



# **Cultural Barriers to Girls' Education: An Investigation into Dropout Trends in Selected Secondary Schools in Masaiti District of Copperbelt Province, Zambia**

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## **Abstract:**

The study examined the influence of cultural norms, beliefs, and practices on girls' retention and completion of secondary education. The study identified key cultural barriers such as early marriages, gender-based household responsibilities, and societal expectations that prioritize boys' education over that of girls. This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a case study design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural barriers influencing girls' dropout trends in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District. A sample of 230 participants was adopted, involving headteachers, teachers, parents, community leaders and female pupils. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Data collection tools were developed based on the study objectives and was pre-tested for clarity and reliability and the analysis was grounded on the themes generated from the study. The study found that cultural practices such as early marriages and traditional initiation ceremonies play a central role in forcing girls out of school. Once girls undergo these rites of passage, they are often considered ready for marriage and womanhood by their communities, leading to increased pressure to leave school and assume adult responsibilities. It was also revealed that girls are disproportionately burdened with domestic chores and caregiving roles at home, which affects their attendance, performance, and overall school engagement. This cultural expectation reinforces the belief that a girl's primary role is within the home, making education a secondary or unnecessary pursuit, and ultimately leading many to drop out before completing secondary school. Based on these findings, the study recommended conducting community sensitization programs to change harmful cultural beliefs and promote support for girls' education.

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**Keywords:** Cultural Norms, Dropout Rates, Early Marriage, Girls' Education, and Sensitization Programs.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Education remains the major tool by which people become empowered and the economic, social and personal well-being of all citizens in a pluralistic society increases (MoE, 1996). However, high pupil dropout rate in various schools diminishes the pool of qualified people from diverse backgrounds who will enter the professional and political ranks that make important public policy decisions. A dropout is a pupil who was enrolled in the beginning of the school year and has left before the end of the school year, and was not enrolled elsewhere (Chanda, 2023a). The issue of girls' education in Zambia, particularly in rural districts like Masaiti in Copperbelt Province, continues to face numerous challenges, with cultural barriers playing a significant role in influencing school dropout trends. Despite efforts by the government and various stakeholders to promote gender equality in education, many girls are still unable to complete their secondary schooling due to deeply rooted cultural practices and beliefs. These include early marriages, traditional initiation ceremonies, and gendered expectations that place greater value on domestic roles and caregiving responsibilities for girls over their academic progression (Khan et al., 2022). In many communities, societal norms dictate that girls should marry early or contribute to household chores, which often leads to irregular school attendance and eventual dropout. Additionally, the perception that educating girls yields fewer economic returns compared to boys further discourages families from supporting their daughters' education. Peer pressure, stigma surrounding menstruation, and limited access to female role models in educational leadership further exacerbate the problem (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).

Education plays a vital role in the personal, social, and economic development of individuals and communities, serving as a foundational tool for empowerment and transformation. In the context of investigating cultural barriers to girls' education and dropout trends in secondary schools, education is particularly important as it provides girls with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to overcome socio-economic challenges and actively participate in society. Mlyakado (2012) say that access to quality education for girls not only promotes gender equality but also contributes to improved health outcomes, economic growth, and the reduction of poverty at both the family and community levels. Furthermore, education fosters critical thinking and awareness, enabling girls to challenge harmful cultural norms and practices that may limit their opportunities (Chanda, 2023b).

Understanding the importance of education is therefore essential in addressing the dropout trends among girls, as it highlights the need to create supportive and inclusive learning environments that can mitigate cultural barriers and encourage sustained school attendance and completion (Zulu et al., 2019).

Cultural norms significantly influence girls' education and contribute to the high dropout rates observed in secondary schools within Masaiti District. In many communities, deeply rooted traditional beliefs and gender roles prioritize boys' education while viewing girls primarily as future wives and caretakers. This perspective often leads to early marriages and increased domestic responsibilities for girls, which limit their ability to attend and perform well in school (Chipunza, 2003). Additionally, some parents perceive investing in girls' education as less valuable since girls are expected to focus on household duties rather than pursue careers. These cultural expectations not only reduce parental support but also affect girls' motivation to continue their education. Understanding the impact of these cultural norms is therefore essential for addressing the barriers to girls' retention and success in secondary education in Masaiti District.

