

Cultural Norms and Barriers to Girls' Education in Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Girls' education remains a central concern in global development discourse, yet cultural norms continue to shape patterns of educational participation in many low- and middle-income contexts. This paper examines how entrenched cultural practices and gendered expectations influence girls' access to and continuity in formal education in Uganda. Drawing on feminist, social norms and capability perspectives, the study adopts a conceptual analytical approach to synthesize existing scholarship on culture, gender inequality and educational outcomes. The analysis highlights how practices such as early marriage, gendered domestic responsibilities and normative perceptions of female social value interact with structural inequalities to constrain educational opportunities for girls. The paper argues that cultural dynamics should not be understood as static traditions but as socially negotiated processes that intersect with poverty, institutional limitations and policy environments. By reframing cultural norms within broader socio-economic and gendered power relations, the study contributes to debates on inclusive education and gender-responsive development strategies in Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Girls' education; Cultural norms; Gender inequality; Social norms theory; Feminist theory; Educational participation

INTRODUCTION

Gender disparities in educational participation remain a significant concern within global development discourse despite sustained policy efforts aimed at expanding access to schooling. Although substantial progress has been made in educational participation globally, important gender gaps continue to emerge in educational attainment and in the conditions that shape girls' progression through schooling, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Evans et al., 2021; Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). These patterns highlight the need for analytical frameworks that move beyond access-focused approaches to examine the broader socio-cultural and structural processes shaping educational trajectories.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that gender inequalities in education are embedded within complex systems of social norms, economic constraints and institutional arrangements. Cultural expectations relating to domestic roles, gendered labour contributions and social reputation can influence how households allocate scarce resources and how communities evaluate girls' educational pathways (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Marcus et al., 2015). Such dynamics underscore the importance of understanding education not only as a site of human capital formation but also as a socially negotiated process shaped by intersecting relations of power, identity and opportunity.

Within African contexts, educational inequalities must also be understood in relation to historical and structural conditions that continue to shape contemporary education systems. Postcolonial approaches emphasize the importance of examining educational development in relation to unequal access to resources, institutional capacity and the broader political economy of development. In this respect, educational transformation in Africa requires attention to the historical and contemporary structures through which inequality is reproduced and challenged (Tikly, 2020).

In Uganda, expansion of educational provision has improved access, but significant challenges remain in transition to and retention at secondary level. Recent evidence indicates that financial barriers remain a major constraint on attendance and continuation, while girls experience additional barriers associated with gender norms, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, reproductive health constraints and physical access to schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union, & UNICEF, 2024; Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025).

Evidence from Uganda further indicates that expansion of secondary education can generate longer-term effects on women's educational attainment and empowerment, suggesting that the benefits of educational participation extend beyond schooling itself (Kazibwe & Li, 2025). These circumstances reinforce the importance of examining how cultural norms interact with household economic conditions and institutional arrangements rather than treating gender disparities as consequences of culture alone.

This paper contributes to debates in gender and education research by analysing how cultural norms shape gender disparities in educational participation within the Ugandan context. By integrating feminist, social norms and capability-oriented perspectives, the study advances a conceptual framework that situates educational inequality within broader processes of social transformation and development. Through this approach, the paper seeks to enhance understanding of the relational mechanisms underpinning gendered educational outcomes while contributing to wider discussions on inclusive education and gender justice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding gender disparities in educational participation requires theoretical engagement with the intersecting cultural, structural and institutional processes that shape opportunities for schooling. Feminist theory provides a foundational lens for examining how gendered inequalities are produced and reproduced through systems of social stratification, emphasizing the relational distribution of resources, decision-making power and social recognition (Kabeer, 2021; Cornwall, 2016).

From this perspective, educational inequality cannot be reduced to differences in individual aspirations or household preferences because these preferences are themselves shaped by wider relations of power and gendered expectations.

Contemporary feminist scholarship also emphasizes the dynamic character of gender relations and the importance of examining education within wider processes of social transformation. Education can reproduce existing inequalities, but it can also provide opportunities for questioning established gender relations and expanding women's agency. These processes require attention to the interaction between institutional arrangements, social expectations and broader systems of power (Tamale, 2020; Unterhalter, 2024).

In education research, feminist perspectives are complemented by postcolonial approaches that situate schooling within historical and political-economic contexts. Educational inequalities cannot be understood independently of wider structures associated with uneven development, resource distribution and institutional capacity. Such an

approach is particularly important in African contexts, where educational systems have been shaped by colonial histories as well as subsequent national and global development agendas (Tikly, 2020; Tamale, 2020).

