Culture in the Classroom: Unpacking the Hidden Forces Impacting Girls' Learning in Zimbabwean Rural Settings

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

ABSTRACT   **Original Research Article**

This study explores how hidden cultural influences significantly affect the educational experiences and outcomes of girls in rural Zimbabwean classrooms. Using a qualitative constructivist approach, the research involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with forty participants, including students, teachers, and parents in Shamva District. The results show that girls' learning is systematically limited by a powerful hidden curriculum, which functions through several interconnected mechanisms: the heavy burden of gendered domestic duties causing fatigue and absenteeism; patriarchal norms that diminish the value of girls' education in favour of boys', justified by economic practices like lobola (bride price); teacher biases that steer boys toward intellectual pursuits and girls toward domestic roles; the acceptance of a sexualized and hostile school environment; and the combined effects of climate-induced stressors with mental health challenges, which further hinder academic engagement. The study concludes that the classroom reflects broader community dynamics, actively maintaining gender inequality. It recommends a comprehensive strategy, including gender-sensitive teacher training, enhanced psychosocial support, targeted community involvement, and strict enforcement of protective policies to break down these hidden barriers and promote equitable education for all girls.

Keywords: Culture, Hidden Forces, Rural Setting, Girls Learning, Education, Rural Zimbabwe.

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Introduction

In rural Zimbabwe, the intersection of tradition and education presents a complex landscape for girls seeking to complete their schooling. Despite national and international commitments to gender equality in education, cultural norms continue to shape and often limit girls' academic trajectories. Practices such as early marriage, gendered household roles, and societal expectations around femininity disproportionately affect girls, leading to high dropout rates and limited educational attainment. In 2023 alone, over 4,557 girls dropped out of school due to pregnancy, with nearly 3,942 of these cases occurring in rural areas (Zim Trending, 2024 September 9). These figures reflect deeper systemic issues, including poverty, lack of access to reproductive health education, and entrenched patriarchal values that prioritize boys' education over girls'. Further illustrating this disparity, CAMFED (2024) reports that only 14% of girls in Zimbabwe complete upper secondary school a proportion that declines to just 1% among the poorest demographics. Compounding these barriers, cultural expectations frequently assign girls the majority of domestic responsibilities, leaving them with inadequate time and energy for academic pursuits. While existing scholarship has increasingly examined the structural barriers to girls' education in rural Zimbabwe, a significant research gap persists regarding the operationalisation of *hidden cultural curricula* within classroom environments. Previous studies have predominantly concentrated on macro-level socio-economic and institutional factors such as poverty, early marriage, and policy inadequacies with insufficient attention

devoted to the micro-level pedagogical and interpersonal dynamics through which cultural norms are enacted, reinforced, and internalised in school settings. This study aims to critically examine the understated yet influential ways in which embedded cultural norms and practices shape the learning experiences and educational trajectories of girls in rural Zimbabwean classrooms. To achieve this, the study pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyse the specific cultural norms and gender expectations that influence girls' engagement and participation in classroom activities.
2. To explore how teachers' cultural beliefs and pedagogical practices contribute to a hidden curriculum that reinforces gendered roles and inequalities.
3. To assess how community norms and economic practices, interact with school environments to constrain or enable girls' educational aspirations and achievements.

Literature review

A growing body of literature highlights the profound influence of cultural norms on girls' education in rural Zimbabwe, revealing a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that hinder academic achievement. Recent studies revealed that, deeply entrenched gender roles remain a significant barrier to girls' education. A research study by Bhiri (2025) found that rural girls in Hwange District face cultural expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities and early marriage over formal education. These norms often result in absenteeism, low self-esteem, and academic disengagement, particularly during menstruation due to lack of sanitary resources and stigma surrounding female biology.