Moreover, early marriages remain a significant cultural barrier contributing to the dropout of girls from secondary schools in Masaiti District. In many communities within the district, traditional beliefs and societal expectations prioritize early marriage for girls over continued education, viewing marriage as a rite of passage and a means to secure social and economic stability. This practice often results in girls leaving school prematurely to fulfill marital roles, which severely disrupts their educational progression and limits their opportunities for personal and professional development (Chanda et al., 2023a). Early marriages also expose girls to increased responsibilities at home, early pregnancies, and health risks, all of which further hinder their ability to attend and perform well in school. Consequently, this cultural norm not only perpetuates gender inequality but also contributes significantly to the high dropout rates observed among female students in the region. Addressing early marriages is therefore crucial in efforts to improve girls' retention and success in education within Masaiti District.

In addition, dropout rates among girls in secondary schools in Masaiti District are significantly influenced by deep-rooted cultural barriers that hinder their continued education. These rates reflect a troubling trend where societal expectations, traditional gender roles, and cultural practices such as early marriage and prioritization of domestic responsibilities disproportionately affect girls' ability to stay in school. The cultural pressure to conform to these norms often results in girls discontinuing their education prematurely, thereby limiting their future opportunities and empowerment (Eloundou-Enyegue, 2004). Additionally, stigmatization and lack of community support exacerbate the dropout situation, as families may view investing in girls' education as less valuable compared to boys. This cultural environment creates an unsupportive atmosphere that negatively impacts girls' motivation and attendance, ultimately contributing to high dropout rates in the district's secondary schools. Gay (2000) say that understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates and promoting gender equity in education.

Sensitization programs are vital in addressing cultural barriers that contribute to the dropout of girls from secondary schools. These programs focus on raising awareness within communities about the significance of girls' education and challenging longstanding cultural practices such as early marriages, gender biases, and preferential treatment of boys (Jha, 2020). By engaging parents, traditional leaders, and other key stakeholders through community meetings and outreach activities, sensitization efforts promote positive attitudes toward girls' schooling and encourage support for their continued education. Additionally, these programs empower girls by informing them of their rights and fostering their confidence to pursue academic goals (Mpolomoka et al., 2023). In examining dropout trends, sensitization initiatives emerge as important strategies for creating an enabling environment that supports girls' retention and success in secondary education despite prevailing cultural challenges.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Despite various national policies aimed at achieving universal access to education, the dropout rates among girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District remain disturbingly high, largely due to deeply entrenched cultural barriers. In many communities within the district, cultural norms and practices such as early and forced marriages, gender stereotyping, and the undervaluing of girls' education continue to impede girls' ability to complete their secondary education. Traditional beliefs often prioritize boys' schooling as the primary investment, while girls are expected to assume domestic roles or contribute economically through early marriage or labor (Mwanza, 2017). These societal expectations not only limit girls' educational opportunities but also create an environment where dropout is normalized or even encouraged (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011). Additionally, cultural stigmas around menstruation, lack of parental support, and peer pressure further exacerbate the challenges girls face in staying in school. The persistence of these cultural barriers undermines the efforts of educational stakeholders and government programs designed to promote gender parity and equitable education (Chanda & Madoda, 2024). Consequently, many girls in Masaiti District disengage from the school system prematurely, which limits their future socioeconomic prospects and perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality. This study therefore aimed to critically investigate the specific cultural factors contributing to girls' dropout trends in secondary schools within Masaiti District, with the goal of informing targeted interventions to reduce dropout rates and promote inclusive education.