Complementing feminist insights, Social norms theory provides a conceptual framework for analysing how collective expectations regulate behaviour and shape educational decision-making. Social norms involve shared expectations about appropriate behaviour and are sustained through social interaction, reference groups and anticipated social approval or disapproval.

Gender norms therefore influence how girls' and boys' educational pathways are understood within families and communities (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Evidence from research involving adolescent girls in Uganda and other low- and middle-income settings demonstrates that norms concerning femininity, family responsibilities and the perceived value of girls can interact with poverty and other constraints to influence educational decisions (Marcus et al., 2015).

Social norms should not, however, be understood as immutable cultural rules. They can change as social expectations, economic conditions, institutional practices and opportunities change. This fluidity creates possibilities for interventions that do more than remove financial barriers and instead engage with the social environments within which educational choices are negotiated (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Marcus et al., 2015).

The capability approach offers further analytical depth by conceptualizing education as a means of expanding individuals' substantive freedoms to pursue valued life outcomes.

Within this framework, educational participation is understood not only in terms of human capital accumulation but also as a process through which individuals can develop agency, exercise choice and expand their capacity to pursue lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Education therefore matters not simply because it produces measurable economic returns but because it can enlarge the range of opportunities available to individuals.

Education-specific capability scholarship further demonstrates the relevance of this approach to questions of gender equality and social justice. The capability perspective draws attention to the difference between nominal access to education and individuals' actual ability to convert educational opportunities into valued outcomes (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). This distinction is particularly important in the Ugandan context, where girls may formally have access to schooling while facing financial, social, geographical and institutional constraints that limit their ability to remain in and benefit from education.

By integrating feminist, social norms and capability-based perspectives within a relational conceptual framework, this study advances a multidimensional understanding of gender disparities in education. The synthesis highlights how cultural norms can operate simultaneously as constraints and as sites of negotiation within broader systems of structural inequality and social transformation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the feminist, social norms and capability perspectives discussed above, this study conceptualizes girls' educational participation as the outcome of an interaction between structural conditions, gendered social norms, household and community decision-making, and institutional and policy environments. The framework moves beyond a linear understanding of cultural norms as direct causes of educational disadvantage. Instead, it proposes that cultural expectations operate through social and material mechanisms that influence the opportunities available to girls and their ability to convert those opportunities into sustained educational participation and broader capabilities.

At the structural level, household economic conditions, poverty, geographical accessibility, institutional capacity and the broader policy environment shape the resources and opportunities available for girls' education. These conditions interact with cultural and gender norms concerning domestic responsibilities, femininity, marriage, social reputation and the perceived value of girls' education. Social norms influence how families and communities interpret educational participation and can affect decisions concerning school enrolment, continuation, transition and completion (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Marcus et al., 2015).

The framework therefore identifies household and community decision-making as an important mediating mechanism. Cultural expectations do not automatically determine educational outcomes; rather, they influence the decisions and negotiations through which educational opportunities are allocated and evaluated. These processes may determine whether limited household resources are invested in girls' schooling, whether girls are expected to undertake domestic or productive responsibilities, and whether continued schooling is considered socially acceptable or economically worthwhile.

These interacting processes shape girls' educational participation, understood in this study as encompassing access, retention, transition and completion. The framework recognizes that formal access to schooling does not necessarily constitute meaningful educational opportunity. Financial barriers, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, reproductive health constraints and physical distance from schools can prevent girls from converting nominal access into sustained participation (Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union, & UNICEF, 2024; Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025).

The framework further incorporates the capability perspective by treating sustained educational participation as a pathway through which girls may expand their agency, choices and substantive freedoms (Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Educational participation is therefore not regarded solely as an outcome but also as a potential mechanism through which girls can challenge restrictive gender expectations and expand their future social and economic opportunities.

Notably, the framework incorporates policy and institutional interventions as cross-cutting influences rather than as a separate final stage. Policies addressing school affordability, gender-based violence, reproductive health, school accessibility and community attitudes can modify the conditions under which cultural norms operate. Recent Ugandan interventions illustrate this multidimensional approach by combining educational assistance with interventions addressing gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health (Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025).

Evidence that Uganda's expansion of secondary education has contributed to improvements in women's educational attainment and empowerment further suggests that educational policy can have effects extending beyond immediate schooling outcomes (Kazibwe & Li, 2025).

