



Assessing Gender Equality in the Provision of Educational Opportunities: A Case of Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

Chanda Chansa Thelma

Chreso University, Lusaka, Zambia, Department of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences

Email: tchanda@chresouniversity.edu.zm

ABSTRACT:

Overview: *The pursuit of gender equality in education is fundamental to achieving equitable and sustainable development. This study examined the disparities between male and female learners in accessing and benefiting from educational opportunities globally, with a particular focus on Zambia.*

Body of Knowledge: *Assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities involves examining the extent to which males and females have equitable access to education at all levels. The study focused on both formal and informal barriers to education, such as gender-based stereotypes, early marriages, and inadequate support for girls' education, particularly in rural or marginalized areas. It also considers the role of policy interventions and legal frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality in education.*

Methods: *The study adopted a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data to provide a comprehensive understanding. The study was conducted in 5 selected secondary within Lusaka district in Zambia with a sample of 200 respondents. Stratified random sampling of schools was used to ensure representation across different schools. The population for the study included; Officials from DEBS office, Head Teachers, Teachers, and Pupils. Structured open-ended interviews, focus groups and questionnaires were used to respondents to collect data. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and Microsoft excel whereas the qualitative data from semi structured interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically.*

Results: *The findings revealed that while enrollment rates for both boys and girls have improved in many regions, disparities still exist in retention, completion, and access to higher education, particularly in rural areas. Socio-cultural factors, economic barriers, and gender biases continue to limit girls' educational opportunities, leading to lower literacy rates and underrepresentation in STEM fields.*

Recommendation: *Schools and educational authorities should establish robust systems for collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data on enrollment, retention, and academic performance. This data may help identify gaps in educational opportunities and inform targeted interventions.*

Keywords: *Access, Disparities, Equity, Inclusion, and Opportunities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia, is crucial to understanding the extent to which both boys and girls have equitable access to quality education. While Zambia has made strides in promoting gender equality through various policies and initiatives, disparities persist, particularly in rural and low-income areas (Chanda & Madoda, 2024). These disparities may manifest in unequal access to resources, fewer opportunities for girls in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, and cultural or societal expectations that limit girls' educational ambitions. In Lusaka District, secondary schools serve as a microcosm of broader national trends, where gender biases can affect enrollment rates, retention, and performance. Mpolomoka et al (2023a)' study noted that assessing the situation in these schools involves examining factors such as school infrastructure, teacher attitudes, curriculum inclusivity, and extracurricular activities, all of which contribute to either promoting or hindering gender equality. Additionally, understanding how gender-related challenges such as early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and gender-based violence influence girls' ability to complete their education is essential in formulating more effective interventions. Therefore, a thorough evaluation of these dimensions can offer insights into how gender equality in education can be better achieved in Zambia.

Access to assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities involves examining various factors that impact equitable access to education for both males and females. This includes analyzing enrollment rates, retention, and completion rates for girls and boys across different levels

of education. It also involves considering the presence of gender-sensitive policies, availability of resources, and the societal and cultural barriers that may hinder the participation of girls in education (Irvine, 2003). Gender disparities in educational opportunities are often shaped by economic, social, and cultural influences that disproportionately affect girls, particularly in low-income and rural areas. Moreover, gender equality assessments should look into the quality of education provided, ensuring that both genders are receiving fair treatment in the classroom, access to learning materials, and encouragement in subjects traditionally dominated by one gender, such as STEM for girls. Eliasu (2023) says that addressing these gaps requires implementing targeted interventions, including scholarships, community awareness programs, and gender-sensitive educational reforms aimed at breaking down barriers and creating a more inclusive educational environment.

Equity plays a crucial role in assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities, as it focuses on ensuring that both boys and girls have fair access to learning resources, support systems, and educational environments that cater to their unique needs (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011). Unlike equality, which emphasizes treating everyone the same, equity recognizes that different genders may require different interventions to overcome specific barriers, such as cultural expectations, socio-economic disadvantages, or systemic biases. Chanda et al (2023a) in their study alluded that in many contexts, girls, for instance, may face challenges like early marriages, societal pressure, or limited access to STEM education, which may require tailored support to level the playing field. Assessing gender equality through the lens of equity involves evaluating whether educational policies and practices actively address these disparities and provide appropriate solutions that ensure all students, regardless of gender, can achieve their full potential. This approach highlights the need for inclusive curricula, gender-sensitive teaching methods, and targeted initiatives that promote gender balance in traditionally male-dominated fields, ultimately fostering a more equitable and just educational system.