Literature continues to highlight the multifaceted cultural and institutional barriers that hinder girls' academic success in rural settings. For instance, Dangarembwa and Gwirayi (2025) identified sexual violence, teacher bias, and parental attitudes as critical factors affecting girls' academic performance in rural secondary schools. Their qualitative study revealed that girls often experience harassment and discrimination within the school environment, which contributes to a hostile learning atmosphere and diminished academic outcomes. Similarly, Deredzai and Goronga (2025) underscore the pervasive nature of sexual violence against female student teachers in Zimbabwean schools, revealing how power imbalances and institutional neglect contribute to emotional trauma and academic withdrawal. In addition, the 2025 UNESCO Gender Report emphasizes that despite global strides in gender parity, girls still face systemic discrimination and harassment that undermine their educational outcomes, particularly in low-income and rural contexts. Complementing these insights, Komatsu (2024) and Psaki et al. (2022) argue that gender-insensitive school environments marked by biased teaching practices,

inadequate facilities, and lack of psychosocial support exacerbate dropout rates and limit girls' participation in class discussions. These findings collectively reinforce the cultural and institutional factors that affect the girl child's quest for equal educational opportunities, hence the urgent need for gender-responsive policies, teacher training, and community engagement to dismantle the hidden cultural forces that perpetuate inequality in rural classrooms.

The issue is further compounded by economic instability and entrenched traditional practices such as lobola (bride price), which often incentivize families to marry off daughters early rather than invest in their education. A comparative study of Zimbabwe and India conducted by Rori and Shakil (2025) revealed that while both countries grapple with gender inequality in rural education, Zimbabwe's unique economic hardships and cultural customs, particularly the monetization of marriage through lobola, exert a stronger influence on girls' educational outcomes. Supporting this, Mlambo Education Foundation Trust (2025) highlights how poverty in rural Zimbabwean communities like Birchenough Bridge drives early marriage as a survival strategy, with lobola offering short-term financial relief to struggling families. Ngidia et al. (2025) further emphasize that sociocultural norms and religious beliefs, especially within the Apostolic Faith Church, reinforce early marriage by framing it as a moral and economic necessity, thereby curtailing girls' autonomy and access to education. Legal analyses also point to the systemic nature of this issue under Zimbabwe's dual legal system, lobola is not only culturally sanctioned but also legally recognized, perpetuating gender hierarchies and undermining girls' rights to equal educational opportunities. As a result, the convergence of economic instability and entrenched traditional practices continues to obstruct the educational progression of the girl child, with long-term implications that perpetuate cycles of marginalization and reduced life opportunities.

Moreover, resilience and psychological well-being have emerged as underexplored yet vital dimensions in understanding girls' educational outcomes in rural Zimbabwe. Chidarikire and Mweli (2025) explored how climate-induced stressors and poverty intersect to affect rural girls' mental health and academic performance, revealing that psychological resilience especially when supported by culturally grounded interventions and community engagement, can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Similarly, Dutiro and Chigevenga (2025) found that rural women in Chimanimani experience heightened psychological distress due to climate change, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive mental health support in education systems. Leshota and Malimabe (2025) further argue that climate change disproportionately impacts the mental health of girls and women in low-income African contexts, calling for eco-psychological frameworks that integrate cultural identity and emotional resilience. These findings align with broader calls for culturally sensitive mental health interventions (Opia &

Matthew, 2025), which emphasize the importance of community-based strategies that reflect local values and lived experiences. Together, these studies highlight the urgent need to embed psychosocial support and resilience-building into rural education policy and practice.

Despite policy efforts aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education, implementation gaps persist, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Zickafoose *et al.* (2024) identify persistent barriers such as inadequate funding, limited teacher training, and gender disparities that hinder the realization of SDG 4 in rural contexts. These challenges are compounded by weak accountability mechanisms and insufficient integration of indigenous knowledge systems. To address these gaps, scholars and global education advocates emphasize the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement. For example, Nantale (2024) argues that involving traditional leaders, educators, parents, and policymakers enhances policy legitimacy and fosters culturally responsive solutions. Similarly, Bissoonauth (2019) highlights how African traditional and religious leaders can play a transformative role in reshaping community attitudes toward girls' education by challenging harmful norms and promoting school retention. Therefore, this calls for collaborative, context-sensitive strategies that bridge policy and practice to ensure that no girl is left behind.

