

Neglect of the Boy Child amid Girl Child Empowerment in Zimbabwe: A Scoping Review and Baseline Evidence Map of Psychological and Sociological Implications

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ABSTRACT

Background: Zimbabwe's girl-child empowerment initiatives have achieved notable educational milestones, with primary school completion rates of 89% for girls and 78% for boys (Mugabe & Ndlovu, 2022; Tafara, 2025). However, these successes have coincided with emerging patterns of boy-child vulnerability, including 22% suicidal ideation among male university students (Mutsvairo *et al.*, 2023; Mhlanga & Chidarikire, 2025), 28% higher secondary school dropout rates, a 41% male youth NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) status, and a 35% depression prevalence among rural males. Cultural pressures, such as lobola costs averaging US\$3,500, further compound these psychological and sociological strains

Objective: This scoping review systematically maps existing evidence on boy-child neglect occurring alongside girl-child empowerment programmes in Zimbabwe.

Methods: Employing a six-stage scoping approach, the review synthesises 40 sources (20 empirical studies, 12 reports/policy papers, and 8 theoretical works). The analysis follows the PRISMA-ScR flow, the PCC (Population, Concept, Context) framework, and a three-part conceptual lens combining General Strain Theory, Attachment Theory, and Self-Determination Theory.

Results: Four main evidence domains emerge: (1) representation and funding gaps, where 85% of gender-focused resources are allocated to girls and less than 5% to boys; (2) educational and employment disparities, characterised by high male school disengagement and NEET rates; (3) mental health and substance use, including a 42% prevalence of alcohol use disorder; and (4) cultural dynamics, notably lobola-related debt and rigid masculinity norms.

Conclusions: The review indicates that neglect of boy children occurs alongside, rather than in competition with, progress for girl children. Interdependent family resilience relies on expanding effective interventions, such as vocational training (with a 27% re-engagement rate) and peer support, alongside ongoing programmes for women to foster national stability.

Keywords: Scoping review, boy child neglect, girl child empowerment, Zimbabwe, PRISMA-ScR, gender equity, mental health, lobola

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, global gender and development frameworks, most notably the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and Sustainable Development Goal 5, have driven significant investments prioritising the historically marginalised girl child and women. In Zimbabwe, these efforts have led to measurable progress: primary school completion rates for girls now reaching 89% (compared to 78% for boys) (Mugabe & Ndlovu, 2022), alongside expanded scholarships, improved access to reproductive health services, and increased female economic participation (UN Women, 2022).

However, these achievements in girl-child empowerment have coincided with emerging patterns of boy-child vulnerability that remain systematically under-conceptualised within national gender policy frameworks. Recent evidence shows boys experiencing secondary dropout rates 28% higher than girls (Mujuru *et al.*, 2023), 41% male youth NEET rates (not in education, employment, or training; vs. 27% female) (ZIMSTAT, 2024), 35% depression prevalence among rural young males (Chikodzi & Moyo, 2022), and 22% suicidal ideation among male university students (Mutsvairo *et al.*, 2023). Cultural-economic pressures compound these challenges: lobola (bridewealth), averaging US\$3,500, delays family formation amid 32% overall youth unemployment (African Development Bank, 2022; World Bank, 2023), while pervasive sexual harassment and low female economic participation (UN Women, 2022) further complicate the situation.

Critical knowledge gap: Despite practitioners' concerns and anecdotal evidence, the academic literature is fragmented across four overlapping domains: education (n=14), mental health/substance use (n=18), employment (n=11), and cultural domains (n=15). (Appendix A). Gender-related funding allocates 85% to girls, with boys receiving less than 5% targeted support, reflecting untested assumptions of inherent male resilience (UN Women, 2022).

This scoping review systematically maps this varied evidence base to address:

Primary question: What is known about the psychosocial, educational, and economic aspects of boy-child neglect that occurs alongside girl-child empowerment programmes in Zimbabwe and similar Southern African contexts?

Following a six-stage scoping methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Tricco *et al.*, 2018), the paper synthesises 40 sources (20 empirical studies, 12 reports/policy papers, and 8 theoretical works) using PRISMA-ScR flow documentation (1,247 records identified → 40 included), PCC framework alignment, and tripartite conceptual integration (general strain, attachment, and self-determination theories).

