

The Influence of Gender Relations on Girls' Dropout in Hurungwe District Secondary Schools of Mashonaland West Province. A Review of Available Literature

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ABSTRACT

Girls in Zimbabwe continue to drop out of secondary school at alarming rates, especially in rural districts where patriarchal gender relations shape their everyday experiences. This review of available literature examines how gender relations influence girls' dropout in secondary schools in Hurungwe District, Mashonaland West Province. The underlying argument in this review is that, school dropout is not just an individual or economic failure, but a direct consequence of unequal power dynamics, social rules and cultural expectations between males and females. This implies that entrenched patriarchal structures in social relations of gender actively disadvantage girls forcing them out of the education system. On the other hand specific research focussing on gender relations as a cause for dropout is very limited. In an attempt to fit into that gap, this paper focusses on how existing literature presents girls dropout from secondary schools as an outcome of gender relations. Gender relations are understood here as socially constructed, culturally embedded, and institutionally mediated patterns of power, resource allocation, and role assignment between men and women. The study was guided by Naila Kabeer's Social Relations Approach. Evident from the review was that retrogressive gender relations remain a significant cause of girls' dropout from secondary schools. On recommendations, review of available literature calls for concerted effort to address this problem through more research on gender relations in education; gender transformative approaches in the teaching and learning process; and the development of learner cognitive agency (especially for girls) so that they develop an attitude for staying in school until they graduate.

Keywords: gender relations, girls' dropout, secondary education; Social Relations Approach, Hurungwe district

ORIENTATION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Hurungwe District of Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe girls continue to dropout of school despite the various initiatives that have been put in place to help them stay in school. Girls drop out at rates higher than boys. This is happening in the wake of the Education Amendment Act of 2020 and the National Gender Policy of 2025. While an exact, official aggregate percentage for the total dropout rate across all secondary schools in the Hurungwe District is not centrally published as a single fixed statistic, regional studies and district reports indicate that the dropout of girls at secondary school level remains a significant challenge (Thomas, 2024). In this district, roughly 15% of secondary school girls drop out. Early marriage, teenage pregnancy and other gender related expectations in the community and in the school continue to pull girls out of the classroom (Thomas, 2024; Afrobarometre, 2023 British Council, 2025). From this observation non-governmental organisations (NGOs) introduced interventions targeting improved educational retention for girls. There are various scholarships on offer, school feeding programmes, and re-entry plans for pregnant girls. All these efforts do not confront the deeper gender relations that drive dropout in the first place. Patriarchal norms still devalue girls' education. Thomas (2024) states that cultural practices like kuripa ngozi, kuzvarira, and roora (appeasing the avenging spirit, pledging young children for marriage and lobola respectively) push girls into early marriages. In the family setup girls carry the bulk of domestic labour. In the

school, they face gender-based violence, biased teaching, and poor sanitation. In rural areas, customary law often overrides formal law. The gap between what policy promises and what actually happens remains wide. The real problem runs deeper than the dropout numbers. The gender relations behind those numbers are poorly understood and weakly addressed. Households, communities, schools, and policy systems all play a part. Unless we grasp how these parts connect, policies will keep delivering what Kabeer (1994) calls "formal equality without substantive equality" that is, rights on paper that do not change lived reality. This review uses Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach to examine how these forces interact. The goal is to interrogate the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that must be tackled together if girls in Hurungwe are to stay in school until they finish secondary education.

DEFINING GENDER RELATIONS

Kabeer (1994), defines gender relations as the socially constructed patterns of interaction between men and women. These patterns are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, institutional arrangements that govern the distribution of resources, responsibilities, and power. Kabeer's Social Relations Approach (1994) argues that gender relations are more than interpersonal dynamics. They are structurally embedded within institutions households, communities, markets, and states. Each of these institutions is governed by distinct rules, resource allocation mechanisms, activities, people, and power relations (Kabeer, 1994). These institutional dimensions interact to produce and reproduce gender inequality across multiple sites, including education.

Connell (2002) defines gender relations as a multidimensional structure with three parts. The first is the structure of power, which covers relations of authority and hierarchy, including patriarchy. The second is the structure of production, which concerns the gendered division of labour and access to resources and the third is the structure of cathexis, or emotional relations, which deals with normative patterns of desire, sexuality, and emotional attachment. Connell (2002) argues that gender relations are not a single structure but a dynamic process in which structures are constructed and reconstructed through practice. This means gender relations are a historically contingent, culturally variable, and open to contestation and change.