Sub-research questions

1. How do local cultural norms and gender expectations shape girls' engagement and participation in classroom activities within rural schools?
2. In what ways do teachers' cultural beliefs and attitudes influence their pedagogical practices and interactions with female students?
3. How does the hidden curriculum reflect, reinforce, or challenge community-held beliefs about girls' education in Zimbabwe's rural learning environments?

Objective

To examine how embedded cultural norms and practices in rural Zimbabwean classrooms influence girls' learning experiences and educational outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

To critically analyze how hidden cultural forces are enacted and reproduced within the classroom, this study is guided by Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and its core concepts of habitus, capital, and field. This theoretical lens is particularly apt for examining the understated, systemic ways in which gender inequality is perpetuated in educational settings, as it moves beyond cataloging visible barriers to explaining the tacit, embodied logic through which social hierarchies become normalized and internalized (Bourdieu, 2020; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the ingrained system of dispositions, perceptions, and practices acquired through long-term socialisation provides a framework for understanding how patriarchal norms become the taken-for-granted reality for students, teachers, and parents in rural Zimbabwe. The gendered habitus explains why girls internalize domestic roles as natural and limit their own aspirations, a process Bourdieu describes as misrecognition, where power relations are perceived not as historical constructs but as the natural order (Bourdieu, 2001). Capitalising on the resources valued within a social space illuminates the differential valuation of boys' and girls' education. In the rural Zimbabwean context, investing in a boy's education is seen as accumulating long-term cultural and economic capital for the family, whereas a girl is often viewed primarily as a source of symbolic capital to be transferred through marriage practices like lobola (Bourdieu, 1986). This economic logic directly influences familial decisions, framing girls' education as a cost with no tangible return (Rori & Shakil, 2025).

Finally, the school is conceptualized as a field a structured social arena with its own rules, power relations, and stakes. The educational field is not neutral; it is a site where the broader field of patriarchal community power is contested and reproduced. Teachers, as key agents, often unconsciously enact a pedagogical habitus that validates masculine forms of participation and devalues feminine ones, thereby converting social bias into academic outcomes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Dangarembwa & Gwirayi, 2025). This process constitutes the hidden curriculum, a powerful mechanism for social reproduction. Supporting these sentiments Bourdieu argued that, the education system often functions to conserve and consecrate existing social hierarchies rather than challenge them (Bourdieu, 1998:20). Thus applying this triad of habitus, capital, and field, the analysis can systematically unpack how classroom interactions, community norms, and economic practices intertwine to form a self-reinforcing cycle that systematically disadvantages girls, offering a strong sociological explanation for the persistence of the hidden curriculum.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The research will be grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning through participants' lived experiences. This aligns with the study's aim to understand how cultural forces are interpreted and internalized by girls, teachers, and community members.

Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is particularly effective for examining complex social and cultural phenomena within their natural settings. This approach enables a deep exploration of the cultural dynamics

that shape girls' learning experiences in rural Zimbabwean classrooms. Through this lens, the study will investigate hidden curricula the implicit values and norms embedded in classroom practices that often reinforce social hierarchies and gender roles (Blasco *et al.,* 2022). It will also examine gendered expectations, which influence girls' academic engagement and aspirations, especially in contexts where traditional gender norms persist (Riegle-Crumb & Morton, 2017). Furthermore, the study will consider community norms and their role in shaping educational outcomes, particularly how local beliefs and power structures impact girls' access to and participation in schooling (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015). By focusing on these, context-specific factors, the research aims to unpack the subtle yet powerful cultural forces that affect girls' learning in Zimbabwean rural settings.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to conduct this study. The researcher also explained the purpose of the research to the school officials and the participants before data collection as a way of upholding informed consent. Twenty female students participated in the FDGs. Ten teachers and ten parents were interviewed from the two selected schools in Shamva district. Interviews averaged approximately 20 minutes in length. Audio recordings were done for the interviews to capture every detail supplied by the interviewees whilst the researcher was also taking down the main points in the note book.

