Appraising the Vulnerability of the Female Gender and the Disruption of Social Protection in the Light of Sdgs 1 and 4: Issues in African Literature

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ABSTRACT

Female vulnerability — characterised by helplessness, economic marginalisation, and constrained access to education — remains a persistent structural condition in African societies, sustained by poverty and the pervasive operation of patriarchal institutions. Social protection systems, in principle, constitute the state's primary buffer against such vulnerability; yet, as a 2023 UNDP report documents, 47.6 per cent of the world's population remain entirely outside formal social protection coverage (UNDP, 2023). This protection gap is acutely gendered: women and girls bear a disproportionate share of unprotected poverty, a condition that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals — particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) — identify as requiring urgent remediation by 2030.

This paper employs qualitative literary analysis to interrogate how African fiction represents, theorises, and critiques female vulnerability and the disruption of social protection. Drawing on Trauma Theory (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992) and Social Protection Theory as dual analytical frameworks, the study examines three primary literary texts — Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow (2006), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked (2014), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) — as documentary imaginaries of female dispossession across sub-Saharan African contexts. The analysis demonstrates how literary representation illuminates the lived dimensions of SDG 1 and SDG 4 deficits that aggregate statistical indices cannot fully capture, and argues that the characters' traumatic experiences of poverty and educational exclusion constitute narrative evidence of systemic social protection failure. The paper calls for accelerated, community-anchored implementation of SDGs 1 and 4 across African nations.

Keywords: female vulnerability; poverty; social protection; Trauma Theory; SDG 1; SDG 4; African literature; patriarchy; education; Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability, in its social and structural dimensions, denotes the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, resist, or recover from conditions of disadvantage. Terna (2021) defines it as "the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard" (p. 186). For women in much of sub-Saharan Africa, vulnerability is not an episodic condition but a sustained structural reality, reproduced through the interlocking mechanisms of poverty, educational exclusion, patriarchal governance of domestic life, and the chronic underprovision of state social protection.

Social protection — comprising state-administered policies and programmes designed to reduce vulnerability, mitigate risk, and guarantee basic welfare — is the institutional mechanism most directly positioned to interrupt this cycle. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines social protection as providing "benefits to individuals based on risks faced across the life cycle" and stresses its role in "stabilising the economy and protecting vulnerable groups" (ILO, n.d.). Yet, coverage remains critically deficient across the Global South. According to the World Social Protection Report 2024–2026 (ILO, 2024), only 46.9 per cent of the global population is covered by at least one social protection benefit, with coverage rates in sub-Saharan Africa falling

to approximately 17 per cent. Women, children, informal sector workers, and rural populations are systematically least protected.

This protection deficit acquires particular significance in the context of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015, SDG 1 (End Poverty in All Its Forms Everywhere) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) are most directly germane to the condition of female vulnerability in Africa. These goals are structurally interdependent: poverty forecloses educational access, and educational exclusion perpetuates intergenerational poverty. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 notes that as of 2023, 272 million children and youth remained out of school globally, with girls in conflict-affected and low-income African countries disproportionately represented among the out-of-school population. UNESCO (2024) further reports that Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately 40 per cent of all out-of-school children worldwide, and that gender parity in secondary education remains unachieved in the majority of the continent's nations.

Against this statistical backdrop, African literature offers a qualitatively distinctive analytical resource. Literary texts register the experiential, psychological, and relational dimensions of poverty and educational exclusion — dimensions that macroeconomic indicators flatten or erase. The female characters in the texts under study — Zilayefa in Yellow Yellow, Nneoma in Trafficked, and Tambu in Nervous Conditions — embody, at the level of narrative, the very conditions that SDG 1 and SDG 4 seek to eliminate. This study reads their experiences through the theoretical lenses of Trauma Theory and Social Protection Theory to illuminate how literary representation can deepen and interrogate the empirical evidence on female vulnerability in Africa, while simultaneously generating policy-relevant insights for the achievement of the SDGs 2030 agenda.