For this review, gender relations are understood as the socially constructed, culturally mediated, and institutionally embedded patterns of interaction between men and women. These patterns shape the distribution of power, resources, responsibilities, and status within households, communities, schools, and policy arenas. The definition is deliberately broad and relational. It reflects Kabeer's (1994) point that gender inequality must be analysed not simply as a characteristic of individuals but as a product of institutional arrangements that systematically disadvantage women and girls. This conceptualisation matters for understanding girls' educational experiences that lead to dropout in Hurungwe District where, gender relations take shape through the interplay of patriarchal cultural norms, household labour allocation, school-based gender dynamics, and state policy frameworks. All of these interact to produce different educational outcomes for girls and boys.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Main Research Question

How do gender relations influence secondary school girls' dropout rates in Hurungwe District of Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe?

Sub-Research Questions

- How do intra-household gender dynamics and resource allocation decisions affect a girl's likelihood of dropping out of secondary school in rural Hurungwe?
- In what ways do school-level gender relations and institutional environments (such as safety, menstrual hygiene facilities, and the implementation of re-entry policies) contribute to girls' school dropouts in the district?

- How do community-level cultural norms and socio-economic dependencies (such as early marriages, teenage pregnancy, and tobacco farming dynamics) intersect with gender roles to accelerate school dropouts among girls?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative desk research design rooted in documentary analysis. This design was considered appropriate because it aimed at unpacking how macro-level gender policies intersect with micro-level community relations to influence secondary school girls' dropout in Hurungwe District. Naila Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach was the theoretical framework that guided the study. This framework helped in the analysis of the selected literature across five institutional dimensions: rules, resources, people, activities, and power, thereby exposing how gender relations within Hurungwe communities affect the girl-child's educational persistence.

Data were gathered from both primary and secondary documentation using digital search engines and institutional repositories. Digital searches were systematically conducted across databases including Google Scholar, African Journals OnLine (AJOL), and local university repositories (such as the University of Zimbabwe and Midlands State University). To capture localised gray literature, policy papers, and contextual demographic data, the researcher retrieved publications from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT), and international development organizations active in the Mashonaland West Province such as CAMFED and UNICEF Zimbabwe. The search strategy included key concepts in the study which were: secondary school girls, dropout; gender relations; patriarchy; Hurungwe and Mashonaland West.

The studies that were included in the study included those that focussed specifically on Hurungwe District as well as the broader Mashonaland West Province and published between 2016 and 2026. Another aspect that was considered for inclusion was the target population. This meant that only those studies that address the dropout of female learners in secondary education were considered. Literature that explicitly examines the intersection of gender relations, patriarchal norms, intra-household dynamics, teenage pregnancy, or educational policy implementation with girls' school dropout was also included. Also included in the review were peer-reviewed journal articles and dissertations from Zimbabwe universities and colleges, official government policy frameworks (e.g., MoPSE directives), and technical reports from established NGOs operating in Hurungwe district.

Excluded documents were those that focused exclusively on urban schooling or tertiary education. Studies examining school dropout driven entirely by factors unrelated to gender relations, opinion pieces, non-peer-reviewed personal blogs, or literature outside the Hurungwe/Mashonaland West context were also excluded.

Intra-Household and Community Dynamics

Contemporary literature reveals a strong consensus regarding the detrimental impact of patriarchal household structures on girls' educational persistence in rural Hurungwe district. Observations by researchers point to the fact that rural households in Mashonaland West systematically prioritize boy-child education when financial resources are scarce. This is corroborated by institutional reports from CAMFED (2022), which establish that deeply embedded cultural norms frame girls as transitory family members whose primary value lies in domestic labour and future marital dowries. Child marriage as given by Maushe; Kurevakwesu; Muridzo; Chigondo & Mashambanhaka (2025) is one of the most damaging manifestations of patriarchal gender relations driving girls' dropout in Zimbabwe. According to the Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's Education Management Information System (EMIS), child marriage is a leading cause of girls' dropout. Some 33% of girls in Zimbabwe marry before the age of 18, and 5% marry before 15 (UNICEF, 2023). In Mashonaland West Province, the prevalence of child marriage is among the highest in the country (Maushe, et al., 2025).

A study by Ncube (2019), maintains that there are other factors that dictate these decisions. In line with that observation Mutanana and Gasva (2014) state that household bias primarily driven by market forces of the local agrarian economy also contribute to higher dropout of girls. In a district like Hurungwe, the peak periods of the seasonal tobacco market creates an acute demand for cheap labour. Economic shocks compel households to pull girls out of school to work in tobacco barns or engage in petty trading to subsidise family income, a phenomenon less frequently observed among boys

School Environment

The school environment is a critical institutional site where gender relations are both reproduced and contested. Kabeer (1994) identifies the school as one of the key institutions through which gender inequality is produced and reinforced, alongside the household, community, market, and state. In secondary schools in Hurungwe and similar districts, multiple institutional dynamics interact to create a gendered environment that disadvantages girls and pushes them towards dropout. Observations by Thomas (2024) demonstrate that school-level actors (teachers, learners and school development committees) in rural Mashonaland West frequently enforce institutional exclusion through covert moral policing and administrative frustration.