Participants

In this study, a purposive sample of forty individuals from a rural district in Zimbabwe was selected to explore how cultural dynamics subtly influence girls' learning experiences in the classroom. The cohort consisted of twenty forms 2 to 4 female students, five female teachers, five male teachers, and ten parents. These participants were deliberately chosen to capture a wide range of perspectives on the often-invisible cultural forces that shape educational outcomes for adolescent girls. Female students, positioned at a pivotal stage of their academic and social development, serve as key informants whose lived experiences reveal how entrenched norms and expectations manifest in their schooling journeys (Mutekwe *et al*., 2013). The inclusion of female teachers adds another layer of insight, as they both reflect and respond to community values within the classroom, often navigating gendered expectations themselves. Male teachers contribute contrasting viewpoints on institutional practices and cultural ideologies, helping to uncover how patriarchal attitudes may be perpetuated or challenged through pedagogy (Risman, 2018). Parents, as transmitters of cultural values, influence girls' attitudes toward education and future aspirations, making their input indispensable in unpacking the broader socio-cultural ecosystem (Zajda, 2024). The selection of these stakeholders was guided by their contextual knowledge and experiential depth, rendering them information-rich sources capable of illuminating the often-unseen cultural scripts embedded in Zimbabwe's rural classrooms and their profound implications for gendered learning outcomes.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing two primary methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This methodological triangulation was strategically chosen to elicit rich, contextual, and multi-faceted insights into the complex socio-cultural phenomena under investigation.

Semi-structured interviews

To investigate the hidden cultural forces influencing girls' learning in Zimbabwean rural ecologies, the researcher employed qualitative interviews with teachers and parents. This method was particularly effective in unpacking the complex interplay between gender roles, cultural expectations, and educational experiences. Interviews offered a dynamic and responsive platform that enabled the researcher to pose critical questions and probe deeper into participants' lived realities, thereby capturing the social norms and values embedded in both home and school environments (Mutekwe *et al.,* 2013; Zajda, 2024).Unlike questionnaires, which are often subject to low response rates and superficial engagement, interviews ensured a high level of participation and allowed the researcher to clarify ambiguities and follow up on emerging themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach facilitated a richer understanding of how cultural expectations such as domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and gendered behavioural norms intersect with school-based experiences to shape girls' educational trajectories (Chikwizo, 2020; Dangarembwa & Gwirayi, 2025). Moreover, interviews enabled the researcher to extend their intellectual and emotional reach across diverse social and cultural boundaries, fostering empathy and insight into the lived experiences of rural girls and their communities (Vicki *et al*., 2018). As a flexible and context-sensitive research tool, interviews proved instrumental in revealing the subtle yet powerful cultural dynamics that contribute to the marginalization of girls in rural classrooms (Bhiri, 2025; Chikuvadze *et al*., 2023).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

To complement the individual focus of the interviews, a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were facilitated with twenty female students. The FGD methodology was specifically selected for its capacity to access not only individual views but also the shared social norms and collective sense-making processes within the student cohort (Gundumogula, 2020). The group dynamic of FGDs can catalyse a level of disclosure and conceptual clarity that may be less accessible in a one-on-one setting, as participants listen to, build upon, or challenge each other's contributions (Sachdeva *et al.,* 2024). Conducted in a permissive and non-

threatening environment, these discussions were structured to encourage open dialogue about sensitive topics, including classroom interactions, gender expectations, and community pressures. This approach was therefore essential for mapping the communal, often unspoken, cultural scripts that constitute the hidden curriculum influencing the girls' educational journeys.

Data Recording and Management

To ensure accuracy and completeness, audio recordings were made during all interviews. This approach is consistent with best practices in qualitative research, where recordings allow for verbatim transcription and facilitate rigorous analysis (Yin, 2011). Simultaneously, the researcher maintained field notes to capture non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and emergent themes. This dual-recording strategy enhances the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Morse, 2015).