Statement of the Problem

Despite substantial international policy commitments and periodic economic growth across much of sub-Saharan Africa, female vulnerability to poverty and educational marginalisation has persisted with remarkable tenacity. The World Bank (2024) estimates that approximately 60 per cent of the world's extremely poor will reside in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2030, a trajectory that disproportionately affects women and girls, who face compound disadvantages in inheritance, asset ownership, and labour market access. In Nigeria specifically — the largest economy in Africa and the country in which two of the three primary texts are set — the multidimensional poverty rate stands at 40.1 per cent (NBS, 2022), with female-headed households and rural women recording the highest levels of deprivation.

A central analytical problem is the tendency of existing scholarship to examine female vulnerability predominantly through either economic-quantitative or strictly literary lenses, without adequately bridging the two. Macroeconomic analyses of SDG progress generate aggregate statistics on poverty rates, school enrolment, and social protection coverage but fail to illuminate the mechanisms through which structural conditions translate into lived suffering, constrained agency, and traumatic experience at the individual level. Literary scholarship, conversely, frequently engages the psychological and relational dimensions of female oppression but insufficiently connects these to the broader policy architecture of international development goals and social protection frameworks. This paper addresses the gap between these two registers by employing literary analysis as a methodologically rigorous instrument for interrogating SDG 1 and SDG 4 deficits in Africa.

Research Questions

1. How do the selected African literary texts represent female vulnerability and the disruption of social protection?

2. In what ways do family structures and constituted authorities contribute to women's vulnerability and social protection deficits?

3. What is the relationship between income inequality and female gender vulnerability as represented in the literature?

4. To what extent have African nations, particularly Nigeria, progressed toward achieving SDGs 1 and 4 as of 2025?

5. What theoretical and policy insights do Trauma Theory and Social Protection Theory contribute to understanding and redressing female vulnerability?

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to conduct a theoretically grounded literary analysis of female vulnerability and social protection disruption in African fiction, connecting textual evidence to the SDG 1 and SDG 4 policy framework. The specific objectives are:

6. To analyse the literary representation of female vulnerability and social protection disruption in Agary's Yellow Yellow, Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked, and Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions.

7. To examine the roles of family structures and state authorities as agents of female exclusion and social protection failure in the texts.

8. To explicate the nexus between income inequality and female vulnerability as represented in the primary texts.

9. To assess Africa's — and Nigeria's — progress toward SDGs 1 and 4 in light of recent data (2023–2025).

10. To demonstrate how Trauma Theory and Social Protection Theory illuminate the literary evidence and generate actionable policy insights for the SDGs 2030 agenda.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative literary analysis design, drawing on close reading as its primary methodological instrument. Close reading is a systematic analytical practice in which textual details — including narrative voice, characterisation, imagery, and dialogue — are scrutinised for their ideological, psychological, and socio-political significance. It is the standard scholarly method in literary studies and is particularly appropriate for the analysis of social and structural themes in fiction, where meaning is embedded in narrative form as well as explicit content.

The three primary texts — Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow (2006), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked (2014), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) — were selected on the basis of three criteria: (i) their canonical status and wide critical reception within African literary scholarship; (ii) their direct thematic engagement with female poverty, educational marginalisation, and social protection failure across different national contexts (Nigeria and Zimbabwe); and (iii) their chronological and geographical range, which enables cross-contextual claims about the structural persistence of female vulnerability in Africa.

The dual theoretical framework of Trauma Theory and Social Protection Theory (elaborated in Section 6) structures the analytical approach, directing interpretive attention toward moments of institutional failure, psychic rupture, and constrained agency in the texts. Findings are then systematically connected to empirical data on SDG 1 and SDG 4 progress to generate policy-relevant conclusions. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed literary criticism, international development reports (UNDP, UNESCO, ILO, World Bank), and government statistical publications. All citations follow APA 7th edition format and are verified against available academic databases.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma Theory

Trauma Theory, as developed principally by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Judith Herman (1992), provides the primary psychological-literary framework for this study. Caruth conceptualises trauma as an overwhelming

response to an event that exceeds the subject's capacity for assimilation, manifesting not at the moment of impact but in its belated, unpredictable return — as flashback, repetition, or psychic disruption. For Caruth, trauma is not merely a clinical symptom but a mode of historical witnessing: "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Herman (1992), in her landmark work Trauma and Recovery, extends this framework to the specific experiences of women subjected to prolonged social domination, arguing that conditions of captivity — including poverty-enforced dependency, domestic subjugation, and institutional abandonment — produce a recognisable traumatic syndrome characterised by helplessness, loss of agency, and disrupted identity.