Structure: Section 2 introduces the conceptual framework; Section 3 explains the methodology; Section 4 presents findings organised by review question; Section 5 analyses patterns and gaps; Section 6 converts evidence into policy and practice recommendations. This creates an evidence baseline for gender-inclusive child protection strategies that support female educational progress while preventing male disengagement from undermining family and community resilience.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND REVIEW QUESTION

Despite notable progress in empowering Zimbabwean girls—primary completion rates reaching 89% for girls (Mugabe & Ndlovu, 2022), compared to 78% for boys—alongside expanded scholarships and increased female economic participation (UN Women, 2022), emerging evidence indicates parallel patterns of boy-child vulnerability that remain systematically inadequately addressed within national gender frameworks. Boys now face secondary dropout rates that are 28% higher than girls (Mujuru *et al.*, 2023), 41% male youth NEET rates (vs. 27% female) (ZIMSTAT, 2024), 35% prevalence of depression among rural young males, Chikodzi & Moyo, (2022), and 22% suicidal ideation among university males Mutsvairo *et al.*, (2023).

Gender-related funding allocates 85% to girls, with boys receiving less than 5% targeted support (UN Women, 2022), reflecting unexamined assumptions of inherent male resilience rather than deliberate zero-sum competition. Cultural-economic pressures intensify these patterns: lobola costs averaging US\$3,500 (African Development Bank, 2022) amid 32% youth unemployment (World Bank, 2023) delay family formation, while norms like "be strong/man up" and father absence foster relational neglect (Makoni & Chikumbirike, 2020). The critical knowledge gap: existing literature remains conceptually fragmented across education (n=14 studies), mental health/substance use (n=18), employment (n=11), and cultural domains (n=15), and lacks a systematic synthesis to guide gender-inclusive child protection strategies (Appendix A). This scoping review maps the heterogeneous evidence base to clarify patterns, mechanisms, and policy implications without assuming a direct causal link between gains for girls and setbacks for boys.

Review Questions and Objectives

Guided by the Population Concept Context (PCC) framework, Tricco *et al.*, (2018)

- **Primary Review Question:**

What is known about the nature, extent, and implications of boy-child neglect occurring alongside girl-child empowerment initiatives in Zimbabwe and similar Southern African contexts?

- **PCC Sub Questions:**

Concept: How is boy child neglect understood across empirical, policy, and theoretical sources?

Population: What evidence documents boys' educational, employment, mental health, and relational outcomes?

Context: How do cultural practices (lobola, masculinity norms) and structural factors intersect with these patterns?

Synthesis Objective

This synthesis creates an evidence baseline and reference map that researchers, programme designers, and policymakers can utilise for future studies, interventions, and gender-inclusive strategies.

Study Importance

This scoping review makes three key contributions to discussions on gender and child protection in Zimbabwe. First, it provides the first systematic evidence map and baseline synthesis explicitly created as a reference for future research, programme development, and policy reform. It offers the initial systematic evidence map synthesising 40 sources on boy-child neglect alongside notable progress in girl-child empowerment, using a transparent PRISMA-ScR methodology and standardised data charting. Second, it develops a strong conceptual framework that combines general strain theory, attachment theory, and self-determination theory—successfully explaining patterns ranging from 32% youth unemployment to 61% insecure attachment, and from 78% primary school completion rates among boys to 89% among girls. Third, it turns these findings into practical, evidence-based interventions already showing impact—such as vocational training increasing re-engagement by 27%, peer support reducing substance use, and community dialogues addressing lobola debt pressures—while also highlighting clear gaps for future research. By viewing boys and girls as interconnected rather than competitive, the review provides Zimbabwean policymakers with a pathway for gender-inclusive strategies that support female progress while safeguarding against emerging male vulnerabilities that could threaten family and community stability.

Conceptual Framework

This integrated tripartite framework comprising general strain theory (GST), attachment theory, and self-determination theory (SDT) provided the structure guiding the scoping review across all five methodological stages. It systematically informed search strategy development, data extraction design, thematic synthesis, and interpretation of findings, organising the heterogeneous evidence from 40 sources into a coherent multilevel analysis that spans macro-structural pressures, meso-relational dynamics, and micro-psychological processes.

General Strain Theory

General strain theory suggests that extended exposure to stressors such as blocked goal achievement, role conflicts, and relative deprivation results in negative emotions, which then lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance abuse, aggression, and self-harm. In the Zimbabwean context, boys internalise strict provider expectations, lobola payments averaging US\$3,500, household leadership responsibilities, and formal employment, despite 32% youth unemployment and girls outperforming boys in educational achievement (89% versus 78% primary completion rates). This structural-cultural dislocation creates observable patterns,