Inclusion plays a critical role in assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities, as it focuses on ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, have equal access to learning resources and opportunities. The concept of inclusion goes beyond mere enrollment numbers, addressing the quality of education received and the environment within which learning takes place. In many contexts, gender disparities persist due to socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and structural inequalities that limit girls' access to education or the types of subjects they are encouraged to pursue (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). To assess gender equality effectively, inclusion must examine factors such as curriculum design, teaching methods, teacher attitudes, school infrastructure, and policies that either promote or hinder equal participation for both boys and girls. Inclusive education fosters an environment where gender biases are challenged, and all learners can thrive, enabling a more holistic evaluation of progress towards achieving gender parity in education (MoE, 1996).

Assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities often reveals significant disparities that are shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. In many regions, girls face barriers such as early marriage, household responsibilities, and gender-based violence, which limit their access to education compared to boys. Additionally, schools may lack gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as proper sanitation facilities for girls, further exacerbating inequality. Gender biases in curricula, teaching methods, and expectations also contribute to unequal educational experiences. These disparities are more pronounced in rural and marginalized communities, where limited resources and deeply ingrained cultural norms hinder efforts to achieve gender parity in education (Mlyakado, 2012). Despite global efforts to promote gender equality, the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect girls remain a significant challenge in achieving equitable access to educational opportunities for all.

Assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities presents numerous opportunities to promote inclusivity and equal access to learning (Foster et al., 2023). One key opportunity lies in the ability to gather data on enrollment, retention, and completion rates for both boys and girls, enabling policymakers to identify gaps and implement targeted interventions. Another opportunity is the integration of gender-sensitive curricula that address the unique challenges faced by female students, such as early marriage or gender-based violence, which often hinder their educational progress (Chanda, 2024b). Additionally, assessment tools can help track the impact of initiatives aimed at empowering girls, such as scholarships and mentorship programs, providing insights into how these efforts contribute to closing the gender gap in education. By evaluating teacher attitudes, school infrastructure, and community engagement, educational institutions can foster environments that promote gender equality, ultimately enhancing the quality and accessibility of education for all learners.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The problem of gender inequality in the provision of educational opportunities remains a significant challenge in many parts of the world, including Zambia. Despite national and global efforts to promote equal access to education, disparities persist between male and female students, particularly in secondary schools (Chanda & Madoda, 2024). In Lusaka District, Zambia, gender biases in educational resources, cultural attitudes, and socio-economic factors continue to limit the opportunities available to female students compared to their male counterparts. These inequalities manifest in lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and reduced academic performance among girls, exacerbating the gap in educational achievement. Assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities is crucial for identifying barriers that prevent female students from fully accessing and benefiting from education (Gay, 2000). This study sought to explore these challenges and provide evidence-based recommendations for fostering a more equitable learning environment. Hence, the purpose of this study was to assess gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the extent of gender disparities in access to educational opportunities at different levels of education within Zambian schools.