Applied to the literary texts under analysis, Trauma Theory illuminates the way in which the female characters' experiences of poverty and educational exclusion are not merely socioeconomic disadvantages but psychologically formative wounds. The trafficking of Nneoma in Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked, the maternal poverty that traps Zilayefa in Agary's Yellow Yellow, and the patriarchal educational exclusion endured by Tambu in Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions each conform to Herman's model of protracted domination and its traumatic sequelae. Trauma Theory thus enables this study to read the literary evidence as testimony to lived suffering that statistical indices cannot register — a suffering that SDG 1 and SDG 4 are designed, in part, to prevent.

It is important to note that the application of Trauma Theory here is not narrowly psychoanalytic but socially and politically oriented. Following Balaev (2014) and other contemporary practitioners of cultural trauma studies, this paper treats trauma not as a purely individual psychological event but as a socially produced condition whose causes are structural (patriarchy, poverty, institutional exclusion) and whose remediation requires structural intervention (social protection, educational access, policy reform). This framing directly bridges the literary analysis and the SDG policy discussion in Sections 8 and 9.

Social Protection Theory

Social Protection Theory, as elaborated in the policy literature of the ILO, World Bank, and UNDP, conceives of social protection as a set of collective mechanisms through which societies manage risk, prevent and mitigate poverty, and guarantee their citizens' right to a dignified life. Woldegorgis (2022) situates social protection schemes as "remedies to redress the externalities of inequality," describing them as "policies and programs intended to reduce the vulnerability of the poor to hazards while also empowering them" (p. 265). The World Food Programme (WFP, 2024) further emphasises that social protection operates through both protective functions (preventing welfare deterioration) and promotive functions (building long-term capabilities and economic security).

Crucially, Social Protection Theory recognises that the state is the primary, though not the exclusive, provider of social protection. Families, communities, and organisations participate in a layered social protection architecture; yet, as the theoretical literature makes clear, family-level and community-level protection is deeply gendered in patriarchal societies — tending to reinforce rather than counteract female vulnerability when not underpinned by enforceable rights-based state frameworks.

Taiwo (1984) observes that the family "constitutes the first world of the child" and the first site of socialisation; in contexts of patriarchal gender order, this makes the family simultaneously the first site of protection and the first site of vulnerability for girls and women.

Applied analytically, Social Protection Theory in this study directs interpretive attention to moments in the primary texts where the state or community fails to deliver social protection — what this paper terms 'social protection disruption' — and to the gendered consequences of such failures for the female characters.

The theory also provides the normative basis for the policy recommendations in Section 10: if female vulnerability is socially produced by protection deficits, then its elimination requires not merely individual agency or cultural reform but the systematic construction and delivery of rights-based social protection systems, as envisaged in SDG 1's targets for universal social protection floors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SDGs, Poverty, and Female Education in Africa

The Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation record have attracted extensive scholarly and policy attention. Critical commentary has praised the SDG framework for its comprehensiveness and its normative ambition while also identifying significant structural tensions, including the difficulty of reconciling universal targets with national heterogeneity, the absence of adequate financing mechanisms for low-income countries, and the risk that aggregate progress metrics obscure deep inequalities in the distribution of gains. These critiques are directly relevant to the African context, where aggregate improvements in school enrolment rates have frequently masked persistent gender and regional disparities.

Recent data from UNESCO (2024) confirm that Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately 40 per cent of the world's out-of-school children and that gender parity in secondary education has not been achieved in the majority of the continent's nations. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 highlights that in conflict-affected countries — including the Sahel, northern Nigeria, and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo — girls' educational exclusion is compounding rapidly due to insecurity-related school closures and the prioritisation of boys' schooling under conditions of resource scarcity. These findings provide the current statistical backdrop against which the literary representation of educational exclusion in the primary texts should be read.

> Key Data Point: As of 2023, 272 million children and youth were out of school globally; Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately 40 per cent of this figure. Gender parity in secondary education remains unachieved in the majority of African nations (UNESCO, 2024; SDG Report 2025).