Gender-based violence, both within and outside schools, is a critical factor in girls' dropout. It is closely tied to patriarchal gender relations. In schools, gender-based violence takes the form of sexual harassment by teachers and male peers, bullying, and exploitative relationships driven by economic vulnerability. The fear and trauma from such violence push many girls to drop out. Schools become sites of risk rather than safety (UNGEL, 2021; British Council, 2023). Mutekwe and Modiba (2012) studied the gendered school curriculum in Zimbabwe. They found that the school environment itself reproduces patriarchal norms through teacher attitudes, curriculum content, and institutional practices that normalise gender-based violence and discrimination. This institutional reproduction of patriarchy within educational spaces creates what Connell (2002) calls a "gender regime" that is, the specific configuration of gender relations within a particular institution that systematically disadvantages girls. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is one of the most direct and damaging expressions of gender relations within the school environment. (Leach et al., 2014). The Together for Girls Coalition (2021) documented significant rates of school-related sexual violence, with teachers identified as perpetrators in a substantial proportion of cases.

In Zimbabwe, FAWWE Zimbabwe (2022) has run programmes aimed at creating safe classrooms for girls, but coverage remains limited, especially in rural districts like Hurungwe (FAWWE Zimbabwe, 2022). Gordon (1994), in her analysis of education policy and gender in Zimbabwe, argued that the curriculum works as a mechanism for reproducing gender ideology. It positions women as subordinate and domestic while naturalising male authority in public and professional spheres. This gendered curriculum has tangible consequences for girls' dropout. When girls perceive that the educational system does not value or prepare them for economic independence, their motivation to stay in school diminishes (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012).

The lack of adequate sanitation infrastructure in rural secondary schools is a gender-specific barrier that directly contributes to girls' dropout. In Hurungwe District, many secondary schools lack clean water for menstrual hygiene, and private spaces for changing sanitary materials. Sommer et al. (2015) conducted a global review of menstrual hygiene management in schools. They found that inadequate sanitation facilities lead to absenteeism during menstruation. Girls miss up to five days of school per month which is approximately 30% of the academic year. Over time, this chronic absenteeism results in learning deficits, academic underperformance, and, eventually, dropout. The Global Partnership for Education (2026) concurs with the given assertion.

Studies in Zimbabwe have found that teachers, both male and female, hold gender-biased expectations. These expectations privilege boys' academic performance and marginalise girls (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). This is also evident in appointments, promotions, assignment of duties, and teacher-student interactions. Girls receive less academic support, less challenging tasks, and fewer opportunities for leadership and participation (ERIC, 2012).

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Zimbabwe has developed a relatively comprehensive body of policy and legislation aimed at promoting gender equality and protecting girls' educational rights. However, observations by Fambisayi (2023) point to an existing gap between policy formulation and implementation particularly in rural districts like Hurungwe district. Maruzani (2026), applying Kabeer's Social Relations Approach, argues that existing policies fail to address the relational dimensions of gender inequality. Policies focus on interventions that do not disrupt the institutional rules, resource allocations, and power dynamics that drive girls' dropout.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) provides a strong foundational framework for gender equality. Section 56 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe enshrines the right to equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, and marital status. Section 27 mandates the State to ensure that all children have access to education (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). UNICEF Zimbabwe (2024) notes that the Constitution of Zimbabwe provides a strong framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and men, girls and boys. However, constitutional provisions alone cannot transform deeply entrenched gender relations. This is especially true where customary law and traditional governance structures operate as parallel legal systems that perpetuate patriarchal norms (Nhapi, 2020).

The Education Act (Chapter 25:04) grants the right to education for all children and promotes equality and equity between girls and boys (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). The Education Amendment Act of 2020 is a landmark reform. It made education compulsory and free for the first time, outlawed degrading punishment of pupils, and critically prohibited the expulsion of pregnant girls from school (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). This provision directly addresses one of the most overt institutional mechanisms through which gender relations produced dropout: the automatic exclusion of pregnant girls from the education system. UNFPA (2023) found that, despite the legal guarantee of re-entry, pregnant girls and adolescent mothers face deep social stigma, inadequate support systems, and logistical barriers including childcare responsibilities and financial constraints that prevent them from returning to school (Thondhlana & Ndwandwe; 2026). In Hurungwe, where community attitudes toward pregnant schoolgirls remain harsh, the gap between legal provision and lived reality is particularly wide.