Data Analysis

A thematic data analysis approach was employed to rigorously examine and interpret qualitative data collected from teachers, parents, and secondary school learners, making it well-suited to this exploratory study aimed at uncovering subtle, contextually embedded cultural influences on girls' learning in Zimbabwean rural settings (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the data were transcribed, closely read, and systematically coded to generate initial patterns, which were then organized into broader themes that captured the hidden sociocultural forces, such as gender norms, traditional beliefs, and community expectations that constrain girls' educational experiences. Stakeholders' narratives were critically compared to highlight convergences and divergences in perception, thereby deepening interpretive insight into how culture operates as an invisible curriculum. The analysis provided a lens for understanding how these cultural factors materialize in classroom interactions and pedagogical expectations, while also exposing intersectional concerns such as poverty, early marriage, and household labour roles, which disproportionately impact girls' educational trajectories and are often interwoven with local cultural practices (Mpofu & Mutasa, 2021). To uphold analytical integrity, an iterative validation process involving peer debriefing and reflexive journaling was implemented, ensuring that thematic constructs remained firmly rooted in the data while critically engaging with the wider literature on gender, education, and cultural dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethical Considerations

To uphold the ethical integrity of this study, a comprehensive protocol aligned with internationally recognized standards was rigorously implemented, beginning with obtaining formal ethical clearance from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to ensure institutional sanction. The principle of informed consent was paramount; a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, nature, and potential implications was provided to all school officials and participants, with written consent secured from adults and parental consent obtained for minors, in strict adherence to guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; BERA, 2018). To protect participants from potential social or emotional harm, stringent measures for confidentiality and anonymity were enforced, including the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of all collected data in encrypted digital repositories, thereby complying with data protection frameworks such as the GDPR and the ethical principles of the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). This consent process was not merely a preliminary formality but an ongoing, voluntary engagement, consistent with contemporary ethical mandates that prioritize participant autonomy and welfare throughout the research lifecycle (Jawa *et al.*, 2023; Klykken, 2021).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study, derived from the narratives of students, teachers, and parents in Shamva District, reveal that the educational experiences of rural Zimbabwean girls are profoundly shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, institutional practices, and economic pressures. The analysis crystallizes into several key themes that illuminate the hidden curriculum and its gendered impact.

The tyranny of gendered roles and domestic responsibilities

A predominant theme emerging from the data is the overwhelming burden of domestic responsibilities placed on girls, which directly competes with their academic pursuits. In rural areas, gender norms often assign girls the main roles of caregivers and household helpers. From an early age, girls are expected to handle tasks like cooking, cleaning, fetching water, caring for siblings, and supporting elderly family members. These duties go beyond after-school chores; many girls must do them before school and late into the night, greatly limiting time for study, rest, and personal growth. Their ability to focus in class or finish homework is affected by physical exhaustion and competing responsibilities. School attendance also suffers. Girls may miss whole days or arrive late because of household duties, which disrupts learning and causes them to fall behind academically. In communities where children's labour is vital for family survival, education takes a backseat especially for girls, whose roles are seen as preparing them for domestic life rather than for academics or careers. Participants consistently reported that girls are expected to perform a disproportionate share of household chores. A Form 3 student shared, *"I have to fetch water, cook, and wash the dishes before I can even think about my homework. Most times, I am too tired to read and I sleep in class."* This aligns with the literature, according to Bhiri (2025) that these cultural expectations lead to chronic fatigue and absenteeism. The hidden curriculum

here reinforces the societal belief that a girl's primary role is domestic, implicitly devaluing her academic identity. A parent confirmed this prioritization, stating that, *"School is important, but a girl must know her duties at home first. How will she manage her own home if she doesn't learn now?''*. Supporting these findings, Komatsu (2024) argues that gender-insensitive environments fail to accommodate these external pressures, leading to increased dropout rates. Lack of consistent schooling decreases their literacy, career options, and long-term economic power, which helps sustain cycles of poverty and gender inequality.