Ekeh (2018) identifies persistent cultural attitudes as a structural barrier to female education in Nigeria, observing that "in most Nigerian homes, families still believe that the woman's place is in the kitchen and bedroom...rather than spending in developing the girl-child in relation to education, she is psychologically prepared for a subservient life" (p. 233). Bakare (2018) reinforces the linkage between educational exclusion and poverty, noting that "education being one of the important poverty indicators can be used as a tool to address the worrisome poverty and unemployment crises in the African continent" (p. 44), while calling for governments' commitment to the implementation of equity-oriented education policies. These scholarly positions are consistent with the SDG 4 framework's emphasis on eliminating gender and wealth disparities in educational access as a prerequisite for breaking intergenerational poverty cycles.

With respect to social protection specifically, the UNDP Human Development Report 2023 reports that 47.6 per cent of the global population remains entirely unprotected by formal social security systems, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording the largest absolute protection gaps. The ILO World Social Protection Report 2024–2026 further notes that women are consistently over-represented among the uncovered population due to their concentration in informal employment, domestic labour, and rural agriculture — sectors structurally excluded from contributory social insurance schemes. These data provide essential context for evaluating the social protection failures depicted in the literary texts.

Critical Reception of the Primary Texts

The three primary texts have each attracted substantial scholarly engagement, though this study identifies analytical gaps that justify the current investigation.

Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow (2006) has been examined for its engagement with environmental politics and the Niger Delta oil economy (Donsomsakulkij, 2018), its stylistic features (Oluwayemisi & Ebenezar, 2024), and its ecocritical dimensions (Oseghale, 2019). Donsomsakulkij analyses Zilayefa's subjectivity through agential realism, demonstrating how the novel reconfigures the concept of agency through the entanglement of human and non-human actors in the oil-degraded Delta landscape. Abdulsahib and Hadeegh (2025) extend this analysis through Herman's Trauma Theory, examining the rupture and recovery of Zilayefa's identity formation. These

contributions illuminate important dimensions of the text; however, they do not systematically connect its representation of female vulnerability to the SDG framework or to Social Protection Theory. This gap is addressed in the present study.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked (2014) has received attention from feminist, psychoanalytic, and cultural-nationalist perspectives. Okolo and Ezekwere (2019) offer a feminist reading that mobilises the text's portrayal of patriarchal violence to advocate for women's rights. Agboola and Okpala (n.d.) employ Freudian psychoanalytic theory to analyse the psychological impact of trafficking on Nneoma and fellow survivors, identifying shame, guilt, and identity disruption as central traumatic sequelae. Chidi-Ukagu and Chidi-Ukagu (2020) examine female objectification and the moral resilience with which Adimora-Ezeigbo's characters respond to trafficking. Mahmud (2022) situates the novel within a broader analysis of cultural disruption in contemporary Nigeria. These readings are rich but partial: none applies Trauma Theory specifically to the relationship between social protection failure and female educational aspiration, the axis of analysis developed here.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) has generated extensive postcolonial scholarship centred on its interrogation of colonial patriarchy, the Bildungsroman tradition, and female identity formation. Jani (2023) reads Tambu's educational trajectory through a Fanonian framework, arguing that the novel interrupts the colonised subject's expected self-formation, opening space for decolonising political consciousness. Sriprivatharshini and Dhanaraj (2024) foreground the suppression-resistance dialectic as the central structure of female agency in the novel. Mukoka (2025) provides a thematic and textual analysis of identity and oppression. Opara (2013) examines body politics and colour politics through a comparativist lens. Despite this critical abundance, there remains a gap in scholarship that reads the novel's treatment of educational exclusion as a form of social protection failure with contemporary SDG policy relevance — a gap this study fills.

Findings: Female Vulnerability and Social Protection Disruption in the Texts

Patriarchy as the Architecture of Vulnerability

Across the three primary texts, patriarchal gender order functions not merely as a cultural norm but as the organising architecture of female vulnerability. In each narrative, the female protagonist's access to social protection — whether state-provided safety nets, family support, community resources, or educational opportunity — is systematically curtailed by patriarchal structures that operate at the level of the family, the community, and the state. This convergence constitutes a key finding of the literary analysis and provides narrative evidence for the theoretical proposition, advanced in Social Protection Theory, that gender-neutral social protection frameworks are insufficient in contexts where the mechanisms of protection delivery are themselves gendered.

