making travel difficult, especially for girls who may face additional social restrictions (Sperling, Winthrop & Kwauk, 2016). The lack of proper sanitation facilities, such as private toilets for girls in schools, further exacerbates this issue, potentially leading to school absenteeism (Cook, Hammond, Kieler & Steinke, 2020). Investments in building schools in underserved areas and ensuring safe transport options can significantly improve access (World Bank, 2021).

The limitations for women in the context of accessibility and infrastructure include several interrelated challenges indicated below:

1) Physical access barriers. Girls and young women, particularly in rural or underserved areas, often face difficulties reaching educational institutions due to long distances from home to school. This can be compounded by safety concerns and social restrictions that limit their mobility (Sperling et al., 2016).
2) Safety and security concerns. Women and girls may experience safety risks during travel to and from school, which can discourage attendance or lead to absenteeism.
3) Lack of sanitation facilities. Insufficient or non-existent sanitation facilities, such as private toilets for girls, can make attending school uncomfortable or even unsafe, leading to increased dropout rates among female learners (Cook et al., 2020).
4) Socio-cultural restrictions. Social norms and cultural practices may restrict women's movement or participation in education, further limiting their access, especially in areas where infrastructure does not support safe and private facilities.
5) Limited transportation options. Inadequate or unsafe transportation infrastructure can disproportionately affect women, who may lack the means or social support to travel long distances safely.
6) Financial constraints. The costs associated with travel and sanitation facilities can be prohibitive, especially for families with limited economic resources, thus limiting women's access to education.

Health-related barriers

Health issues play a vital role in girls' ability to access education. Menstrual health management (MHM) is a critical factor, as inadequate facilities and stigma surrounding menstruation can lead to school absenteeism (Sommer, Caruso, Sahin, Calderon, Cavill, Mahon & Phillips-Howard, 2016). Additionally, nutrition plays a role; malnourished children, particularly girls, are less likely to attend school regularly (McCullough, 2014). Health education programmes that focus on MHM and nutrition can improve retention rates and academic performance among girls (Sommer et al., 2016).

Girls and women worldwide face a multitude of health-related barriers that significantly impede their access to quality education. These obstacles are often intertwined with socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors, creating a complex web that limits opportunities for learning (Andrews, 2010). One primary health-related barrier is reproductive health challenges. Women and girls experiencing early pregnancy or menstrual health issues frequently miss school days or drop out altogether. According to hooks (2000), the lack of access to affordable and adequate menstrual hygiene products, combined with insufficient sanitation facilities in schools, exacerbates absenteeism among menstruating girls, reinforcing gender disparities in education. Additionally, health conditions such as malnutrition and anaemia, prevalent in many developing regions, impair cognitive development and concentration, hindering academic performance. Poor health can also lead to frequent absences, reducing continuity and engagement with educational curricula. Mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, are increasingly recognised as significant barriers, especially for adolescent girls and women facing societal pressures, gender-based violence, or discrimination (McCullough, 2014). These mental health challenges can diminish motivation, self-esteem, and the ability to participate fully in classroom activities. Furthermore, the burden of caring for sick family members or managing household health needs often falls disproportionately on girls and women, diverting their time and energy away from learning pursuits (Sperling et al., 2016). Infectious diseases such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), tuberculosis, and other communicable illnesses also disproportionately affect girls and women in certain regions, leading to increased absenteeism and dropout rates. In some contexts, social stigma linked to health conditions further marginalises girls and women, discouraging them from attending school or seeking necessary health services (UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, the lack of access to healthcare services themselves acts as a barrier; without proper medical support, health issues remain unaddressed, compounding educational disadvantages. Cultural norms and gender roles can prevent girls and women from prioritising their health or seeking help, especially in conservative societies where discussing reproductive or sexual health is taboo. This silence often leads to untreated health problems that interfere with their educational pursuits. Overall, these health-related barriers not only restrict girls' and women's physical ability to attend and succeed in school but also undermine their confidence and aspirations, perpetuating cycles of gender inequality (Sommer et al., 2016). Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach that combines health services, gender-sensitive policies, improved sanitation facilities, and community engagement to ensure that girls and women can fully access and benefit from educational opportunities.