- To assess the impact of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in educational access within Zambian schools.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Social Justice Theory. This theory emphasizes the need for equity and fairness in education. It critiques the systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups, including women and girls, from accessing educational opportunities. The theory emphasizes equity, fairness, and the dismantling of systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. This theory advocates for recognizing and addressing the historical and sociocultural contexts that shape educational access and outcomes for different genders (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). In Lusaka, various factors such as economic disparities, cultural norms, and institutional biases contribute to the inequitable distribution of educational resources and opportunities between boys and girls. For instance, societal expectations may prioritize boys' education over girls', resulting in lower enrollment and retention rates for female students. Additionally, issues such as inadequate facilities, insufficient female role models, and a lack of targeted interventions further perpetuate gender inequality in education (Rammohan & Vu, 2018). Thus, applying Social Justice Theory enables stakeholders to critically evaluate these systemic issues and implement policies that promote equal access, enhance the quality of education for all genders, and foster an inclusive environment that values diversity and equity in learning opportunities.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate the disparities in educational opportunities between genders within selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. By assessing gender equality in education, the study aims to identify systemic barriers that hinder equitable access to quality education for all students, particularly girls. This investigation is crucial for informing policymakers and educational stakeholders about the specific challenges faced by female students, thereby fostering a more inclusive educational environment. Additionally, the findings may contribute to the development of targeted interventions and programs aimed at promoting gender equity in education, which is essential for empowering women, enhancing socio-economic development, and achieving sustainable development goals. Ultimately, this study seeks to elevate awareness and catalyze action towards rectifying gender imbalances in education, thereby fostering a more equitable society.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed methods approach which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding (Banda et al, 2017). Stratified random sampling of schools was used to ensure representation across different schools. The study was conducted in 5 selected secondary schools within the Lusaka district of Zambia. The sample consisted 200 respondents; 10% of the target population 2000. The population for the study was purposefully drawn from the 5 schools. Purposive sampling procedure was used to select officials (5) from DEBS office, and head teachers (5); 1 representing each school while simple random sampling procedure was used to select the teachers (15); 3 representing each school, and pupils (175); 35 representing each school. Structured open-ended interviews, focus groups and questionnaires were used to respondents to collect data. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and Microsoft excel whereas the qualitative data from semi structured interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically by coding them to categorize responses into themes. The study upheld research ethical considerations such as voluntary participation of the respondents, informed consent, confidentiality, honesty, and right of privacy.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Gender Disparities in Access to Educational Opportunities at Different Levels of Education

According to the study results, gender disparities in access to educational opportunities at different levels of education within Zambian schools have been a persistent issue, influenced by a combination of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Cultural Norms was found to be highest at 20%, Enrollment at 15%, Early Marriage and Pregnancy at 15%, Re-entry Policy at 12%, Retention at 10%, Access at 10%, Scholarship Programs at 8%, Economic Barriers at 5%, and Community Awareness Programs at 5%. The findings were summarized in figure1 below;