### **1.2 Research Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify the key cultural barriers that contribute to the dropout of girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District of Copperbelt Province, Zambia.
- Investigate how cultural practices influence girls' school attendance and academic achievement in secondary schools in Masaiti District of Copperbelt Province, Zambia.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the Social Cognitive Theory and Cultural Reproduction Theory, which together help explain how cultural factors influence girls' education and dropout trends in Masaiti District. Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the role of social environment, observational learning, and social expectations in shaping individual behaviors and decisions (Bandura, 1986). In the context of girls' education, this theory suggests that the attitudes, behaviors, and norms modeled by family members, peers, and the wider community profoundly affect girls' motivation to remain in school. For example, if influential adults and community leaders prioritize early marriage or domestic roles for girls, these expectations are internalized, reducing girls' commitment to education. The theory highlights the interaction between personal factors (such as self-efficacy), behavior, and environmental influences, making it a useful lens to examine how cultural barriers impact girls' dropout decisions. Cultural Reproduction Theory, attributed to Pierre Bourdieu, focuses on how dominant cultural values and social structures perpetuate existing inequalities across generations (Bourdieu, 1973). This theory explains how cultural norms, traditions, and practices within communities reinforce gender roles that limit girls' access to education. In many societies, including the Masaiti District, cultural beliefs may reproduce gender biases by valuing boys' education more than girls' and by encouraging girls to prioritize marriage and caregiving over schooling. This reproduction of cultural values through social institutions, including the family and school, contributes to the persistent dropout rates among girls. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how cultural barriers operate at both the social and structural levels to affect girls' educational outcomes. They help to frame the study's investigation into how entrenched cultural practices and community expectations lead to the high dropout rates observed in Masaiti District secondary schools. The framework also underpins the study's exploration of potential strategies to challenge and transform these cultural barriers in order to promote gender equality in education.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides critical insights into the cultural barriers that contribute to the high dropout rates of girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District, Copperbelt Province. By examining how traditional beliefs, early marriages, and gender-based expectations hinder girls' education, the research offers valuable evidence to inform policymakers, educators, and community leaders in designing culturally sensitive interventions aimed at improving girls' retention and academic success. The findings may assist education authorities in developing strategies such as community sensitization, parental engagement, and support systems that directly address the root causes of girls' school dropout. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader goal of promoting gender equality and social justice, recognizing that empowering girls through education leads to positive outcomes in health, economic development, and societal progress. It also supports Zambia's efforts to meet Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5, which focus on inclusive, equitable education and gender equality. Additionally, the study may serve as a foundation for future academic studies and policy initiatives related to education and cultural dynamics in similar contexts.

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## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural barriers influencing girls' dropout trends in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District. The research design utilized a case study, which allowed for a detailed exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context. The study was conducted in three selected secondary schools in Masaiti District of Copperbelt Province in Zambia. A purposive sampling was used to select 230 participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the cultural factors affecting girls' education. The population involved school headteachers (3); 1 from each selected school, teachers (24); 8 from each selected school, parents (21), community leaders (2) and female students (180); 60 from each selected school who have either dropped out or are at risk of dropping out. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Data collection tools were developed based on the study objectives and was pre-tested for clarity and reliability. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns and themes that emerged from participants' responses. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation was strictly observed throughout the study. Furthermore, the main objective of gathering such information was made clear to the participants. Additionally, the study avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the study, hence, the study was fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research.

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## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

### 3.1 Key Cultural Barriers that Contribute to the Dropout of Girls in Selected Secondary Schools in Masaiti District

Data collected from the study revealed that community and peer pressure plays a profound role as a cultural barrier contributing to the dropout of girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District of Zambia. In many communities within the district, traditional beliefs and cultural expectations strongly influence the decisions families make regarding the education of their daughters. The prevailing view in some areas is that a girl's ultimate role is to become a wife and mother, making formal education beyond a certain level appear unnecessary or even inappropriate (Bayisenge, 2010). Families may experience pressure from neighbors, extended relatives, or community elders to prioritize marriage prospects or household duties over school attendance. This cultural mindset often results in parents being reluctant to invest in their daughters' education, especially when resources are limited (Banda & Mpolomoka, 2018). In addition, peer pressure among adolescents exacerbates the problem. Girls who see their friends dropping out of school

to get married, engage in relationships with older men for financial support (commonly referred to as “sugar daddies”), or take on work to support their families may feel compelled to follow similar paths. Fear of social exclusion or being labeled as different can discourage girls from pursuing education, especially when educational achievements are not celebrated or valued by peers. Chanda (2024) added that this dual pressure from both the community and peer groups creates an environment where continuing education becomes increasingly difficult for girls, ultimately leading many to abandon school altogether despite their academic potential and aspirations.