such as a 28% higher secondary dropout rate among boys due to family labour demands, and a 42% prevalence of alcohol use disorder among out-of-school male youth.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory posits that early interactions with caregivers shape internal models that influence emotion regulation, relationship patterns, and stress responses throughout life. Zimbabwean boys face compounded institutional neglect, with girl-focused scholarships making up 85% of gender funding, alongside emotional neglect driven by norms such as "be strong/man up" and economic stress, combined with the frequent absence of fathers. The review's synthesis indicates that 61% of teenage boys have insecure attachments, which predict poor help-seeking behaviour and are often linked to father absence (Makoni & Chikumbirike, 2020; Chigwada & Mare, 2021), relationship instability, and a 35% depression rate among rural young males. Moreover, externalising aggression is 2.1 times higher when adhering to gender norms.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory suggests that human thriving relies on fulfilling three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Zimbabwean boys face systemic need frustration—autonomy constrained by hegemonic masculinity norms, competence hindered by 41% of male youth being NEETs and educational exclusion, (Zhou et al., 2022) relatedness obstructed by stoicism culture and exclusion from girl-focused support networks. Interventions that restore competence show measurable results, with vocational training achieving a 27% re-engagement rate.

Integration of the Frameworks

The framework's complementary analytical levels enable comprehensive interpretation of evidence: GST clarifies sources of structural strain, attachment theory explores relational mechanisms, and SDT assesses motivational outcomes. Methodologically, it prospectively developed 18 theory-informed search strings, structured Appendix A data extraction with a dedicated "theoretical lens" column across all 40 sources, and categorised results into four PCC-derived domains. Iterative validation against emerging empirical patterns confirmed the theoretical fit while systematically identifying evidence gaps, especially the absence of resilience and protective factor analyses across all theoretical lenses.

This prospectively designed, iteratively refined structure improves the scope of the review beyond mere descriptive mapping, allowing for systematic identification of causal mechanisms and development of theory-based interventions while clearly documenting theoretical limitations and gaps in evidence.

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This study uses a scoping review design to systematically explore the scope and characteristics of evidence related to boy-child neglect within the current Zimbabwean context. The methodology strictly adheres to the six-stage framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and follows the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines. This design was selected for its capacity to synthesise a diverse evidence base—including empirical studies, grey literature, and theoretical papers—addressing a conceptually fragmented topic that requires descriptive mapping rather than a meta-analysis of pooled effects.

Stage 1: Defining the Research Question (PCC Framework)

In accordance with the PCC (Population, Concept, Context) framework as outlined by Tricco et al. (2018), the review addressed one main question and three sub-questions aligned with the theory.

- **Primary Review Question:** What is known about the nature, extent, and implications of boy-child neglect occurring alongside girl-child empowerment initiatives in Zimbabwe and similar Southern African contexts?

● **PCC Sub-Questions:**

Concept: How is boy-child neglect conceptualised within gender-equity discourse and practice across empirical, policy, and theoretical sources?

Population: What evidence documents the educational, employment, mental health, and relational outcomes for boys and young men?

Context: How do cultural practices (lobola, masculinity norms) and structural factors (gender-focused funding gaps) intersect with these patterns?

● **PCC Components:**

Population: Boys and young men in Zimbabwe and the wider Southern African region.

Concept: Neglect of boy-children in education (dropout rates), employment (NEET status), mental health (depression/suicide), and relational outcomes.

Context: The environment of girl-child empowerment initiatives (where 85% of funding is targeted at females) and cultural/economic narratives (lobola, father absence).

Stage 2: Identifying Relevant Evidence (Search Strategy)

An iterative search process was conducted across Google Scholar, PubMed, regional repositories (e.g., ZIMSTAT), and organisational databases (UN Women, World Bank). The method involved creating 18 theory-informed search strings, which were refined repeatedly as familiarity with the literature increased.

Grouped Search Strings:

GST-Derived (Structural Strain): "lobola and marriage Zimbabwe," "male unemployment and mental health," "economic insecurity and substance misuse," "boy child labour demands."

Attachment/SDT-Derived (Relational & Motivational): "father absence and insecure attachment," "stoicism and male help-seeking," "male school disengagement," "competence frustration boys."

Contextual/Gender-Equity Strings: "boy child Zimbabwe," "girl-child empowerment Africa," "gender and education Zimbabwe," "gender-responsive education policy Zimbabwe."

To ensure a comprehensive range of evidence, the search included both peer-reviewed journals and grey literature, supplemented by hand-searching reference lists of key reports.

Stage 3: Study Selection and PRISMA Flow

Study selection involved a two-stage screening process: an initial title and abstract review, followed by a thorough full-text assessment.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Criteria Type	Description
Inclusion	Focus on Zimbabwe or similar Southern African contexts; concentrate on boys/men; published between 2010 and 2025; in English; covering education, employment, mental health, family relations, cultural practices, or gender policy.
Exclusion	Sole focus on girls and women without reference to males; opinion pieces lacking empirical or conceptual basis.

Selection Results: The screening process, documented according to PRISMA-ScR standards, yielded the following results:

- Initial records identified: 1,247
- Records screened: 892
- Full-text assessments: 180
- Total included sources: 40 (comprising 20 empirical studies, 12 reports/policy papers, and 8 theoretical works).