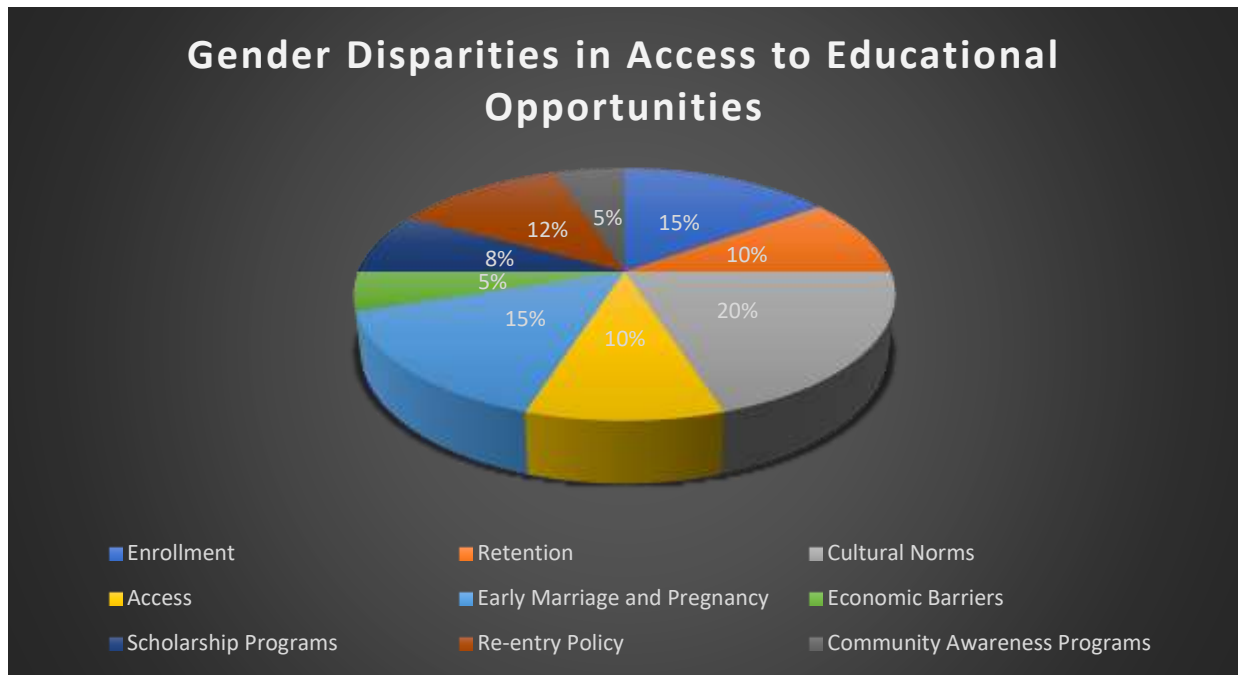


Figure1: Gender Disparities in Access to Educational Opportunities at Different Levels of Education

The study results revealed that cultural norms play a significant role in perpetuating gender disparities in access to educational opportunities at different levels of education within Zambian schools. In many Zambian communities, traditional beliefs and practices still prioritize the education of boys over girls (Chanda et al., 2023b). This preference is often rooted in the perception that boys are future breadwinners, while girls are expected to take on domestic roles such as child-rearing and household chores. As a result, families may invest more resources in educating their sons, while daughters face early marriages or are pulled out of school to help at home. These cultural expectations limit girls' access to education, particularly at higher levels, where financial and social pressures increase (Chipunza, 2003). Additionally, stereotypes about gender roles influence subject choices, with girls being steered away from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, further exacerbating gender inequality in career prospects. This deeply embedded cultural bias against girls' education undermines efforts to achieve gender parity in Zambia's education system.

The findings also indicated that enrollment disparities between genders have been a significant challenge in accessing educational opportunities across different levels of education in Zambian schools. Historically, boys have had higher enrollment rates compared to girls, particularly in rural areas where socio-economic factors and cultural norms often prioritize male education (Chanda, 2023a). Early marriages, traditional gender roles, and economic hardships disproportionately affect girls, leading to higher dropout rates among them, especially at secondary and tertiary levels. Although there have been efforts by the Zambian government and international organizations to promote gender parity, including the introduction of policies such as free basic education and scholarships for girls, significant gaps remain. At the primary level, the gender gap has narrowed over the years, but it widens as students progress through secondary and higher education. Challenges like inadequate school infrastructure, long travel distances, and societal expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities for girls contribute to these disparities, limiting their access to continuous education (Jha et al., 2020).

Additionally, the head teachers observed that early marriage and pregnancy are significant gender disparities that hinder access to educational opportunities for girls at various levels of education in Zambian schools. These challenges disproportionately affect young girls, often forcing them to leave school prematurely, thereby limiting their chances for academic achievement and future career prospects (Chanda, 2023b). One of the respondents stated that:

“Early marriages and teenage pregnancies are significant contributors to the lower participation of girls in secondary education. Despite policy interventions like the re-entry policy that allows pregnant girls to return to school, stigma and social pressure limit its effectiveness”.

Early marriage, typically influenced by socio-cultural practices, economic hardships, and traditional gender roles, places young girls in domestic responsibilities that prevent them from continuing their education. Similarly, pregnancy often leads to school dropouts, as pregnant girls face stigma, inadequate support systems, and restrictive policies that make it difficult for them to return to school (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2004). This gender disparity not only perpetuates the cycle of poverty and inequality but also deprives girls of their right to education, contributing to a wider gap in gender equity in education across Zambia.

The findings further revealed that the Re-entry Policy in Zambian schools is a significant measure aimed at addressing gender disparities in access to educational opportunities, particularly for girls who drop out of school due to early pregnancies. Chanda et al (2023c) in their study revealed that while the policy is designed to allow these girls to re-enter the educational system after giving birth, its implementation has faced several challenges that perpetuate gender inequality. Cultural stigma, limited support systems, and economic hardships often prevent many girls from taking advantage of the policy, leading to higher dropout rates compared to their male counterparts. In addition, some schools and communities may not fully embrace the re-

entry initiative, further compounding the gender gap in education at various levels. Mpolomoka et al (2023a) in their study alluded that the policy, though progressive in its intent, needs more robust enforcement, community sensitization, and support mechanisms to ensure that both girls and boys have equitable access to education, thereby narrowing the existing gender disparities within Zambia's educational system.