Furthermore, traditional initiation ceremonies, while culturally significant and deeply rooted in the customs of communities, have increasingly become a barrier to girls’ continued education. These ceremonies, often held during school terms, require girls to be withdrawn from school for extended periods, disrupting their academic progress and leading to poor performance or eventual dropout. During the initiation, girls are taught roles that prioritize marriage, domestic responsibilities, and submission over personal development and education, reinforcing the belief that a woman’s place is in the home rather than in the classroom or workforce (Chanda et al., 2023b). Consequently, once initiated, many girls lose interest in school or face pressure from families and community members to marry early or assume adult responsibilities. This undermines their motivation and opportunities to complete secondary education. Moreover, the secrecy and sacredness surrounding these ceremonies make it difficult for educational stakeholders to intervene or advocate against practices that hinder girls’ educational attainment, further entrenching this cultural barrier (Mohanraj, 2010).

In addition to the influence of traditional initiation ceremonies, negative community perceptions of girls’ education further exacerbate the problem of school dropout among girls in Masaiti District. Many communities still hold the belief that educating girls offers little long-term value, as girls are expected to marry early and take on domestic roles rather than pursue careers or higher education (Mutombo & Mwenda, 2010). This perception leads to limited support from families, with more emphasis placed on educating boys who are seen as future breadwinners. One of the community leaders observed that:

“Girls who strive to excel in school are sometimes met with criticism or labeled as disrespectful to cultural norms, which discourages them from continuing their education”-.

Moreover, fears that educated girls may become too independent or less suitable for marriage contribute to resistance against their academic progress. Such attitudes not only demoralize girls but also create an environment where dropping out of school seems more acceptable or even inevitable. Nyamanhare et al (2022) in their study noted that these cultural biases, deeply embedded in the community, make it difficult for educational campaigns and policies to take root, ultimately denying many girls the opportunity to complete their secondary education.

Furthermore, the prioritization of boys’ education over that of girls remains a persistent cultural barrier contributing to the dropout of girls in secondary schools in Masaiti District. In many households, especially those facing financial constraints, the education of boys is considered a more worthwhile investment due to the belief that boys will eventually support the family, while girls are expected to marry and leave the household. This gender bias results in limited educational resources, such as school fees, uniforms, and learning materials, being allocated preferentially to boys (Porter, 2016). One of the parents narrated that:

“Girls are often left to struggle with inadequate support or forced to abandon school altogether. In some cases, girls are kept at home to perform domestic chores or care for younger siblings, further diminishing their chances of academic success. This unequal prioritization not only reflects deeply rooted patriarchal values but also perpetuates the cycle of female under-education and economic dependence. As a result, many capable and ambitious girls are denied the opportunity to fulfill their academic potential, reinforcing gender disparities in education and hindering broader development efforts within the community”-.

Expanding further, the results indicated that gender role expectations and domestic responsibilities represent one of the most deeply entrenched cultural barriers that significantly contribute to the dropout of girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District. In many traditional households, girls are expected to assume domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, caring for younger siblings, and attending to the needs of the family, often from a very young age. These responsibilities are seen not only as a norm but also as essential training for their future roles as wives and mothers (Chanda et al., 2023c). As a result, girls are burdened with a dual workload managing household chores alongside their academic responsibilities leaving them physically exhausted and with little time or energy to focus on schoolwork. This often leads to poor academic performance, irregular attendance, and eventually, school dropout. Moreover, when family emergencies arise, such as illness or the need to support a household business, it is typically the girl who is withdrawn from school to shoulder the additional responsibilities. These gendered expectations are rarely imposed on boys, who are often given more freedom and time to concentrate on their studies. Katapa (2010) added that the situation is further exacerbated by societal attitudes that reinforce the notion that investing in girls’ education is less important because their ultimate destiny lies in marriage and homemaking. Consequently, girls who aspire to complete their education face both internal and external resistance, as they struggle against cultural expectations, familial obligations, and a lack of community support. This imbalance continues to perpetuate gender inequality in education and limits the opportunities for girls to rise out of poverty and contribute meaningfully to the development of their communities.

Likewise, the lack of educated female role models in the communities of Masaiti District serves as another cultural barrier that contributes to the dropout of girls from secondary schools. In many rural areas, girls grow up in environments where few, if any, women have successfully pursued education beyond basic levels or entered professional careers. This absence of visible success stories reinforces the notion that education is not essential for girls and that their futures are limited to domestic roles, early marriage, or informal labor (McLeod, 2017). Without women to look up to who have benefited from education, girls struggle to envision themselves achieving academic or career success, and may lack the motivation to remain in school especially when facing competing cultural pressures.