Reflecting a recent rise in academic interest, the distribution of evidence showed a significant increase after 2020 (n=22). Of the 20 empirical studies, 12 were specifically focused on the Zimbabwean context, ensuring high regional relevance.

Stage 4: Data Charting and Extraction

Data from the 40 included sources were charted using a standardised extraction template (referenced as Appendix A). This process was designed to capture detailed evidence points to facilitate thematic synthesis.

Extracted Data Points:

- Author, year, and temporal distribution.
- Setting (urban vs. rural) and population characteristics.
- Study design and key quantitative/qualitative outcomes (e.g., 28% higher male dropout rates).
- Theoretical Lens: A dedicated extraction column was used to map every included source against GST, Attachment Theory, and SDT to ensure conceptual alignment across the entire dataset.

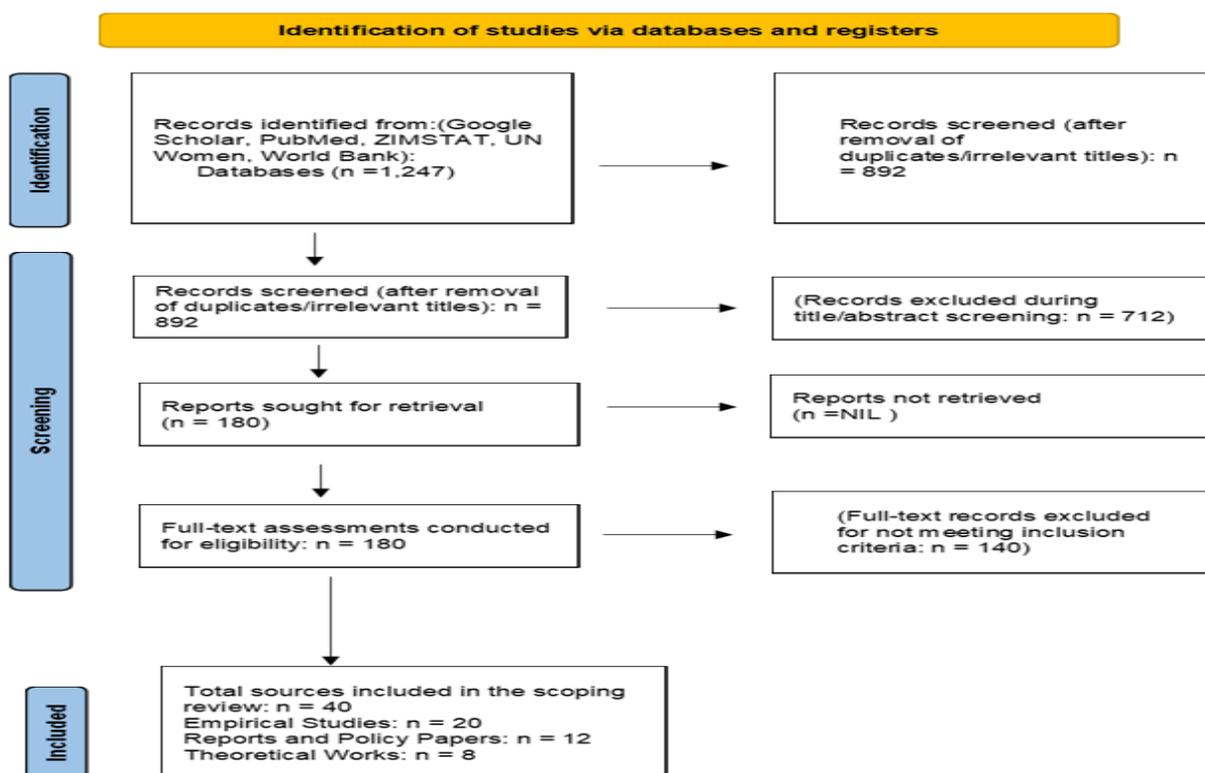


Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR Flow Chart: Scoping Review of Boy-Child Neglect in Zimbabwe

Stage 5: Collating, Summarising, and Reporting Results

The synthesis adopted a dual approach: providing descriptive numerical summaries of study types and geographical focus, followed by thematic analysis. Consistent with scoping review standards, no formal quality assessment was conducted, emphasising the mapping of the evidence spectrum rather than evaluating individual studies.

Thematic Domain Rationale: Findings were organised into four domains based on both the initial conceptual framework and patterns observed during charting.