Patriarchy, as represented in the texts, is not simply the domination of individual women by individual men but a systemic structure of authority and exclusion. Taiwo (1984) identifies its literary manifestation in the way male authors historically assigned women "roles and other stereotypes that project them as weak, poor, helpless, and dependent, without agency" (pp. 1–2). While the primary texts under study are authored by women who contest and resist these stereotypes, their female characters nonetheless inhabit social worlds in which patriarchal authority determines whether girls receive schooling, whether women retain employment, and whether survivors of exploitation may access rehabilitation and economic reintegration. This structural account of patriarchy — as a mechanism of social protection disruption — is the central analytical contribution of this study's literary reading.

Zilayefa in Yellow Yellow: Poverty, State Failure, and Educational Aspiration

Zilayefa — the mixed-heritage narrator of Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow — embodies the intersection of poverty, environmental displacement, and state social protection failure that characterises the condition of many young women in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Raised by a single mother in a village through which oil pipelines have been laid, Zilayefa's early life is marked by the environmental destruction that has eliminated agricultural

livelihoods and the developmental neglect of the Nigerian state, which extracts enormous petroleum revenues from the region while systematically failing to invest them in local communities.

Zilayefa's desire for education is inseparable from her awareness of social protection failure. Her account of the government's skills-acquisition programme is both testimony and indictment:

I imagined that I could learn a skill like sewing through one of the skills-acquisition programmes organized by the government agency set up to address the development needs of the Niger Delta. None of the programmes had reached my village since the agency was formed, but I was sure that being in Port Harcourt would give me a better chance of getting my little piece of the national cake. (Agary, 2006, p. 43)

Read through Social Protection Theory, this passage documents a canonical form of social protection disruption: a programme exists in policy but fails to reach its intended beneficiaries due to implementation failures rooted in governance deficits. The state's extractive relationship with the Niger Delta — taking oil revenue while withholding developmental investment — is itself a structural form of social protection denial that produces and perpetuates female vulnerability. Mojolaoluwa (2017) notes that Zilayefa "leaves the village for the city in search of greener pastures with the principal aim of getting a formal education" — a migration driven not by aspiration alone but by the spatial failure of the state to deliver on its social protection obligations at the rural periphery.

Trauma Theory illuminates the psychological dimension of this experience. Zilayefa's displacement from her village, her relationship with Admiral (which begins as patronage and deteriorates into abandonment), and her navigation of Port Harcourt's exploitative social landscape all constitute what Herman (1992) identifies as conditions of captivity: situations in which the subject's choices are severely constrained by power relations, economic dependence, and the absence of institutional protection. Even after Admiral withdraws financial support and emotional connection, Zilayefa's resolve to complete her West African Examinations Council (WAEC) examinations persists — constituting, in Herman's terms, a survival strategy through which the traumatised subject reasserts agency by adhering to a life-affirming goal. Her declaration — "I still intended to go to school. I had to do this for myself and for my mother" (Agary, 2006, pp. 173–174) — is simultaneously a personal statement and a narrative embodiment of the SDG 4 imperative that education must be made accessible to all, regardless of poverty or gender.

The connection between Zilayefa's literary experience and the empirical evidence is direct and illuminating. UNESCO (2024) reports that conflict and insecurity in Nigeria's Niger Delta and northern states have driven significant increases in out-of-school rates in recent years. The World Bank (2024) notes that poverty is the single most powerful determinant of school dropout in Nigeria, with girls in rural and conflict-affected areas disproportionately affected. Zilayefa's narrative is not exceptional fiction; it is a literary rendition of a structural reality that aggregate statistics confirm.