In addition, the limited presence of female teachers, school administrators, or professionals in the community further deepens this gap, as girls are often left without mentors or advocates who understand and can address the unique challenges they face. Ngulube et al (2024) in their study observed that the presence of educated women can have a powerful influence in shaping aspirations, boosting self-esteem, and challenging negative gender stereotypes. When girls see women succeeding in various fields, it sends a strong message that their goals are valid and achievable. Conversely, when such examples are absent, it becomes difficult to challenge the status quo or counter prevailing narratives that undervalue girls’ education. As a result, many girls internalize these limitations and disengage from their studies, eventually dropping out. Addressing this barrier requires targeted efforts to promote

female education, increase the visibility of successful women, and create mentorship programs that connect girls with role models who can inspire, guide, and support them throughout their educational journey (Nyairo, 2018).

In furtherance, menstrual hygiene challenges and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation constitute another significant barrier contributing to the dropout of girls in schools. One of the teachers stated that:

“Many girls lack access to affordable sanitary products, private and clean changing facilities, and proper menstrual hygiene education, which results in discomfort, embarrassment, and frequent absenteeism during their menstrual periods. In most cases, school infrastructure does not cater to the specific needs of menstruating girls, leading to fear of leakage, teasing by male peers, and shame especially in co-educational settings”.

Additionally, cultural taboos surrounding menstruation often portray it as unclean or shameful, discouraging open conversations about menstrual health. Girls are sometimes taught to isolate themselves or avoid certain activities during menstruation, which reinforces feelings of stigma and exclusion. In households where menstruation is not openly discussed, girls may struggle in silence, lacking the guidance and support they need to manage their periods confidently. These challenges can lead to repeated absenteeism, loss of academic continuity, and ultimately, dropping out of school altogether (Tembo & Fort, 2008). The combination of inadequate resources, cultural silence, and stigma surrounding menstruation places girls at a significant disadvantage and undermines their right to a safe and inclusive learning environment (Mpolomoka et al., 2023b). Addressing menstrual hygiene management in schools is therefore essential to promoting gender equity and improving retention rates for girls in education.

The findings also revealed that the prevalence of early marriages and childbearing presents a deeply rooted cultural barrier that significantly affects the educational continuity of girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District. In many rural communities, girls are viewed as economic assets whose bride price can offer immediate financial relief to struggling families, making early marriage a preferred alternative to continued education. Cultural and traditional norms often promote the idea that a girl's ultimate role is that of a wife and mother, not a student or professional, and once a girl reaches puberty, she is considered ready for marriage regardless of her age or academic potential (Muyunda, 2021). As a result, families may withdraw girls from school and marry them off, believing that education is no longer necessary or beneficial.

In addition, early childbearing often follows closely after marriage or results from unintended teenage pregnancies, which remain common due to a lack of comprehensive sexuality education and limited access to reproductive health services. Chanda et al (2024) further explained that pregnant girls and young mothers face immense challenges in returning to school, including stigma from peers and teachers, lack of child care support, and school policies that may not accommodate their unique needs. In some cases, school administrators or parents discourage re-entry, assuming the girls will be a bad influence on others or that they have already “ruined” their future. This discouraging environment creates a sense of hopelessness, and many girls resign themselves to a life without education. Moreover, these early life transitions force girls into adult responsibilities prematurely, disrupting their psychological, emotional, and physical development. The long-term impact is not just felt at the individual level, but also at the community and national level, as it contributes to intergenerational poverty, increased dependency, and a lack of female representation in higher education and skilled professions (Daka et al., 2022). Without strong legal enforcement of child marriage laws, robust re-entry policies for young mothers, and sustained community sensitization, early marriage and childbearing will continue to derail the educational prospects of girls in Masaiti District and beyond.