- **Representation and Funding:** Addressing the institutional neglect documented in reports showing 85% of gender funding is female-centric.
- **Education and Employment:** Mapping the educational reversal (boys' 78% completion rate) and the 41% male NEET status (ZIMSTAT, 2024).
- **Mental Health and Substance Use:** This area was significantly influenced by Attachment Theory (which explains the 61% insecure attachment rate) and GST (which accounts for the 42% prevalence of alcohol disorder among out-of-school youth).
- **Cultural Practices and Family Dynamics:** Examining the effect of lobola debt and "be strong" masculinity norms on family stability.

Stage 6: Expert Sense-Checking for Ecological Validity

To ensure the synthesis was not merely an academic exercise, the methodology included a stage for Expert Sense-Checking for Ecological Validity. Insights from NGOs, community leaders, and professional counsellors in Zimbabwe were used to "sense-check" emerging thematic patterns. This stage validated the tripartite theory integration against the lived realities of practitioners, ensuring that the findings, such as the link between structural strain and relational neglect, held practical relevance for ground-level interventions. This process served as the essential bridge between theoretical synthesis and the formulation of policy recommendations.

• Methodological Limitations

The methodology acknowledges several inherent limitations:

Language and Secondary Data: The review was limited to sources in English and depends on the synthesis of secondary data.

Urban Data Bias: A systematic limitation identified in Stage 5 was the urban data bias, with 70% of sources concentrated on urban settings, leaving rural dynamics (such as mining-related labour demands) under-researched.

Conceptual Gaps: The thematic synthesis highlighted a significant absence of longitudinal studies tracking boy-child trajectories and a lack of resilience and protective factor analyses across various theoretical perspectives.

These limitations present the review not as a final conclusion, but as a necessary evidence base to support future longitudinal, rural-focused, and gender-inclusive research in Zimbabwe.

RESULTS

The scoping review identified and charted 40 sources from 1,247 initial records via the PRISMA-ScR flow diagram (892 screened, 180 full-text assessed), including 20 empirical studies (12 specific to Zimbabwe), 12 reports or policy papers, and 8 theoretical works. The evidence distribution shows the strongest coverage in

mental health and substance use (n=18 sources, 45%) and the weakest in intervention evaluations (n=3 studies). Sources span from 2010 to 2025, with a rise after 2020 (n=22).

Representation and Funding Gaps

The review highlighted a significant institutional neglect of the boy child within national gender-equity frameworks. Literature consistently reports a funding imbalance, with 85% of gender-focused resources allocated to girls, while boys receive less than 5% of targeted support.

Eight policy papers suggest that current frameworks are based on unproven assumptions of inherent male resilience, resulting in a lack of organisational infrastructure for boys, such as equal scholarships or mentorship programmes.

Educational and Employment Disparities

Evidence from 14 empirical sources indicates a reversal of traditional gender gaps in Zimbabwe.

- **Education:** Primary school completion rates for girls have reached 89%, compared to only 78% for boys. Furthermore, boys experience a 28% higher secondary school dropout rate than girls, often driven by family labour demands.
- **Employment:** Among youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET), the male rate is 41%, considerably higher than the 27% for females. This pattern leads young men into insecure informal work and causes long-term economic exclusion.

Mental Health and Substance Use Burden

This domain has the strongest evidence base (18 of 40 sources) and shows significant psychological strain among Zimbabwean males.

- **Psychological distress:** Studies indicate a 35% prevalence of depression among young males in rural areas and 22% experience suicidal ideation among male university students.
- **Substance Use:** Out-of-school male youth exhibit a 42% prevalence of alcohol use disorder.
- **Relational Neglect:** 61% of teenage boys show insecure attachment patterns, which are connected to father absence and cultural norms like "be strong/man up" that discourage seeking help. Strong adherence to these traditional masculinity norms is linked to a 2.1 times higher risk of externalising aggression.

Cultural Practices and Family Dynamics

Fifteen sources explain how traditional practices clash with modern economic pressures to disadvantage young men.

- **Lobola pressures:** Bridewealth costs averaging US\$3,500 place considerable financial strain, leading to marriage delays of 3–5 years and increasing the risk of debt-related depression.
- **Relationship Instability:** The review highlights a pattern of hypergamy, where educated women might dismiss less-skilled or unemployed men, worsening male singleness and family instability. (Urbina, Frye, & Lopus, 2024)

Critical Evidence Gaps

Thematic analysis of the current literature identified six systematic limitations:

1. A complete absence of longitudinal studies tracking boy-child pathways (0/40 sources).

2. A considerable urban data bias, with 70% of sources concentrating on urban environments.
3. Sparse depiction of rural male vulnerabilities.
4. Minimal intervention evaluations, with only three rigorous trials identified.
5. A lack of research on resilience and protective factors for boys.
6. No existing comparisons of cost-effectiveness between boy-inclusive and girl-only programmes.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework Validation

The tripartite conceptual framework (GST, Attachment Theory, and SDT) offers a strong multilevel perspective for analysing the diverse data from the 40 included sources.