Patriarchal Norms and the Political Economy of Girls' Devalued Education

Further findings of this study reveal that the devaluation of girls' education is not a matter of individual prejudice but a systemic outcome embedded within a patriarchal political economy. This system, upheld by interlocking cultural, economic, and legal structures, rationalizes the preferential investment in sons' schooling while framing daughters as transient assets whose ultimate value is realized through marriage, not academic attainment. For example, the core patriarchal logic was succinctly captured by a male teacher's metaphor: *"Educating a boy is like building a family bank. Educating a girl is like watering a neighbour's garden."* This analogy reveals a patrilineal worldview where sons are perceived as permanent assets who will inherit lineage and provide for their natal family, thereby making their education a long-term investment. Daughters, in contrast, are constructed as economic liabilities whose productive and reproductive capacities will be transferred to another family upon marriage. Their education is thus seen as a sunk cost with no tangible return for her family of origin.

This cultural logic is strongly materialized through the institution of lobola (bride price). According to Rori and Shakil (2025), lobola is not just a symbolic tradition but a vital economic tool that encourages early marriage. A father participant clearly explained this calculation: *"Why spend on school fees when she will belong to another family? The lobola we get can help us pay for her brother's education or solve immediate problems."*

This statement reveals a harsh cost-benefit analysis, where a daughter's education is sacrificed to fund a son's, or to provide short-term financial relief amid deep economic instability, as highlighted by the Mlambo Education Foundation Trust (2025). Importantly, this system isn't just culturally accepted but is legally recognized within Zimbabwe's dual legal system, which acknowledges customary law. The legal recognition of lobola legitimizes the very framework that treats women as property, hence structurally undermining constitutional guarantees of gender equality and the right to education. This creates a fundamental contradiction, where the state, through one legal channel, aims to empower girls in school, while through

another, it upholds traditional norms that make such empowerment economically impractical for many rural families.

Consequently, the classroom is not an insulated space but is deeply implicated in this political economy. The decision to withdraw a girl from school is often a rational, if devastating, economic strategy within this constrained framework. The convergence of patrilineal ideology, the monetization of marriage through *lobola*, and systemic economic hardship creates a powerful feedback loop that systematically diverts resources away from girls' education, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of gendered poverty and marginalization.

The Hidden Curriculum: Teacher Bias and the Gendered Architecture of the Classroom

This research provides compelling evidence that a potent hidden curriculum operates within rural Zimbabwean classrooms, fundamentally shaped by teacher attitudes and pedagogical practices. This curriculum functions as a tacit educational force, transmitting and reinforcing societal gender norms through the daily rituals of school life. The findings reveal a consistent pattern where male students are positioned as epistemic authorities, the primary knowers and actors, while female students are channeled into supportive and often silent roles.

The data illustrate a clear gendered division of labour and recognition. One female student noted that, *"The teachers always choose boys to answer questions in science and mathematics. When we girls raise our hands, they look past us or say let's give the young men a chance."*

This practice, repeatedly observed by participants, implicitly constructs scientific domains as masculine, undermining girls' sense of belonging and intellectual self-efficacy in STEM subjects. Conversely, girls reported being praised for compliance and domesticity. Another student explained, *"When the classroom is dirty, the teacher's eyes always find us. 'Girls, can you sweep? You are better at making things tidy.' They never ask the boys."*

This differential reinforcement, as documented in studies of gendered classroom interaction (Riegle-Crumb & Morton, 2017), silently teaches that boys' primary role is intellectual engagement, while girls' is maintenance and care.

These micro-inequities in pedagogy are compounded by a more insidious dimension of the hidden curriculum thus the normalization of a sexualized and hostile environment. A student's hushed confession during an FGD, *"Some teachers call us names like 'sweetie' and touch our shoulders or waists in a way that makes us uncomfortable. We are afraid to report them because they are the authorities"*, points to the abuse of pedagogical power. This aligns directly with the findings of Deredzai and Goronga (2025) on the pervasive sexual violence against female student teachers, revealing

how institutional power imbalances are exploited. Such actions communicate a devastating lesson that female students' bodies are not their own sovereign territory but are subject to male authority and appraisal, fundamentally violating the safety required for intellectual risk-taking and engagement.