The framework also allows for feedback and normative change. Educational participation may itself alter aspirations, perceptions of girls' social roles and community expectations. Consequently, the relationship between culture and education is conceptualized as dynamic rather than one-directional. This reflects the understanding of social norms as socially produced and potentially transformable rather than fixed cultural characteristics (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for Analysing cultural norms and girls' educational participation in Uganda



The conceptual framework developed in this study synthesizes feminist, social and gender norms, and capability perspectives to explain how structural conditions, cultural expectations, household and community decision-making, and institutional interventions interact to shape girls' educational participation in Uganda. (Kabeer, 2021; Cornwall, 2016; Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Thematic Literature and Conceptual Synthesis

Research on gender disparities in educational participation has increasingly emphasized the need to move beyond access-centered analyses toward understanding the social processes that influence retention, progression and completion. Although global initiatives have contributed to improvements in educational access, persistent inequalities remain associated with the interaction between gender norms, household circumstances, institutional arrangements and broader social inequalities (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024).

Within development sociology, education is often conceptualized as an important mechanism for social mobility and economic transformation. However, the benefits associated with schooling are not automatically distributed equally. Gendered divisions of labour, unequal access to resources and expectations concerning women's and

girls' roles can shape how educational opportunities are taken up and translated into longer-term outcomes (Kabeer, 2021). The implication is that educational participation should be understood in relation to the social and economic conditions within which households make decisions about schooling.

African education scholarship further illustrates the importance of historical and structural context. Educational systems do not operate independently of wider development processes, and inequalities in access, quality and outcomes can reflect longer histories of unequal resource distribution and institutional development (Tikly, 2020). A contextually grounded analysis must therefore consider the relationship between global education agendas, national policy environments and localized social practices.

The social-norms perspective adds another dimension to this analysis. Community expectations concerning marriage, domestic responsibilities, femininity and social status can influence how girls' educational trajectories are perceived and negotiated. The evidence reviewed by Marcus et al. (2015), including research from Uganda, illustrates how gender norms interact with poverty and other social conditions in shaping the opportunities available to adolescent girls. Social norms therefore operate alongside, rather than independently from, economic constraints.

The Ugandan evidence reinforces this multidimensional interpretation. The 2024 Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union and UNICEF report identifies financial constraints as a major barrier to secondary participation while also documenting additional barriers affecting girls, including gender norms, gender-based violence, early pregnancy and limited access to sexual and reproductive health services (Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union, & UNICEF, 2024). The 2025 Gender for Development Uganda report similarly identifies low transition and retention at secondary level and emphasizes that girls face overlapping financial, social, reproductive and physical-access barriers (Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025).

These findings suggest that the relationship between culture and educational participation should not be conceptualized as a simple causal pathway in which cultural norms independently determine whether girls remain in school. Rather, norms interact with household resources, institutional capacity, geographical accessibility and policy interventions. A girl may face a cultural expectation to undertake domestic responsibilities, for example, while the practical effect of that expectation is intensified when her household also faces school-related financial costs or when access to a nearby secondary school is limited.

Intersectional analysis is therefore important because educational disadvantage is rarely produced through a single dimension of inequality. Class, location, gender, household circumstances, institutional quality and other social positions can overlap to shape the opportunities available to girls. The Ugandan evidence on financial barriers and regionally differentiated educational constraints demonstrates the importance of examining these factors together rather than isolating culture from material conditions (Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union, & UNICEF, 2024).

Through synthesizing these strands of scholarship, this paper advances a conceptual perspective that situates gender disparities in educational participation within broader processes of social transformation. The central analytical proposition is that cultural norms matter because they shape the social meaning and practical organization of educational opportunities, but their effects are mediated by economic resources, institutions and policy environments.

Analytical Discussion

The analysis indicates that gender disparities in educational participation are not adequately explained by resource limitations alone. They are embedded within relational systems involving cultural expectations, household decision-making, institutional structures and socio-economic constraints. From a feminist perspective,

educational inequalities are connected to broader relations of power that influence the distribution of resources, responsibilities and opportunities (Kabeer, 2021; Unterhalter, 2024).

This interpretation is particularly important because households do not make educational decisions in a social vacuum. Choices concerning girls' schooling are negotiated within existing expectations about domestic responsibilities, economic contributions, marriage and the perceived social value of education. Social norms can therefore affect not only whether girls enter school but also whether their continued participation is viewed as desirable or feasible (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Marcus et al., 2015).