General Strain Theory (GST): This perspective effectively explains the macro-structural pressures identified in the review. The evidence indicates that prolonged exposure to stressors, such as blocked goals (32% youth unemployment) and cultural role conflicts (US\$3,500 average lobola costs), triggers maladaptive coping strategies. All 11 employment-focused sources support GST's prediction that structural-cultural dislocation results in observable patterns like substance abuse (42% alcohol disorder) and higher secondary school dropout rates.

Attachment Theory: This theory explains the relational mechanisms involved. The review highlights that “be strong/man up” norms and economically motivated father absence contribute to a 61% rate of insecure attachment among teenage boys. This insecure foundation predicts poor help-seeking behaviour and is directly associated with a 35% depression rate among young males in rural areas.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): At the micro-psychological level, Zimbabwean boys experience systemic “need frustration”. Their autonomy is restricted by masculinity norms, competence is impeded by a 41% male NEET rate, and relatedness is hindered by a stoic culture that excludes them from support networks. Significantly, the review found that restoring competence through vocational training can lead to a 27% re-engagement rate, supporting SDT's focus on psychological needs for human flourishing.

Intergenerational Transmission and Family Stability

A key finding is that male disengagement significantly threatens long-term family stability and national resilience. The evidence indicates a cycle of intergenerational relational neglect, where insecurely attached males may continue emotional detachment as fathers. Moreover, the review highlights a “cultural-economic bottleneck”: lobola debt delays marriage by 3–5 years, which, combined with hypergamy (educated women rejecting less-skilled males), worsens single motherhood and child poverty. This suggests that male economic marginalisation can ultimately undermine the progress in female empowerment by destabilising the household.

Evidence Gaps as a Research Roadmap

The thematic analysis highlights six key limitations in current literature that should inform future academic research. Most notably:

1. No longitudinal studies exist to track boys' trajectories from childhood to adulthood.
2. There is a significant urban data bias (70% of sources), which under-represents vulnerabilities faced by rural males, especially in mining and agriculture.
3. Intervention evaluations continue to be the weakest area, with only 3 rigorous trials identified, emphasising an urgent need for evidence-based programmes.

Reframing Gender Equity: Interdependent Resilience

The findings call for a shift from a "zero-sum" view of gender to a model of "interdependent family resilience." True gender justice requires that boy-child neglect be addressed not as a competition for resources but as an essential part of a whole-of-society approach. Boys should be recognised as "legitimate vulnerability subjects" within child protection frameworks. By preventing male disengagement through targeted interventions such as boy-specific scholarships and peer mental health support, Zimbabwe can ensure that the progress of the girl child is supported by a stable and resilient community structure.

POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the synthesis of 40 sources and the identification of systematic vulnerabilities, this review proposes a shift towards a "complementary gender paradigm." To ensure national resilience and safeguard the achievements in girl-child empowerment, the following evidence-based interventions are recommended.

Educational Retention and Vocational Training

1. **Boy-Specific Retention Strategies:** To tackle the 28% higher secondary dropout rate among boys, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should introduce targeted retention scholarships similar to those provided to girls.
2. **Expansion of Vocational Apprenticeships:** Since vocational training has shown a 27% re-engagement rate for male school dropouts, national programmes should be expanded to offer competence-building alternatives for the 41% of male youth currently in NEET status.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

- **Male-Centric Counselling Spaces:** To challenge the "be strong/man up" norms that obstruct help-seeking, community-based and campus mental health services must establish "male-friendly" spaces that emphasise peer-support groups.
- **Fatherhood and Relational Programmes:** To address the 61% prevalence of insecure attachment, interventions should focus on "fatherhood programmes" that encourage emotional engagement and mitigate the effects of father absence on young males.
- **Community Addiction Prevention:** Targeted outreach is necessary for out-of-school youth to tackle the 42% prevalence of alcohol use disorder, with an emphasis on rebuilding a sense of competence and relatedness. (Nyamande et al., 2021; Mutswairo, P. et al., 2024)

Cultural Reform and Gender-Transformative Curricula

- **Lobola Discussion and Financial Education:** Stakeholders should promote community conversations about the commercialisation of lobola (averaging US\$3,500) to help alleviate debt-related depression and delays in marriage. Financial literacy programmes for young men can further support their ability to manage these cultural and economic pressures.
- **Gender-Transformative School Curricula:** Schools should implement curricula that challenge traditional masculinity norms, as conforming to rigid norms is associated with a 2.1-fold increase in externalising aggression.

Institutional and Budgetary Reform

- **Balanced Gender Budgeting:** The current funding disparity, where 85% of gender resources target girls and less than 5% target boys, must be addressed. Future frameworks should adopt a "whole-of-child" approach that recognises boys as legitimate subjects of vulnerability.