Collectively, these practices constitute a powerful hidden curriculum that systematically devalues girls' intellectual contributions and politicizes their bodies. The consistent channeling of boys toward public, academic recognition and girls toward private, domestic tasks (Blasco *et al.*, 2022) prefigures the adult gender roles prevalent in the broader community. This curriculum does not merely reflect external cultural norms; but it actively reproduces them within the school, legitimizing patriarchal authority and limiting girls' academic identities and future aspirations. These findings mirror those of Dangarembwa and Gwirayi (2025), who revealed that this institutionalized bias is not a peripheral issue but a central mechanism undermining girls' performance and perpetuating educational inequality. The classroom, therefore, becomes a key site where gender hierarchies are rehearsed and ratified, making pedagogical reform a critical frontier for change.

The Intersection of Climate Stress, Mental Health, and Learning

An emergent and critical finding of this research elucidates the complex, cascading effects of climate-induced stressors on the psycho-educational landscape for rural Zimbabwean girls. The data reveal that environmental shocks are not merely background economic factors but are active, gendered stressors that directly shape mental well-being and academic engagement. This creates a vicious cycle where ecological fragility exacerbates psychosocial vulnerabilities, which in turn derail educational trajectories. The analysis begins at the household level, where climate variability translates into direct educational risk. The poignant testimony from a mother, *"The rains failed, we have nothing. Suppose a man shows interest in my daughter. In that case, it is one less mouth to feed and we get something to help the family"*, exemplifies how economic precocity, intensified by drought, recalibrates familial cost-benefit analyses regarding daughters' education. This aligns with the findings of the Mlambo Education Foundation Trust (2025), which frames early marriage as a climate adaptation strategy in contexts of extreme poverty. Within such circumstances, a girl's education is sacrificed as a tangible asset to mitigate immediate household insecurity, a decision rationalized within a constricted range of options.

For the girls themselves, this environmental and familial instability manifests as chronic psychological distress, which directly impairs cognitive and academic functioning. The testimony of a Form 4 student, *"I am always worried about home. Will there be food? Will my parents make me marry? It is hard to focus on my books"* encapsulates the cognitive load

and weathering associated with this persistent anxiety. This finding is in line with the work of Chidarikire and Mweli (2025), who documented that climate-related poverty intersects with gendered expectations to produce significant mental health burdens for adolescent girls. The constant state of hypervigilance and worry consumes attentional resources, leaving limited cognitive capacity for the deep, sustained concentration required for academic learning, thereby directly depressing academic performance. Consequently, the lack of institutional support structures further complicates this psycho-educational linkage. According toDutiro and Chigevenga (2025), the psychological distress induced by climate change remains largely unaddressed in rural settings. The current findings confirm that schools, already resource-constrained, are not equipped with the gender-sensitive mental health frameworks necessary to help girls process this compound trauma. There are no safe spaces for them to articulate their fears of forced marriage or starvation, nor are there counsellors trained in the eco-psychological approaches called for by Leshota and Malimabe (2025). Thus, the school environment, instead of being a sanctuary for learning and growth, becomes another site where their invisible psychological struggles are ignored, further alienating them from the educational process.

Community Norms and the Social Reproduction of Gendered Aspirations

The data substantiates that community norms function as a powerful mechanism for the social reproduction of gender inequality, operating through the direct shaping of girls' academic aspirations and self-concept. This process of socialization ensures that gendered expectations are not merely externally imposed but are internalized by girls, thereby influencing their educational engagement and life trajectories from within. The findings reveal a concerted, if often unconscious, community effort to align girls' ambitions with prescribed patriarchal and socio-economic roles.

This normative regulation is vividly captured in the counsel reported by one student: *"My aunt says I should not dream too much. The most important thing is to find a good husband."* This directive exemplifies what sociologists term "aspiration containment," where girls' horizons of possibility are deliberately narrowed to domains of marriage and motherhood. This internalization of limited futures constitutes a strong facet of the hidden curriculum, as it teaches girls to de-prioritize their own intellectual and professional potential. This is supported by Campano, Ghiso, & Welch (2015) who suggest that, these local belief systems are not peripheral but are central to understanding patterns of educational participation and disengagement.