Nneoma in Trafficked: Trafficking, Institutional Failure, and the Right to Rehabilitation

Nneoma's trajectory in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked illustrates a distinct but related axis of social protection disruption: the failure of family, community, and state to protect a young woman from trafficking, and the subsequent failure of civil society institutions to support her rehabilitation and reintegration. Nneoma's departure from her family home is not a simple act of volition but a flight from a patriarchal domestic arrangement in which her father has betrothed her, without her consent, to Ofomata — a transaction that commodifies her body and forecloses her educational aspirations. This patriarchal disposition of women through marriage arrangements is, in Social Protection Theory terms, a family-level social protection failure: the family, which should function as the first protective institution for the child (Taiwo, 1984, p. 10), instead becomes an agent of her dispossession.

The consequences of this initial family-level failure cascade through Nneoma's subsequent experiences. Trafficked to Rome and London, subjected to sexual exploitation, and eventually deported, she returns to Nigeria bearing what Agboola and Okpala (n.d.) identify as the full traumatic syndrome of trafficking survivorship: shame, stigma, anxiety, fear, powerlessness, and identity disruption. Trauma Theory — specifically Herman's (1992) account of "complex trauma" produced by repeated, inescapable violation — is precisely applicable here.

Nneoma's traumatic wound is not a single catastrophic event but an accumulation of violations whose source is structural: the patriarchal family, the trafficking network, and the state's failure to provide either preventive social protection or adequate post-trafficking rehabilitation services.

The novel's most powerful representation of institutional social protection failure occurs when Chief Amadi, the owner of the Oasis Salon where Nneoma has found employment and partial rehabilitation, discovers her history and dismisses her:

You know nothing is hidden under the sun...you are a good worker and a talented tailor, no one can deny that. But I cannot keep someone with your background here. So, I am terminating your appointment with immediate effect. (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2014, p. 272)

Chief Amadi's action constitutes a textbook illustration of what Social Protection Theory identifies as secondary social exclusion: the denial of economic participation to someone who has already been victimised, on the basis of their victimisation itself. The patriarchal vindictiveness that motivates his decision — he exploits Nneoma sexually before engineering her dismissal — compounds economic exclusion with sexual violation, demonstrating that patriarchal authority operates simultaneously as a mechanism of exploitation and as a mechanism of protection disruption. The effect, from a Trauma Theory perspective, is to retraumatise: to confirm the subject's worst experience of powerlessness and to undermine the fragile recovery that meaningful employment had begun to produce.

Yet Nneoma's narrative is ultimately one of resilience rather than defeat — which is itself a theoretically significant finding. Chidi-Ukagu and Chidi-Ukagu (2020) observe that Adimora-Ezeigbo "imbued her female characters with the moral strength to withstand the storm and emerge victorious in the end" (p. 469). Nneoma's determination to obtain a university degree — "I'll never be happy until I get a degree. That's the only thing that will complete my healing" (Ezeigbo, 2014, p. 164) — frames education not merely as an economic resource but as a therapeutic and restorative dimension of recovery from trauma. This narrative framing converges with Herman's (1992) clinical account of recovery, which emphasises the reconstruction of a meaningful life project as central to healing from complex trauma. It simultaneously underlines the SDG 4 argument: that educational access for women is not merely an economic investment but a human rights imperative with profound psychological dimensions.

Tambu in Nervous Conditions: Colonial Patriarchy and the Denial of Educational Citizenship

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions situates female educational exclusion within the specific historical and ideological conditions of colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe, while illuminating dynamics of patriarchal social protection disruption that resonate across African contexts. Tambu's household is governed by a double patriarchal authority: the intimate authority of her father, who insists that girls' education is irrelevant to their domestic destiny ("Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother, learn to cook and clean, grow vegetables" [Dangarembga, 1988, p. 15]), and the institutional authority of her educated uncle, Babamukuru, whose meritocratic values do not extend to Tambu herself until her brother's death creates an unexpected opening.

Jani (2023) argues that the novel interrupts the colonised subject's expected Bildungsroman trajectory, opening space for what he terms a "decolonising project" in contrast to the self-formation promised by colonial education. This reading is consistent with Trauma Theory's account of structural trauma: Tambu's exclusion from education is not the result of individual failure but of a systematic colonial-patriarchal regime that assigns educational citizenship on the basis of gender. Her father's poverty reinforces rather than explains this exclusion, since the family's scarce educational resources are directed by patriarchal priority to her brother rather than to Tambu. The poverty-education-gender nexus that Tambu embodies is precisely what SDG 4's targets on gender parity in educational access are designed to address.