### **3.2 How Cultural Practices Influence Girls' School Attendance and Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools in Masaiti District**

The study results revealed that in Masaiti District, the prevalence of early marriages continues to be a major concern that negatively affects the education of girls, particularly in secondary schools. This practice is deeply rooted in cultural norms and traditional beliefs that prioritize marriage over education for girls. Many communities within the district still hold the perception that a girl's ultimate role in society is to become a wife and mother, and as such, once a girl reaches puberty, she is often considered ready for marriage regardless of her age or level of education (Chiyota & Marishane, 2020). This cultural mindset is further reinforced by the practice of lobola (bride price), where families may view their daughters as a source of economic benefit through marriage. In some cases, parents may marry off their daughters early to reduce the financial burden of supporting them, especially in households struggling with poverty (Chanda, 2023c). Additionally, peer pressure, community expectations, and lack of legal enforcement against child marriages contribute to the continuation of the practice (Eliasu, 2023). Girls who become pregnant while in school are often forced to leave and are pressured into marriage as a way to avoid family shame or community stigma. The consequences of early marriage are severe and far-reaching. Girls are not only denied their right to education but are also exposed to early childbearing, health risks, and domestic responsibilities that hinder their personal development and limit their future opportunities. Academically, early marriage leads to high dropout rates, poor performance, and limited participation in school activities due to the burden of marital and household duties (Phiri et al., 2023).

Moreover, the lack of comprehensive sexuality education and limited access to reproductive health services in rural communities contributes to early pregnancies, which often lead to early marriages. This creates a vicious cycle where girls are continually excluded from educational opportunities (UNDP, 2017). By investigating the prevalence and causes of early marriages in Masaiti District, it becomes possible to understand how cultural traditions directly interfere with girls' right to education and academic success. Such investigations can inform policy formulation, awareness campaigns, and community-based interventions aimed at shifting harmful cultural perceptions, enforcing child protection laws, and promoting the value of educating girls as a tool for social and economic development.

The findings further noted that early marriage critically undermines girls' attendance in secondary schools in Masaiti District, perpetuating a cycle of educational disruption driven by entrenched socio-cultural and economic pressures. The practice remains prevalent in many communities and carries severe consequences for girls' education. One of the students revealed that:

“Once married or pregnant, girls are often withdrawn from school and expected to focus on family and domestic duties, with little or no opportunity to continue their education”.

Moreover, barriers such as lack of support, social stigma, and limited reentry options into the school system further compound the problem. In rural settings, cultural norms such as initiation ceremonies and expectations around bride price pressure girls into early marriage, often at the expense of their schooling (Tuwor & Sossou, 2008). Poverty also plays a significant role, as families may prioritize the immediate economic benefits of marrying off a

daughter over the long-term value of her education. Traditional gender roles, which position girls as caregivers and homemakers, reduce the time and value placed on their schooling. These factors combined contribute to poor school attendance, lower academic performance, and a reduced likelihood that girls will complete secondary education (UNFPA, 2012). As a result, early marriage not only deprives girls of learning opportunities but also restricts their future social and economic potential.

Additionally, in many households within Masaiti District, traditional gender roles strongly influence girls' participation in education. Girls are often expected to take on a majority of domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and caring for younger siblings or other family members. These duties consume much of their time and energy, frequently conflicting with school attendance and study time. As a result, many girls experience irregular attendance, frequent absenteeism, and in some cases, drop out of school altogether (Yumusak et al., 2013). In contrast, boys are usually assigned fewer household chores, allowing them more time to focus on their academic work. This unequal division of labor reinforces existing gender disparities in education, limiting girls' opportunities for academic success and long-term personal development.

Furthermore, prevailing beliefs within families and communities often devalue the importance of educating girls, viewing their primary role as homemakers and caregivers. This mindset reduces parental encouragement and financial investment in girls' secondary education (Shayan, 2015). The pressure to conform to traditional gender expectations also impacts girls' confidence and aspirations, as they have limited exposure to alternative roles beyond domestic work. Community leaders and elders frequently reinforce these norms, strengthening societal expectations for girls to prioritize household duties over schooling. Walby (2003) say that to improve girls' school attendance and achievement, efforts must focus on challenging and changing these deeply rooted gender roles, promoting shared household responsibilities, and raising awareness about the benefits of girls' education for families and communities.