The officials from DEBS office explained that retention as a gender disparity in access to educational opportunities within Zambian schools is a significant issue, particularly at higher levels of education. While both boys and girls may enroll in primary school at similar rates, the retention of female students often declines as they progress to secondary and tertiary education (Chanda, 2024b). This disparity is influenced by various socio-economic and cultural factors, such as early marriages, teenage pregnancies, and the prioritization of boys' education over girls' in some communities. One of the officials alluded that:

“Retention rates for girls are lower than for boys. Girls are more likely to drop out due to factors like early marriages, pregnancies, and household responsibilities”.

Additionally, the lack of adequate facilities, including sanitary provisions for girls, contributes to absenteeism and dropout rates among female students. Poverty also plays a role, as families with limited resources may invest more in educating male children, who are often viewed as future breadwinners. These factors collectively result in lower retention rates for girls, perpetuating gender inequality in access to educational opportunities across different levels in Zambian schools. Nyariro (2018) narrated that addressing this disparity requires targeted interventions, such as promoting girls' education, creating gender-sensitive policies, and improving the learning environment to support female students' retention.

The study results also noted that access to education remains a significant challenge in addressing gender disparity within Zambian schools, particularly at different levels of education. While strides have been made in promoting gender equality in primary education, barriers persist, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. Cultural norms, early marriages, and poverty disproportionately affect girls, limiting their opportunities to continue schooling beyond the basic level. In rural areas, access to education for girls is further hindered by long distances to schools, inadequate facilities, and a lack of female role models in educational leadership positions (Chanda et al., 2024). Furthermore, the financial burden of education, including school fees and associated costs, often leads to a prioritization of boys' education over girls' within families. These factors contribute to higher dropout rates among girls, particularly in upper secondary and tertiary education, reinforcing the gender disparity in access to educational opportunities in Zambia.

In addition, teachers expressed that scholarship programs play a critical role in addressing gender disparities in access to educational opportunities at various levels of education within Zambian schools. Historically, gender inequality has been a significant barrier to girls' education, especially in rural areas, where cultural norms and economic challenges often prioritize boys' education over girls'. In response to this, scholarship programs designed specifically for girls have been implemented to bridge the gap and promote equal access to education (Mutombo & Mwenda, 2010). These programs provide financial support that covers tuition fees, school supplies, and sometimes even living expenses, reducing the economic burden on families and encouraging them to keep their daughters in school. At different levels of education, from primary to tertiary, such scholarships aim to empower girls by offering them the opportunity to pursue academic and professional goals that would otherwise be inaccessible due to financial constraints (MESVTEE, 2012). Additionally, these programs often include mentorship and life skills training, equipping girls with the necessary tools to overcome societal barriers and succeed in their educational endeavors. However, challenges remain in fully addressing the gender disparity, as some regions still face limitations in the availability and accessibility of these scholarships, requiring ongoing efforts to ensure equitable distribution and effectiveness across the country.

The findings also indicated that economic barriers significantly contribute to gender disparities in access to educational opportunities within Zambian schools, particularly affecting girls at various levels of education. Many families, especially those in rural areas or from low-income households, prioritize boys' education over girls due to limited financial resources (Chanda et al., 2024b). This is often influenced by societal norms that view boys as future breadwinners, making their education a more valued investment. As a result, girls are often pulled out of school to help with household chores, care for younger siblings, or even marry at a young age to alleviate financial burdens on the family (Chanda, 2023c). One of the pupils explained that:

“High tuition fees and the economic burden of pursuing higher education disproportionately affect girls, especially those from low-income families. When resources are limited, families may prioritize boys' education over girls”.