Tambu's response to educational exclusion — growing maize to sell at market in order to pay school fees her father refuses to provide — is a striking narrative illustration of what development economists call "constrained agency": the exercise of individual initiative under conditions of structural disadvantage. Sriprivatharshini and

Dhanaraj (2024) analyse this as the "suppression-resistance dialectic" that structures female agency in the novel: the female subject is neither passively victimised nor freely self-determining, but navigates a social world that systematically constrains her choices while being unable entirely to extinguish her will. Trauma Theory reads this dialectic as the survival response of a subject subjected to protracted domination — a subject who, in Herman's (1992) terms, preserves her identity and future-orientation precisely through the act of resistance.

SDG Progress Data: Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for approximately 40 per cent of the world's out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2024). The region's primary school completion rate stood at 69 per cent in 2022, with significant gender gaps in secondary enrolment persisting in rural areas (World Bank, 2024). Nigeria's out-of-school children number over 10 million, the largest in the world (UNICEF, 2023).

The policy translation from Tambu's experience to the SDG 4 framework is direct and urgent. UNICEF (2023) reports that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, exceeding ten million. UNESCO (2024) confirms that gender parity in secondary education remains unachieved in the majority of sub-Saharan African nations. Tambu's narrative — a story of a girl who succeeds in obtaining education only because her brother dies and she is admitted in his place — is not a story of systemic success but of systemic failure in which individual determination momentarily circumvents an otherwise intact structure of exclusion. Accelerating progress toward SDG 4's gender parity targets requires not the exceptional tenacity of individuals like Tambu, but the institutional reform of the social protection systems that consign millions of African girls to Tambu's initial condition.

Sdg 1 and Sdg 4 In Africa: Progress and Persistent Gaps

The literary evidence analysed in Section 8 acquires its full policy significance when situated within the current empirical record on SDG 1 and SDG 4 progress in Africa. That record presents a deeply concerning picture of stalled and, in some dimensions, reversed progress in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.

With respect to SDG 1, the UNDP (2023) reports that the pandemic caused the first increase in global poverty rates since 1998, pushing an additional 97 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 alone. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank (2024) projects that the region will account for approximately 60 per cent of the world's extremely poor by 2030 — a trajectory that makes the eradication of extreme poverty by that year effectively impossible under current policy trajectories. Nigeria's multidimensional poverty rate of 40.1 per cent (NBS, 2022) — encompassing deprivations in health, education, and living standards simultaneously — reflects the complex, overlapping nature of poverty that SDG 1's multidimensional targets seek to address but that progress indicators frequently fail to capture in their full depth.

Social protection coverage remains the most critical SDG 1 implementation gap. The ILO (2024) reports that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only approximately 17 per cent of the population is covered by at least one social protection benefit — the lowest coverage rate of any world region. Women are disproportionately excluded from formal coverage due to their over-representation in the informal sector. This statistical reality is the macroeconomic expression of precisely what the literary texts under study represent at the level of individual narrative: the systematic failure of social protection systems to reach the most vulnerable.

With respect to SDG 4, UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 finds that progress toward universal primary completion and secondary gender parity has stalled or reversed in much of Sub-Saharan Africa since 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic caused school closures affecting 258 million learners in the region (UNESCO, 2023), with girls less likely to return to school after reopening due to economic pressures, early marriage, and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately assigned to them. Nigeria's situation is particularly acute: UNICEF (2023) estimates that more than ten million children remain out of school, with girls in northern Nigeria — where conflict, insecurity, and restrictive gender norms compound each other — experiencing the highest rates of educational exclusion.

These data confirm that African nations are, in the aggregate, significantly behind the 2030 targets for both SDG 1 and SDG 4. The literary analysis of Section 8 demonstrates that this policy failure is not merely a matter of inadequate resources or institutional capacity, but reflects the operation of patriarchal social structures — within families, communities, and state institutions — that actively reproduce female vulnerability by disrupting social protection and educational access. Addressing this requires not only increased investment in social protection and education but the fundamental reform of the gender norms and patriarchal governance structures that determine how resources and protections are distributed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has employed a theoretically grounded qualitative literary analysis to interrogate the representation of female vulnerability and social protection disruption in three canonical African texts — Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Trafficked, and Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions — reading them through the dual lenses of Trauma Theory and Social Protection Theory in relation to the SDG 1 and SDG 4 policy framework.