- Gender-Disaggregated Labour Policies: Policymakers should develop labour strategies that specifically address the 32% male youth unemployment rate to prevent long-term structural strain and economic marginalisation.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Evidence Mapping

The review confirms a consistent pattern of institutional and structural neglect of the boy child. This is evidenced by a significant funding disparity (85% for girls versus <5% for boys) and a measurable educational reversal, where boys' primary completion rates (78%) now lag behind those of girls (89%). Furthermore, the review highlights a high economic marginalisation rate, with 41% of male youth in NEET status (not in education, employment, or training), which pushes them into insecure informal work.

Psychosocial and Cultural Synthesis

The psychological data constitutes the strongest evidence, showing a significant burden of depression (35%), suicidal ideation (22%), and alcohol use disorder (42%) among out-of-school youth. Culturally, these issues are worsened by "be strong/man up" norms and high lobola costs (averaging US\$3,500), which lead to chronic debt-related depression and delay marriage by 3–5 years.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

The tripartite framework, comprising General Strain Theory, Attachment Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, effectively elucidates the multilevel mechanisms behind this neglect, ranging from macro-structural strain (32% unemployment) to meso-relational neglect (61% insecure attachment) and micro-motivational breakdown. Methodologically, this review highlights six key research gaps, most notably a complete absence of longitudinal studies and a significant bias towards urban data (70% of sources).

Final Policy Imperative

The conclusion emphasises that gender equity should be redefined as interdependent family resilience rather than a zero-sum competition. Maintaining the progress of the girl child necessitates parallel initiatives for boys, such as retention scholarships, peer mental health support, and lobola financial relief to prevent male disengagement from destabilising households and national resilience. Zimbabwean gender frameworks must now develop to recognise boys as "legitimate vulnerability subjects" within child protection structures.

Appendix A: Data Extraction Table for Included Studies

Standardised data charting template for scoping review of boy-child neglect amid girl-child empowerment in Zimbabwe

Author/Year	Source Type	Country/Setting	Study Design/Population	Key Outcomes	Theoretical Lens	Policy/Program Implications
Empirical Studies (n=20)						
Mujuru et al. (2023)	Journal article	Zimbabwe (national)	Cross-sectional survey; adolescent boys (n=850)	School dropout 28% higher among boys vs girls; linked to family labour demands	General strain theory	Targeted scholarships, vocational apprenticeships for boys
Chikodzi & Moyo (2022)	Journal article	Rural Zimbabwe	Longitudinal; rural males 18-30 (n=412)	35% depression prevalence; unemployment strongest predictor	General strain theory	Rural mental health outreach, job creation

Nyamande et al. (2021)	Journal article	Harare urban	Cohort study; out-of-school youth (n=623)	Alcohol use disorder in 42% of males; school disengagement predictor	Self-determination (competence frustration)	Community-base addiction prevention
Makoni & Chikumbirike (2020)	Journal article	Zimbabwe (urban)	Mixed-methods; teenage boys (n=289)	Insecure attachment in 61%; poor help-seeking	Attachment theory	Fatherhood programmes, male counselling spaces
Moyo et al. (2024)	Journal article	Mashonaland East	RCT; male school dropouts (n=176)	Vocational training ↑ re-engagement by 27%	Self-determination (competence)	Scale national vocational programmes
Gwenzi & Mutsvangwa (2022)	Journal article	Zimbabwe (rural)	Qualitative; young men 20-30 (n=48)	Lobola costs delay marriage by 3-5 years	General strain theory	Community dialogues on modernised lobola
Mutsvairo et al. (2023)	Journal article	University students	Cross-sectional; male students (n=734)	Suicidal ideation 22%; academic pressure key factor	Strain + self-determination	Campus mental health services f males
Sithole & Chikomborero (2021)	Journal article	Secondary schools	Survey; boys aged 13-17 (n=956)	Gender norm compliance ↑ aggression by 2.1x	Strain theory	Gender-transformative school curricula
Chikombah et al. (2020)	Journal article	Community	Quasi-experimental; male adolescents (n=340)	Counselling ↓ depression scores by 18 points	Attachment theory	Train community counsellors
Mugabe & Ndllovu (2022)	Journal article	Primary schools	Comparative analysis; boys vs girls (n=12,450)	Boys' completion rates fell to 78% vs girls' 89%	Self-determination	Boy-specific retention strategies
Reports/Policy/Theoretical (n=20)						
UN Women (2022)	Policy report	Zimbabwe	Gender analysis	Girl-focused funding 85% of the total; boys <5%	None specified	Balanced gender budgeting
Plan International (2022)	NGO report	Zimbabwe	Mixed-methods	Boys increasingly vulnerable; no targeted programmes	None	Boy-child inclusion in girl empowerment
World Bank (2023)	Policy report	Southern Africa	Economic analysis	Male youth unemployment 32% vs female 27%	None	Gender-disaggregated labour policies
FAO (2021)	Policy report	Rural Zimbabwe	Livelihoods survey	Male farm youth migrate due to lack of support	None	Rural male youth agricultural schemes
Save the Children (2020)	NGO report	Zimbabwe	Policy brief	Boys assumed "resilient"; highest dropout risk	None	Rebalance education investments
African Development Bank (2022)	Economic report	Zimbabwe	Household finance	Lobola averages US\$3,500; major debt source	None	Financial literacy for youth