The sanctification of these norms by religious institutions lends them a powerful moral authority that is particularly difficult to contest. The assertion by a community elder and church member, *"According to our faith, a woman's place is to be a helper and a mother. Too much education can lead*

her astray" frames educational attainment for girls not as an empowerment tool but as a potential source of moral deviance. This finding directly aligns with Ngidia *et al.* (2025), who document how certain religious doctrines, particularly within the Apostolic Faith Church, conflate female submission with virtue and higher education with spiritual risk. This theological framing transforms a socio-cultural preference into a moral imperative, making resistance to early marriage or the pursuit of advanced education not just a social transgression but a potential sin.

Consequently, the community functions as an educative space that rivals and often overpowers the formal school. While the school may promote messages of gender equality and academic achievement, the constant, authoritative reinforcement of traditional norms from family and faith leaders creates a profound cognitive dissonance for girls. To maintain social belonging and moral identity, many girls consciously or subconsciously lower their educational aspirations, self-selecting out of academic paths that conflict with community-held definitions of a good woman. This process ensures that patriarchal structures are reproduced not solely through coercion, but through the shaping of individual subjectivity and desire, presenting a formidable, deeply rooted challenge to policy interventions aimed at retaining girls in the educational pipeline.

Recommendations

To dismantle the hidden cultural forces hindering girls' education in rural Zimbabwe, a multi-pronged, collaborative approach is essential. The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Implement Gender-Responsive Teacher Training and Curriculum Reform:**

   The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, in partnership with organizations like CAMFED, should mandate comprehensive in-service training for teachers on gender-responsive pedagogy. This training must equip educators to identify and challenge their own biases, create inclusive classroom environments, and actively encourage girls' participation. Furthermore, the formal curriculum should be reviewed to integrate positive representations of women and girls in leadership and professional roles.

2. **Strengthen School-Based Support Systems:**

   Schools should establish safe, confidential reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with clear consequences for perpetrators. Additionally, introducing psychosocial support systems, such as peer support groups and counselling services that incorporate culturally grounded interventions, is critical to address the mental health impacts of climate stress and gendered pressures.

3. **Launch Targeted Community Engagement and Advocacy Campaigns:**

   Policymakersand NGOs must actively engage traditional leaders, religious figures, and parents in dialogue. Advocacy campaigns should highlight the long-term economic and social benefits of educating girls, challenging harmful norms like early marriage and the inequitable distribution of domestic labour.

4. **Develop and Enforce Protective Policies with Accountability Mechanisms:**

   While laws against early marriage exist, their enforcement is weak. There is a need to strengthen legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms to protect girls' rights, including stricter enforcement of laws against child marriage. This should be coupled with economic support for the poorest families, such as cash transfers conditional on girls' school attendance, to offset the short-term financial incentive of *lobola*.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the powerful, often invisible, cultural currents that shape the educational landscape for girls in rural Zimbabwe. It concludes that the classroom is not an isolated space but a microcosm of the broader community, where gendered norms, patriarchal values, and economic pressures converge to create a hidden curriculum that systematically disadvantages girls. The voices of the participants, the tired student, the pragmatic parent, the biased teacher paint a vivid picture of a system where girls' potential is consistently subdued. Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond simplistic policy solutions to embrace deeply contextual, culturally sensitive, and multi-stakeholder strategies. It demands a concerted effort to transform not only pedagogical practices and school environments but also the deeply held community beliefs that devalue girls' potential. Through aligning teacher training, mental health support, community advocacy, and robust policy enforcement, stakeholders can begin to dismantle these hidden forces. Ensuring that every girl in rural Zimbabwe can realize her right to a quality, equitable education is not only a moral and legal imperative but also a fundamental cornerstone for sustainable national development.

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