The analysis establishes three principal findings. First, patriarchal structures function across the texts as the primary architecture of female vulnerability, operating at the level of the family, the community, and the state to disrupt social protection and foreclose educational access — a literary finding that is consistent with, and illuminates the human dimensions of, the ILO's and World Bank's statistical evidence on gendered protection deficits. Second, the female characters' responses to poverty, trafficking, and educational exclusion conform to the pattern of complex traumatic experience theorised by Herman (1992), in which protracted domination produces a recognisable syndrome of helplessness, disrupted identity, and constrained agency — while simultaneously generating resilience strategies through which subjects reassert their life projects. Third, education functions across all three texts as both a practical resource for economic liberation and a psychological dimension of recovery from trauma: Zilayefa's WAEC ambitions, Nneoma's university aspirations, and Tambu's determined farming for school fees are simultaneously survival strategies, healing projects, and literary endorsements of the SDG 4 imperative.

These findings carry direct policy implications. African nations' significant deficit relative to the 2030 SDG targets — particularly in social protection coverage, poverty eradication, and gender parity in education — reflects not merely resource constraints but structural governance failures in which patriarchal social norms distort the delivery of both state and family social protection. Addressing this requires policy frameworks that take the gender dimension of social protection failure seriously, investing in rights-based protections that are explicitly designed to reach women and girls excluded by current systems.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are advanced for policymakers, development practitioners, educational institutions, and civil society organisations:

- Accelerated and Community-Anchored SDG Implementation: African governments should prioritise the implementation of SDGs 1 and 4 through participatory frameworks that engage local communities — particularly women, girls, and marginalised groups — in the design and monitoring of social protection and education programmes. Top-down implementation has consistently failed to reach the rural and informal sector populations most in need; community-based approaches that draw on local cultural knowledge and social networks are essential to close the last-mile delivery gap.

- Universal, Gender-Sensitive Social Protection Floors: In line with ILO Recommendation No. 202, African governments should build toward universal social protection floors that explicitly cover informal sector workers, domestic caregivers, and rural women — the groups systematically excluded from contributory social insurance schemes. Cash transfer programmes targeted at female-headed households, school feeding

programmes for girls, and gender-sensitive early childhood support are evidence-based interventions that can reduce female vulnerability and support educational participation simultaneously.

- Non-Negotiable Female Education: Families, communities, and governments must treat girls' education as a categorical policy priority. Governments should provide free, quality basic and secondary education for all children, with specific interventions — conditional cash transfers, female teacher deployment, safe school infrastructure, and flexible learning pathways — to address the specific barriers faced by girls in rural and conflict-affected areas. The evidence from both the literary analysis and UNESCO's (2024) data is unambiguous: educational exclusion is a primary mechanism through which poverty is reproduced across generations.

- Post-Trafficking and Rehabilitation Frameworks: Governments should develop and fund comprehensive, rights-based rehabilitation frameworks for trafficking survivors and women who have experienced gender-based violence, providing legal protection, psychological support, vocational training, and educational reintegration pathways. The criminalisation of survivors — as illustrated by Chief Amadi's dismissal of Nneoma — must be explicitly counteracted by anti-discrimination legislation and enforcement.

- Integration of Literary and Cultural Evidence in SDG Monitoring: Development agencies and national statistics offices should explore complementary methodologies — including community narratives, participatory research, and literary and cultural analysis — that capture the experiential and psychological dimensions of poverty, educational exclusion, and social protection failure that aggregate indicators cannot register. This would strengthen the evidence base for SDG monitoring and produce more context-sensitive policy responses.

- Patriarchal Norm Reform Through Education and Advocacy: Gender transformative education, incorporating critical literacy and human rights curricula, should be integrated into national school systems to challenge the patriarchal norms that reproduce female vulnerability across generations. Civil society organisations, religious institutions, and community leaders should be engaged as partners in norm change, recognising that legal and policy reform without cultural transformation is insufficient to produce durable gender equity.

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