At the same time, these norms should not be treated as fixed or uniformly shared. Social norms can change as communities encounter new economic opportunities, institutional interventions and changing aspirations. This creates an important conceptual space for understanding education as both a site where gender expectations may be reproduced and a site where those expectations may be contested (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020).

The development-sociological perspective further suggests that educational participation is closely connected to household livelihood strategies. Where households face severe financial constraints, immediate survival needs can compete with longer-term investments in education. In Uganda, the costs borne by households at secondary level remain significant, and financial barriers are identified as an important contributor to non-attendance and dropout (Ministry of Education and Sports, European Union, & UNICEF, 2024). These material pressures can interact with gender norms in ways that make girls particularly vulnerable to discontinuing education.

The Ugandan evidence also indicates why interventions that address only one constraint may be insufficient. The 2025 Gender for Development Uganda programme combines support for girls' education with interventions addressing gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health, reflecting an understanding that educational participation is shaped by multiple interacting barriers (Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025). This multidimensional orientation is consistent with the conceptual argument advanced in this paper.

The capability approach provides a further basis for interpreting these dynamics. Education can expand individuals' substantive freedoms by increasing their ability to make choices, pursue valued aspirations and participate in social and economic life (Sen, 1999). However, formal access to schooling does not automatically produce expanded capabilities. The conversion of educational opportunities into valued outcomes depends on the social, economic and institutional conditions surrounding the learner (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

This distinction has particular relevance for girls' education in Uganda. An intervention may increase enrolment without necessarily addressing the conditions that determine whether girls remain in school, complete secondary education or translate educational experiences into greater agency. Evidence from Uganda that links secondary education policy with longer-term outcomes in women's education and empowerment reinforces the importance of viewing schooling as part of a wider process of social transformation (Kazibwe & Li, 2025).

Within the Ugandan context, these insights highlight the need for policy approaches that recognize the relational nature of educational inequalities. Interventions aimed at improving gender parity should address community-level normative systems while simultaneously responding to household financial constraints, institutional limitations and barriers to physical access. The current policy direction represented by G4DU is important in this regard because it combines financial assistance with complementary interventions intended to support girls' continued participation in secondary education (Ministry of Education and Sports & UNICEF, 2025).

The evidence therefore supports a shift from narrowly access-focused approaches toward multidimensional strategies that address the conditions under which educational participation becomes sustainable. Such strategies should combine material support with gender-responsive institutional practices and interventions that engage families and communities in questioning restrictive expectations surrounding girls' education.

Overall, the paper advances a relational conceptualization of educational participation that bridges feminist theory, social norms analysis and capability-oriented perspectives. This synthesis suggests that gender disparities are reproduced through the interaction of cultural expectations, material constraints and institutional arrangements, but are also potentially open to transformation when these interacting conditions change.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined gender disparities in educational participation through a relational analytical framework integrating feminist theory, social norms perspectives and the capability approach. The analysis demonstrates that girls' educational trajectories are shaped by the interaction of cultural expectations, household economic conditions, institutional arrangements and wider development processes.

The central argument is that cultural norms should neither be treated as isolated explanations for girls' educational disadvantage nor dismissed as secondary to material poverty. Rather, norms influence how educational opportunities are valued, negotiated and distributed within households and communities, while their effects are mediated by economic resources, institutional capacity and policy environments.

The Ugandan context demonstrates the importance of this multidimensional perspective. Financial barriers remain significant, but girls also encounter gender-specific constraints involving social expectations, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, reproductive health and physical access to schools. Effective responses therefore require more than increasing enrolment. They must address the conditions that enable girls to remain in school, progress through secondary education and translate educational opportunities into broader capabilities and life choices.

From a policy perspective, the analysis supports integrated approaches that combine financial assistance with gender-responsive educational systems, community engagement and interventions addressing the social and institutional barriers that shape girls' educational trajectories. From a research perspective, future studies should examine these processes longitudinally and comparatively, with particular attention to how changes in household circumstances, community norms and policy interventions influence girls' retention, completion and longer-term empowerment.

The broader contribution of the paper is to conceptualize girls' educational participation as a relational process rather than simply an outcome of individual choice or school availability. Such an approach provides a stronger basis for understanding how gender inequalities are reproduced and contested and for developing education policies that are responsive to the social realities within which girls pursue their education.

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