Additionally, school-related costs such as uniforms, textbooks, and examination fees further exacerbate the situation, creating a financial strain that disproportionately affects girls. This gendered economic inequality leads to lower enrollment, retention, and completion rates for girls, particularly in secondary and tertiary education. The lack of access to quality education for girls undermines their future economic opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and gender inequality in Zambian society (Ngulube et al., 2024)

The study also found that community awareness programs play a critical role in addressing gender disparity in access to educational opportunities within Zambian schools. These programs are designed to challenge and change deep-rooted cultural and societal norms that often hinder girls from obtaining the same educational opportunities as boys. By raising awareness about the importance of education for both genders, these initiatives aim to empower communities to support equal access to education at all levels, from primary to tertiary institutions (Mpolomoka, 2023b). Through targeted campaigns, workshops, and community discussions, these programs highlight the benefits of educating girls and dispel myths that reinforce gender-based discrimination. Additionally, community awareness programs encourage parental and societal engagement in ensuring girls stay in school, thereby addressing issues like early marriages and gender-based violence that disproportionately affect girls' education (Tsui & Rich, 2002). These efforts are essential for creating a more inclusive educational environment in Zambia, where both boys and girls can pursue their educational goals without barriers related to gender inequality.

3.2. The Impact of Policies and Initiatives Aimed at Promoting Gender Equality in Educational Access

The findings revealed that government policies and frameworks play a crucial role in promoting gender equality in educational access, shaping the landscape of educational opportunities for all genders. Chanda, (2024c) noted that through comprehensive legislative measures, governments can establish a foundation that supports equitable access to education, thereby addressing systemic barriers that have historically disadvantaged marginalized groups, particularly girls and women. These policies often include provisions for free and compulsory education, scholarships for underprivileged students, and targeted programs to encourage female enrollment in STEM fields. Furthermore, frameworks that focus on gender-sensitive teaching methodologies and curricula can foster an inclusive learning environment, promoting not just access but also retention and success rates among female students. Additionally, governments can implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement in gender equity efforts (Walby, 2003). Ultimately, by prioritizing gender equality in educational access through robust policies and frameworks, governments can facilitate broader social and economic development, empowering individuals and communities alike.

Additionally, the Education Act of 2011 in Zambia represents a significant government policy aimed at promoting gender equality in educational access (MESVTEE, 2012). This legislation acknowledges the need to eliminate barriers that hinder both boys and girls from accessing quality education. It emphasizes the importance of inclusive education by mandating that schools adopt practices that ensure equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of gender. The Act provides guidelines for addressing issues such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and cultural practices that may impede girls' education. Furthermore, it encourages the establishment of mechanisms to support the retention of girls in school, such as scholarships and mentorship programs. By fostering an educational environment that promotes gender equity, UNESCO (2012) added that the Education Act of 2011 aims to empower both girls and boys, ultimately contributing to the overall development of the nation and enhancing the socio-economic status of women in Zambian society.

Furthermore, officials from DEBS office alluded that the National Gender Policy serves as a critical framework for promoting gender equality in educational access, recognizing the inherent disparities that exist between genders in accessing quality education. This policy aims to address barriers that hinder girls and women from fully participating in educational opportunities, such as socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and inadequate infrastructure. One of them expressed that:

"This policy outlines strategies to promote gender equality in various sectors, including education, emphasizing the need for equal opportunities for girls".

By fostering an inclusive educational environment, the policy seeks to empower all individuals, irrespective of gender, to pursue their educational goals and enhance their socio-economic status (UNDP, 2017). It encourages the implementation of strategies such as targeted scholarships, awareness campaigns, and community engagement initiatives that promote the value of education for both genders. Furthermore, the policy emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive curricula and teacher training programs that challenge stereotypes and promote positive role models. Overall, the National Gender Policy is a proactive governmental approach designed to dismantle systemic barriers, foster equitable access to education, and ultimately contribute to the broader goals of social justice and sustainable development.

The findings further revealed that increased enrollment rates in Zambian schools can be significantly attributed to various policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in educational access. The Zambian government, in collaboration with international organizations, has implemented targeted programs designed to dismantle barriers that hinder girls' access to education (Unterhalter, 2006). These initiatives include the provision of scholarships, the elimination of school fees, and the establishment of girl-friendly school environments that promote safety and inclusivity. Additionally, community awareness campaigns have been crucial in shifting societal attitudes towards girls' education, encouraging families to prioritize the education of their daughters. As a result of these concerted efforts, there has been a notable increase in female enrollment rates, contributing to a more balanced gender representation in schools. This upward trend not only enhances educational outcomes for girls but also fosters long-term socio-economic benefits, as educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce and contribute to community development (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Overall, the emphasis on gender equality in educational access reflects a transformative approach to addressing historical disparities and promotes a more equitable future for all students in Zambia.