Policy and governance

Government policies and governance strategies are fundamental in dismantling barriers to education for girls and women. Education policies that specifically target gender disparities, such as affirmative action and scholarships for girls and women, have shown effectiveness in increasing enrolment (UNESCO, 2021). Collaboration between governments, NGOs, and international organisations is also vital to create a cohesive strategy that addresses the multifaceted barriers facing girls' education. Advocacy for policy implementation and monitoring is crucial as well, ensuring that commitments made by governments are implemented (Khan, 2018).

Success stories and best practices

Several programmes worldwide have successfully addressed barriers to girls' education. For instance, the "Let Girls Learn" initiative, launched by former First Lady, Michelle Obama, aimed to provide educational opportunities to girls globally through various partnerships (Baker, 2021:para. 7). Additionally, programmes implemented in countries such as Bangladesh, where community engagement and conditional cash transfers have increased girls' enrolment and retention rates, serve as successful models for replication (Pritchett & Sandefur, 2015).

The path to achieving gender parity in education requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the various barriers faced by girls and women. Economic challenges, cultural perceptions, safety concerns, accessibility issues, health-related barriers, and effective policy implementation all play critical roles in shaping educational access. Effective interventions must be contextualised based on the specific needs and circumstances of the communities involved (Sommer et al., 2016). Building on successful programmes and fostering partnerships among stakeholders can create a sustainable impact towards closing the gender gap in education. Continued efforts are essential not only to

promote gender equality in educational access but also to unlock the potential of girls and women as agents of change in society. One notable success story for women is the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, founded by Nobel laureate, Muhammad Yunus. The bank revolutionised women's empowerment through microfinance by providing small loans to women entrepreneurs who traditionally had limited access to formal banking services. This initiative not only enabled women to start small businesses, improve their economic standing, and contribute to their families, but also challenged societal norms that often marginalised women's roles in economic activities. Over the years, the Grameen Bank has demonstrated that empowering women financially can lead to broader social benefits, including improved health, education, and decision-making power within households and communities. Its success has inspired similar microfinance programmes globally, showcasing how targeted financial interventions can foster women's independence and drive sustainable development.

Methodology

Introduction

Access to education is a critical factor for the empowerment of girls and women, enabling them to improve their social, economic, and health outcomes. However, various barriers continue to hinder their educational opportunities worldwide. In this qualitative study I explored the personal perceptions and experiences of girls and women regarding the barriers they faced in accessing education. Using in-depth interviews, I gathered rich, nuanced data that may inform policy interventions aimed at enhancing educational access for this marginalised group.

Research Objectives

1) To identify and categorise the barriers (social, cultural, economic, and institutional) that girls and women face in accessing education.
2) To understand the personal experiences and perceptions of girls and women regarding these barriers.
3) To uncover coping strategies employed by girls and women in overcoming these barriers.
4) To explore the impact of these barriers on educational attainment and personal development.

Research Design

I employed a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2009), primarily focusing on semi-structured interviews to capture the complex and often subjective nature of the barriers to education for girls and women.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experiences. I recruited a sample of 15 participants:

- Girls aged 10 to 18 enrolled in school at the time (responses from nine girls are labelled as G1–9).
- Young women aged 19 to 25 who have dropped out or completed their education (responses from the six women are labelled (W1–W6).
- Women who have never had the opportunity to attend school.
- Educators and community leaders who can provide insights into the barriers faced by girls and women in educational settings.

Participants were recruited from various geographical areas, including urban, rural, and semi-urban communities to capture a wide range of perspectives. Local NGOs and community organisations focused on women's rights and education assisted in recruiting the participants (Anastassiou, 2017).