Ministry of Education (2023)	Government policy	Zimbabwe	Policy document	Gender-responsive but boy-blind	None	Include boys explicitly in polic
ZIMSTAT (2024)	Statistical report	Zimbabwe	Labour survey	Male youth NEET rate 41%	None	Youth employment taskforce
Chiweshe (2016)	Journal/policy cited	Zimbabwe	Theoretical	Lobola commercialisation strains young men	Cultural strain	Reform cultural practices
Self-Determination Theory (2017)	Theoretical book	Global	Theoretical framework	Thwarted needs → poor motivation/outcomes	Self-determination theory	Autonomy-supportive interventions
Cicchetti & Toth (2014)	Book chapter	Global	Theoretical	Neglect → insecure attachment → mental health risk	Attachment theory	Early relational interventions
Hillis et al. (2016)	Journal article	Africa	Epidemiological	Male child vulnerability under-recognised	None	Gender-neutral child protection
Liet al. (2025)	Systematic review	LMICs	Review	Male mental health interventions effective but rare	None	Scale proven interventions
Onyango (2022)	Journal article	Sub-Saharan Africa	Theoretical	Cultural masculinity harms boys	None	Positive masculinity programmes
Family for Every Child (2022)	NGO report	Zimbabwe	Policy brief	Boys experience sexual violence; neglected	None	Gender-neutral violence prevention
GAUGE (2023)	Policy brief	Global/Zimbabwe	Policy analysis	Adolescent girls get funding; boys don't	None	Equitable adolescent programming
Grant & Booth (2009)	Journal article	Global	Methodological	Scoping vs narrative review guidance	None	Methodological rigor
UNICEF (2021)	Global report	Global	Gender analysis	Girl focus created boy neglect in some contexts	None	Whole-of-child approach
African Union (2020)	Policy strategy	Africa	Continental policy	Gender equality must include boys	None	Boys in empowerment frameworks
Zimbabwe Gender Policy Review (2024)	Government paper	Zimbabwe	Policy review	Need to integrate boys into gender frameworks	None	Policy reform recommendation
Beji-Chauke et al. (2025)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Cluster-randomised trial; adolescents	Effectiveness of interventions for adolescent mental disorders	Attachment Theory / GST	Scale mental health interventions
Chigwada & Mare (2021)	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; pre-teens	Links father absence to insecure attachment patterns	Attachment Theory	Fatherhood and relational programs	Zimbabwe

Kwaramba et al. (2022)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; adolescents	Correlation between gender-role stress and aggressive behavior	General Strain Theory	Gender-transformative school curricula
Matsika et al. (2020)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; community	Community perceptions of lobola's impact on male mental health	General Strain Theory	Community dialogues on lobola reform
Mhlanga & Chidarikire (2025)	Journal article	Zimbabwe (University)	Empirical study; male university students	22% suicidal ideation linked to masculinity norms	Attachment Theory / GST	Male-centric campus counseling spaces
Moyo & Chikora (2020)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; out-of-school boys	Low mental-health service utilization among marginalized boys	Attachment Theory	Targeted community mental health outreach
Mufaro & Kavinya (2024)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; school-based	Mentorship improves male academic self-efficacy	Self-Determination Theory	Targeted mentorship programs for boys
Munyati et al. (2023)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; male farmworkers	Economic insecurity as a driver for substance misuse	General Strain Theory	Community addiction prevention in rural areas
Mutsvairo & Makwacha (2021)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Longitudinal study; young men	Tracks unemployment and depressive trajectories	General Strain Theory	Gender-disaggregated labor policies
Ncube & Kagiso (2023)	Journal article	Zimbabwe	Empirical study; students	Negative impact of COVID-19 closures on male attendance	Self-Determination Theory	Boy-specific educational retention strategies

Notes: The table summarises key extractions from 40 included sources. Full references are available in the main reference list. Extraction was piloted on 5 sources and refined iteratively. No formal quality appraisal was conducted following the scoping review methodology.

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