The respondents pointed out that retention and completion rates in Zambian schools are significantly influenced by policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in educational access. The head teachers stated that the Zambian government, alongside various non-governmental organizations, has implemented strategies to address the historical disparities in education, which often hinder girls' participation. Programs such as the provision of free school uniforms, sanitary products, and targeted scholarships have been introduced to alleviate the financial barriers that often prevent girls from enrolling and staying in school (Chanda, 2023d). Furthermore, initiatives promoting awareness about the importance of educating girls have helped shift societal perceptions, encouraging families to prioritize girls' education. As a result, there has been a notable increase in female enrollment and retention rates, indicating that gender-focused policies are effectively contributing to higher completion rates among girls. The positive outcomes of these initiatives not only empower individual girls but also foster broader societal development by promoting gender equality and enhancing educational attainment for future generations (Yumusak et al., 2013). However, continuous monitoring and adaptation of these policies are essential to ensure sustained progress and address any emerging challenges.

The study also found that efforts to enhance gender equality have been significantly bolstered by campaigns and programs that focus on raising awareness among communities about the importance of education for all genders. These initiatives have effectively highlighted the barriers girls face in accessing education, such as cultural stereotypes, economic constraints, and early marriages. By fostering dialogue among stakeholders including parents, educators,

and community leaders advocacy efforts have contributed to a shift in attitudes, promoting the notion that girls' education is vital for national development (GRZ-2015-12-24). Furthermore, policies that include incentives for families to send their daughters to school, alongside educational programs that emphasize the value of gender equality, have been instrumental in increasing enrollment rates for girls. As a result, awareness and advocacy have not only transformed perceptions but have also mobilized resources and support, ensuring that educational access is equitable and inclusive in Zambia. This holistic approach is essential for creating sustainable changes in the educational landscape and achieving broader societal goals related to gender equity (Van Berkel, 2017).

The teachers noted that policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing gender equity have increasingly emphasized the need for teacher training programs to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches. These approaches equip educators with the skills to recognize and address gender biases that may exist in teaching practices and classroom interactions (Van Bavel, 2012). Training programs focus on fostering an inclusive environment where both girls and boys feel valued and empowered to participate actively in their education. One of the teachers pointed out that:

“Professional development programs focusing on gender sensitivity in teaching practices have been implemented. Educators are trained to create inclusive classrooms that support girls' learning”.

Furthermore, gender sensitivity in teacher training is essential in developing curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and promote equal opportunities for all students. By enhancing teachers' understanding of gender dynamics, these initiatives aim to reduce barriers to education for marginalized groups, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and greater gender parity in schools. As a result, a more equitable educational landscape is created, contributing to the broader goal of sustainable development in education (Zohaib et al., 2024).

Additionally, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plays a crucial role in assessing the effectiveness of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in educational access within Zambian schools. Through systematic data collection and analysis, M&E frameworks enable stakeholders to evaluate the progress of gender equality initiatives, identifying strengths and areas needing improvement (Shayan, 2015). These frameworks provide insights into enrollment rates, retention, and academic performance of both boys and girls, ensuring that gender disparities are addressed. Additionally, M&E facilitates accountability by tracking the implementation of policies, thereby promoting transparency in how resources are allocated and used. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, M&E helps to refine strategies that enhance gender-responsive educational environments, ultimately contributing to more equitable access to education for all students in Zambia (Scott, 2008). Moreover, the feedback obtained through M&E informs policymakers about the impact of existing initiatives and guides the development of future programs, ensuring that they are tailored to the specific needs of different communities, thus promoting sustainable gender equality in education.