Data Collection

In-depth interviews

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to allow flexibility in exploring topics while ensuring that key areas of interest are covered (Rutledge & Hogg, 2024). An interview guide was developed to include open-ended questions that address the following themes:

1) Personal experiences with educational access.
2) Perceptions of social, cultural, and economic barriers.
3) Institutional challenges faced within educational settings.
4) Coping strategies and support systems.
5) Aspirations and future goals related to education.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting to encourage openness and honesty. In instances where face-to-face meetings were not feasible, virtual interviews were conducted using a secure video conferencing platform (Islam, 2020).

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis. Field notes were also taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns (Creswell, 2009) and themes within the qualitative data (Ott & Longnecker, 2024). The following steps were followed:

1) Familiarisation. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and I read through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data.
2) Initial coding. Using an open coding approach, significant phrases and sentences were highlighted, and initial codes were created to categorise the data.
3) Theme development. Codes were grouped into larger themes (Rutledge & Hogg, 2024) reflective of the barriers, experiences, coping strategies, and impacts identified in the data.

4) Reviewing themes. Themes were refined and reviewed in relation to the data set to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences.
5) Finalising themes. A concise narrative was created for each theme, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate their perspectives.
6) Validation. Member checking was employed; a sub-sample of participants was invited to review the findings and provide feedback on the interpretations made, ensuring validity and trustworthiness.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the institutional review board prior to the start of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any time, and how the data would be used (Cacciattolo, 2015). Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing the data.

Limitations

While qualitative research provides deep insights, it may not be generalisable to larger populations due to the limited sample size. The potential for interviewer bias must also be acknowledged, as my perspective may have influenced data interpretation. However, rigorous adherence to qualitative methodology helped mitigate these issues.

With this qualitative study I aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the barriers faced by girls and women in accessing education. By capturing their lived experiences through interviews, I sought to inform stakeholders and policymakers on targeted interventions that could facilitate better educational access, ultimately contributing to gender equity in education and empowerment of women and girls. The insights gained from this research can pave the way for future studies and programmes aimed at addressing the systemic issues that hinder educational access for this vulnerable population.

Findings

Socio-cultural Barriers

Socio-cultural norms and traditions significantly restrict girls' access to education. In many societies, longstanding beliefs and customs diminish the perceived value of educating girls, often relegating them to domestic roles.

- Early marriage and childbearing. One principal noted: "*In some communities girls are married off early, which cuts their education short*." In support of the statement, G3 said: "*My parents wanted me to marry soon because it's what's expected in our culture*." According to the UN Women report, approximately 12 million girls are married before age 18 annually, severely limiting their educational prospects.
- A lack of role models. A teacher commented that "[w]*ithout women role models in leadership or teaching positions, girls find it harder to see education as a pathway to success*." G7 expressed feelings of invisibility: "*I rarely see women teachers or leaders, so I don't think I can become one myself*."

Additional participant responses

My community believes girls should stay home and help with chores, not go to school (G1).
When I see other girls getting married early, I feel like my education doesn't matter (G5).

Economic Barriers

Financial constraints are a primary obstacle for many families when deciding whether girls should attend school.

- School-related costs. A female participant noted: "*The cost of uniforms, books, and transportation often prevents girls from enrolling or continuing school*." G2 added: "*My family cannot afford school fees, so I had to stop after primary school*."
- Opportunity costs. Families often rely on girls' labour at home or in economic activities, leading to withdrawal from school when chores or economic needs arise. G8 shared the following:, "*I had to leave school to help my family sell goods because no one else could*."

Additional participant responses

Many families see boys' education as more important because they will earn money in the future (W2).
Girls are often expected to work at home, which prevents them from going to school regularly (G4).

Institutional Barriers

Structural deficiencies within educational systems also impede girls' access.