The Brookings Institution (2025) noted that the National Gender Policy requires teacher training institutions to incorporate gender issues in all curricula and to remove gender stereotypes from educational materials. However, Maruzani (2026) argues that the policy's implementation does not address the relational structures of gender inequality. Using Kabeer's (1994) framework, Maruzani (2026) shows that the policy operates mainly at the level of individual rights and service delivery. It does not adequately target the institutional rules, resource allocation mechanisms, and power dynamics within households and communities that drive girls' dropout. The policy's emphasis on increasing girls' enrolment does not sufficiently address the conditions that cause enrolled girls to drop out (Maruzani, 2026).

The fundamental challenge across all policy and legal frameworks in Zimbabwe is the persistent gap between what the law says and what happens on the ground. On this aspect Maruzani (2026) concurs with Brookings Institution (2025) that, while the Education Amendment Act (2020) and the National Gender Policy (2025) are progressive legislative achievements, their implementation fails to address the gender relations patriarchal norms, unequal intra-household resource allocation, and gendered safety concerns that sustain the very conditions driving dropout.

In Hurungwe District, the implementation gap is made worse by limited institutional capacity, poor coordination between government ministries and civil society organisations, and the continued dominance of customary governance structures that resist externally imposed gender norms. Without addressing these structural barriers, policy reforms risk becoming what Kabeer (1994) calls formal equality without substantive equality, that is, legal provisions that guarantee equal rights but do not transform the social relations that produce unequal outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of available literature has examined how gender relations shaped by socio-cultural norms, household division of labour, school environment dynamics, and policy frameworks contribute to girls' dropout from secondary schools in Hurungwe District, Mashonaland West Province, Zimbabwe. From this review several key conclusions emerge.

Gender relations are more than interpersonal dynamics. They are structurally embedded within institutions that systematically disadvantage girls. Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding how households, communities, schools, and the state produce and reproduce gender inequality through their respective rules, resource allocation mechanisms, activities, people, and power dynamics. Applied to the Hurungwe context, this framework reveals that girls' dropout is not an individual failure but a structural outcome of institutionalised gender inequality. Patriarchal socio-cultural norms are the most fundamental driver of girls' dropout. Gender relations operate through the cultural devaluation of girls' education, the economic and cultural incentives for child marriage, and the control over female sexuality and mobility. These norms are not merely attitudinal. They are institutionalised within household decision-making, community expectations, and customary legal systems that perpetuate male dominance.

The gendered household division of labour creates a structural trade-off between domestic work and educational participation for girls. In Hurungwe, infrastructure deficits make the time demands of water collection, firewood gathering, and caregiving even heavier. Girls face chronic time poverty that directly undermines their ability to attend and persist in school. The school environment, rather than serving as a site of gender transformation, often reproduces patriarchal relations. Gender-based violence, gendered curriculum and pedagogical practices, inadequate sanitation infrastructure, biased teacher attitudes, and safety concerns related to long commuting distances all contribute to this reproduction.

Zimbabwe has enacted progressive legislation, including the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), the Education Amendment Act (2020), and the National Gender Policy (2025–2030). Yet implementation gaps persist, especially in rural districts where customary practices override statutory provisions and institutional capacity for enforcement is weak.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings from the review guided by Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach, MoPSE should develop a policy intervention that targets gender relations across institutional sites rather than relying on individual-level measures such as scholarships and school feeding alone. As Maruzani (2026) argues, a relational framework must address the structural dimensions of gender inequality within households, communities, and schools simultaneously. MoPSE should issue binding, standardised re-entry guidelines to all secondary schools in Hurungwe and other districts in Mashonaland West Province. These guidelines must specify procedures for supportive reintegration, allocate funding for childcare support for adolescent mothers.

Ultimately, dismantling the systemic barriers that drive girls out of the education system requires a profound disruption of the status quo. There is need for research into previously unexplored gender relations, implementing gender-transformative approaches within the teaching and learning process, and intentionally fostering cognitive agency for all learners (especially) female learners. From this trajectory, stakeholders can effectively shift the narrative from vulnerability to resilience.

Addressing gender relations equips girls with the critical mind set and determination needed to resist exclusionary pressures, transforming the school environment into a space that actively sustains their academic journeys. This calls for maximum effort from educators, policymakers, and communities to ensure that every girl is not only enrolled, but empowered with the internal agency to stay in school until graduation.

Future Research

While this study sheds light on the critical intersections of school dropout and gender relations, further studies

are required to broaden these insights. Future research should prioritize intervention-based research for interrogating gender-transformative pedagogy and specific cognitive agency frameworks in the classroom. Investigating these areas will provide policymakers and educators with actionable, evidence-based strategies to move beyond standard enrolment statistics and foster institutional environments where female learners are systematically empowered to complete their education.

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