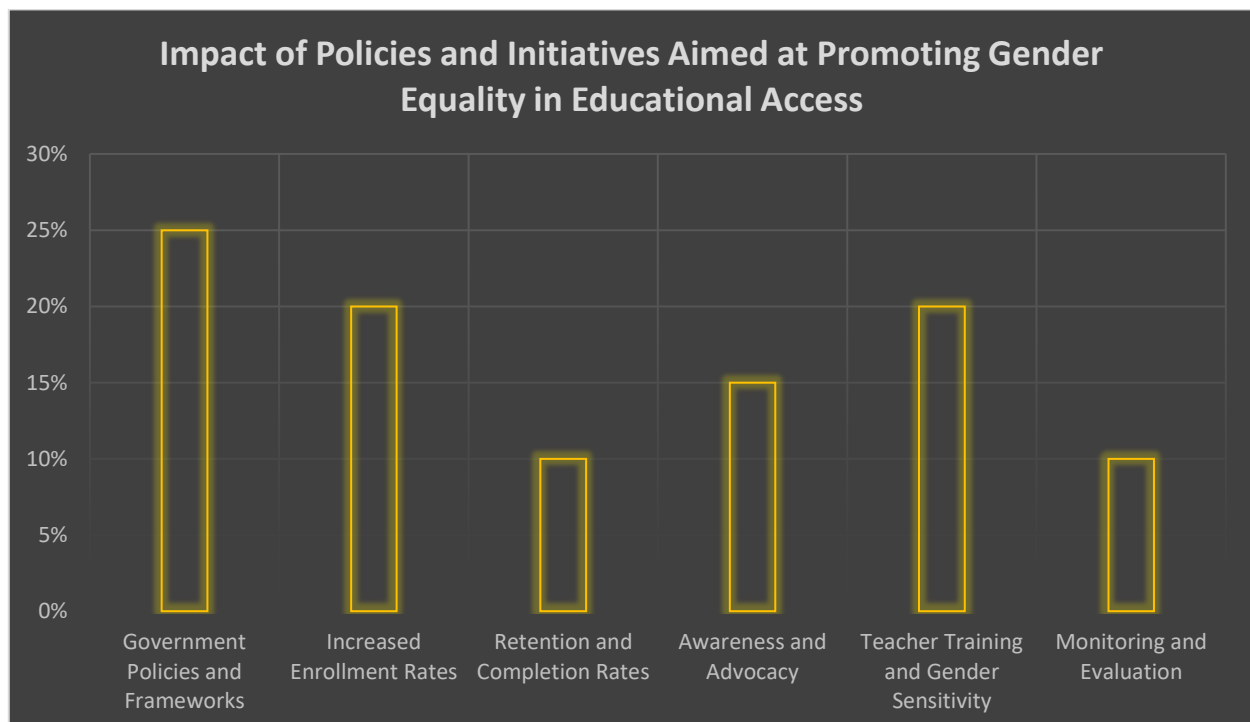


Figure2: Impact of Policies and Initiatives Aimed at Promoting Gender Equality in Educational Access

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, assessing gender equality in the provision of educational opportunities in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia, reveals significant disparities that impede the realization of equitable access to education for all genders. While strides have been made towards improving enrollment rates among girls, persistent challenges such as socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and inadequate facilities continue to undermine their

educational experience. The findings indicate that, despite policies aimed at promoting gender equality, implementation remains inconsistent, affecting the retention and performance of female students. Additionally, male students also face unique challenges that warrant attention, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in education. To foster a truly inclusive educational environment, it is imperative that stakeholders prioritize comprehensive strategies that address these barriers, promote awareness, and ensure the equitable distribution of resources, thus paving the way for sustainable educational advancement for all students in the district.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study;

- Schools educational authorities should develop and enforce policies that promote gender equality, such as ensuring equal access to resources, scholarships, and support services for all genders. Training for educators on gender sensitivity can help create a more inclusive environment.
- DEBS Office and Traditional Leaders should work together and increase community awareness about the importance of gender equality in education as it is crucial. Additionally, schools can organize workshops, seminars, and campaigns involving parents, community leaders, and local organizations to address cultural biases and promote the value of educating girls.
- Schools and educational authorities should establish robust systems for collecting and analyzing gender-disaggregated data on enrollment, retention, and academic performance. This data may help identify gaps in educational opportunities and inform targeted interventions.

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