- Inadequate infrastructure. Many rural schools lack basic facilities, especially sanitation facilities for girls. G4 said: "*I skip school when I have my period because there is no place to change or wash*."
- Curriculum gender bias. Curricula often reinforce stereotypes, with limited representation of women or gender-equitable content. A teacher commented: "*Materials rarely show women in leadership roles, which discourages girls from aiming high*."
- Teacher bias. Male-dominated teaching staff may unconsciously perpetuate stereotypes. G6 stated: "*Sometimes teachers expect less from girls or don't encourage us as much as boys*."

Additional participant responses

The way subjects are taught doesn't include stories about women or girls, so I feel less interested (G9).
Teacher expectations can influence whether a girl feels capable of succeeding or not (G5).

Political Barriers

The political environment significantly impacts access to education for girls and women.

- Conflict and instability. In conflict zones, education systems often collapse, and girls are especially vulnerable. G9 shared, "*Sometimes, schools are closed because of fighting, and I worry about my safety*." W3 noted: "*During war, girls are at higher risk of violence, which makes it impossible to attend school*."

- Weak enforcement of policies. Despite policies designed to promote girls' education, implementation remains weak. G8 said: "*Even when there are scholarships, they are not always given out fairly or monitored properly*."

Additional participant response

> *Governments need to do more to ensure laws supporting girls' education are actually enforced* (W6).

Discussion

To strengthen efforts toward educational equity, it is crucial to address these multifaceted barriers to girls' and women's education holistically. Engaging communities to challenge harmful norms, increasing economic support for families, developing gender-sensitive curricula, improving school infrastructure, and ensuring political commitment and enforcement are all essential steps. Only through coordinated and sustained interventions can we hope to create an inclusive educational environment where girls and women have equal opportunities to learn and succeed.

Recommendations

To effectively address these barriers, a multi-faceted approach must be employed.

1) Community engagement. Engaging local communities in discussions about the value of education for girls and women can help change entrenched social norms. Empowering communities to advocate for girls' education can lead to shifts in attitudes and behaviour.
2) Economic support and incentives. Providing financial assistance, such as conditional cash transfers (by governments) to families who send their daughters to school, can alleviate economic burdens and incentivise education. Scholarships specifically targeted at girls and women can also encourage enrolment and retention.
3) Improving educational infrastructure. Investment in schools that provide safe, gender-sensitive environments, including proper sanitation facilities, can significantly enhance girls' educational experiences.
4) Training educators. Professional development programmes for teachers focusing on gender sensitivity and inclusive teaching practices can mitigate biased attitudes and promote equitable learning environments.
5) Policy advocation and enforcement. Strengthening laws that protect girls' rights to education and ensuring adequate budget allocation for education sectors can create a more conducive environment for girls to access schooling.

Conclusion

The aim with this study was to explore the multifaceted barriers hindering girls' and women's access to education and to examine the strategies implemented to overcome these obstacles. Through an extensive review of the literature, several key insights emerged. Historically rooted in patriarchal societal norms, gender inequality in education persists due to economic disparities, cultural perceptions, safety concerns, infrastructural limitations, health-related issues, and policy gaps. Economic barriers, such as poverty and costs associated with schooling, significantly restrict access, particularly for marginalised groups in low-income and rural settings. Cultural norms and early marriage practices further diminish girls' educational opportunities, while safety and security concerns, especially in conflict-affected areas, pose substantial risks. Infrastructure deficits, including inadequate sanitation and transportation, alongside health issues like menstrual hygiene and malnutrition, compound these challenges. Effective policy interventions, community engagement, and innovative programmes such as conditional cash transfers and microfinance initiatives, have demonstrated success in addressing some of these barriers. Overall, the literature underscores that achieving gender equity in education requires a comprehensive, context-specific approach involving multi-sectoral strategies, policy commitment, and community participation. These insights highlight the critical need for sustained efforts to dismantle obstacles and empower girls and women, ultimately fostering social and economic development worldwide.

Notes

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