Cultural stereotypes about female intelligence and capabilities play a profound role in shaping girls' school attendance and academic achievement in secondary schools in Masaiti District of Zambia. These stereotypes are deeply ingrained in many communities and often dictate perceptions about what girls can or cannot achieve academically. There is a prevailing notion that girls are naturally less intelligent or less capable than boys, especially in subjects traditionally considered challenging or male-dominated, such as mathematics, science, and technology. This belief is reinforced by family members, community leaders, and sometimes even educators, which results in lower academic expectations for girls (Rammohan & Vu, 2018). When parents and teachers hold these biases, they may be less likely to encourage girls to excel or pursue advanced studies, leading to limited academic aspirations among the girls themselves. Additionally, girls internalize these societal views, which can damage their self-esteem and motivation to perform well academically (Suleman et al., 2015). Beyond academic performance, these stereotypes also influence the allocation of time and resources within households. Girls are often expected to prioritize domestic chores, caregiving, and other gendered responsibilities over schooling, which affects their attendance and focus in school. The cumulative effect of these stereotypes is that girls face systemic disadvantages, both socially and academically, which contribute to higher dropout rates and lower overall achievement compared to their male peers (Chanda, 2024b). To break this cycle, it is critical to challenge and transform these cultural beliefs through community awareness, gender-sensitive teaching practices, and policies that promote equal opportunities for girls to thrive academically in Masaiti District and similar contexts.

Traditional initiation ceremonies hold significant cultural importance in many communities, including those in Masaiti District of Copperbelt Province, Zambia, but they also influence girls' school attendance and academic achievement in notable ways. These ceremonies often mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and involve rituals, teachings, and sometimes prolonged periods of seclusion or absence from daily routines such as schooling. For many girls, participating in initiation rites can lead to extended absences from school, disrupting their learning continuity and contributing to poor academic performance (Mwansa, 2011). Moreover, the cultural emphasis placed on these ceremonies sometimes reinforces traditional gender roles, prioritizing marriage and domestic responsibilities over education for girls (Amin, 2012). This cultural expectation can diminish motivation for academic achievement and increase dropout rates, as girls may be perceived primarily as future wives and mothers rather than students. Additionally, the financial and time demands of initiation ceremonies can strain families economically and socially, further limiting girls' educational opportunities (Lee & Nathan, 2011). Therefore, while initiation ceremonies serve important cultural functions, their influence on girls' education in Masaiti District often presents challenges that affect attendance and academic success.

The role of parents and guardians plays a crucial part in determining girls' school attendance and academic achievement in secondary schools in Masaiti District, and is deeply influenced by prevailing cultural practices. In many communities, parents and guardians are the primary decision-makers regarding their daughters' education, and their beliefs, attitudes, and cultural values can either support or hinder girls' schooling (Chanda, 2024c). For instance, some parents may prioritize domestic responsibilities or early marriage over education due to traditional gender roles, perceiving investment in a girl's education as unnecessary as or less valuable than that of a boy. Others may fear that education exposes girls to negative influences or makes them less obedient, reinforcing the idea that a woman's place is in the home. Additionally, lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of girls' education, compounded by economic pressures, often leads parents to withdraw their daughters from school (Zuilkowski et al., 2019a). On the other hand, parents and guardians who value education and challenge regressive cultural norms can serve as powerful advocates for girls, encouraging consistent attendance, academic performance, and long-term aspirations. Therefore, understanding and addressing the influence of parental attitudes and cultural expectations is essential to improving educational outcomes for girls in the district.

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#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- The Ministry of Education in collaboration with traditional leaders and NGOs should launch continuous community awareness campaigns to challenge harmful cultural beliefs, such as early marriage and gender stereotypes.
- School administrators and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) should establish school committees that include parents, guardians, and local leaders to address cultural practices affecting girls' education and promote school attendance.

- The Ministry of Education and school management should implement school-based interventions such as mentorship programs, guidance and counselling, and gender-responsive teaching to support girls at risk of dropping out.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study established that cultural barriers significantly contribute to the high dropout rates among girls in selected secondary schools in Masaiti District. Key findings reveal that early marriages, traditional initiation ceremonies, cultural stereotypes about female intelligence, and entrenched gender expectations within households and the school environment all play a critical role in undermining girls' educational attainment. These cultural practices not only limit girls' access to consistent schooling but also negatively impact their academic performance, self-esteem, and long-term aspirations. Furthermore, the influence of community beliefs, parental attitudes, and socio-cultural norms continues to perpetuate gender inequality in education. Many families still prioritize domestic roles for girls over academic achievement, leading to reduced support for girls' continued schooling. The study concludes that addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that involves sensitizing communities, engaging traditional and religious leaders, and implementing gender-sensitive policies that protect girls' right to education. Strengthening school and community partnerships, alongside government and non-governmental interventions, is essential to dismantling these cultural barriers and ensuring that every girl in Masaiti District has an equal opportunity to complete her education.

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