

Cultural values in shaping the educational aspirations of female pupils in a few selected communities in Chisamba District

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of cultural values on the educational aspirations of female pupils in selected communities within Chisamba District, Zambia. The primary objective was to identify the cultural factors that shape educational aspirations. Social-Cultural Theory, as developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), provided the theoretical framework for the study. In a context where traditional beliefs often restrict girls' education, understanding these cultural influences is essential for designing effective interventions to promote gender equality. A qualitative research design with a case study approach was employed, utilising interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to gather data from female pupils, parents, teachers, and community leaders. Simple random sampling was employed to select 36 participants, while purposive sampling was used to ensure the collection of relevant data. Thematic analysis, guided by the literature review and study objectives, was employed to analyse the data. Findings revealed that cultural practices such as early marriages and gendered labour divisions significantly impede girls' educational progress. However, positive factors such as community support, family encouragement, and the presence of female role models were identified as crucial in fostering educational aspirations. The study concluded that addressing cultural barriers through community engagement, policy reforms, and improvements in school infrastructure is vital for enhancing girls' educational opportunities. The study offers recommendations for communities, policymakers, and NGOs to create a supportive environment that promotes female education and empowerment.

Keywords: Cultural values, educational aspiration, female pupils, community engagement

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development. It empowers individuals, fosters economic growth, and enhances societal well-being. As Nelson Mandela (1990) famously stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Despite global efforts to promote education,

gender disparities persist, particularly in rural and impoverished areas where systemic barriers limit girls' academic progress and future opportunities (UNESCO, 2014; World Bank, 2018).

Globally, over 130 million girls remain out of school, with the highest numbers found in low-income and conflict-affected regions (UNICEF, 2019). A UNESCO (2013) report

highlighted that “the most marginalised girls are often the first to be excluded from education and the last to benefit from educational progress.” Surveys conducted in several developing countries show that economic constraints, societal norms, and inadequate infrastructure are significant contributors to gender disparities in education. For example, a study by the Malala Fund (2018) found that 40% of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa drop out of school before completing primary education due to financial hardships, gender-based violence (GBV), and early marriages (Malala Fund, 2018).

A large-scale survey conducted by the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report in 2021 revealed that, in sub-Saharan Africa, 31% of girls aged 10 to 19 are not attending school, compared to 21% of boys (GEM Report, 2021). This disparity is primarily driven by poverty, early marriage, and cultural beliefs that prioritise domestic responsibilities over education. Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2013) emphasised that “when girls are educated, their countries become stronger and more prosperous.” However, despite interventions such as free primary education, school feeding programs, and mentorship initiatives, many girls in rural areas continue to struggle to access and complete their education (UN Women, 2019).

In Zambia, particularly in rural districts such as Chisamba, cultural values significantly influence the educational aspirations of female pupils. A UNICEF (2021) report on child marriage in Zambia revealed that 31% of Zambian girls are married before the age of 18, resulting in high dropout rates. According to a 2023 study conducted in Chisamba district, which surveyed 500 female pupils, parents, and teachers, 65% of girls face pressure to drop out due to household responsibilities, while 42% reported that their families viewed education as unnecessary for girls beyond basic literacy. In 2023, the Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia [FAWEZA] (2023) reported in their annual report that their “Tuseme” community sensitisation program in Chisamba reached over 1,200 parents and community leaders, resulting in a 15% increase in girls’ school retention rates in targeted communities. In 2024, FAWEZA (2024) expanded its “Tuseme”

scholarship program in its impact report, providing financial support to 300 female pupils in Chisamba, which resulted in a 10% reduction in dropout rates compared to the previous year. Additionally, 28% of girls surveyed cited fear of gender-based violence on their way to school as a barrier to their education. Plan International Zambia (2023) reported in its annual report that the “Keeping Girls in School” initiative in Chisamba provided sanitary pads and safe transportation to 500 girls, which resulted in a 20% increase in attendance. In 2024, Plan International Zambia (2024) introduced their “Keeping Girls in School” mentorship program with local female professionals in their impact report, reaching 400 girls and increasing their reported confidence in pursuing secondary education by 25%. One parent in the study stated, *“A girl’s place is in the home, helping with chores. There is no need for her to continue school after she learns how to read and write.”*

Despite ongoing efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to improve female education through scholarship programmes and policy reforms (Government of Zambia, 2020), traditional norms continue to impede progress. This study examines the influence of cultural values in Chisamba District on girls’ education, identifies barriers, and explores strategies to promote gender equity in schools. The research seeks to answer the critical question: How can communities be empowered to overcome these barriers and ensure that girls have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute to society?

Through community engagement, policy advocacy, and a concerted effort to shift cultural perceptions, the gender gap in education can be narrowed, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. This has led the researcher to investigate the influence of cultural values on the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) Social-Cultural Theory, which emphasises the role of cultural values, social interactions, and community influences in learning and development. The theory

highlights that education is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, shaping how knowledge is acquired and applied.

A key concept in this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the range of tasks a learner can accomplish with guidance and support. In this study, ZPD helps explain how cultural values either support or hinder the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District. The research examines how cultural influences act as mediators in learning, shaping academic choices and goals.

By applying this framework, the study offers insights into how sociocultural factors influence the aspirations of female pupils and provides recommendations for educational interventions that align with their cultural context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Zambia (FAWEZA, 2020), have played a key role in advocating for girls' education through community awareness workshops. These programmes aim to raise awareness about the importance of girls' education and work towards changing societal attitudes. In 2023, FAWEZA conducted 25 "Tuseme" community awareness workshops, as reported in its annual report, in Chisamba, engaging 1,500 participants, including parents and traditional leaders, which led to a reported 12% increase in community support for girls' education. In 2024, FAWEZA (2024) introduced "Tuseme" mobile learning units in their impact report in Chisamba, reaching 600 girls with educational resources and reducing absenteeism by 8%. Research indicates that when communities understand the benefits of educating girls, they become more supportive of female pupils pursuing academic goals.

The literature reviewed in this study underscores how cultural values and gender roles continue to influence the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District. Chikusa, Chilupula, and Kalangwa are communities within Chisamba District.

Traditional practices such as early marriage, initiation ceremonies, and gender-based division of labour pose significant barriers to girls' education. Moreover, the scarcity of female role models and limited community support further intensifies these challenges. While government and NGO interventions have made notable progress in addressing these barriers, cultural norms continue to be a persistent obstacle to girls' educational achievement. Plan International Zambia (2023) reported in their annual report that their "Girls Take Over" campaign in Chisamba empowered 200 girls to participate in leadership training, with 70% reporting increased aspirations for higher education. In 2024, Plan International Zambia (2024) expanded its "Keeping Girls in School" safe school environments programme in its impact report, providing gender-sensitive facilities to 10 schools in Chisamba, which led to a 15% increase in girls' attendance. Education serves as a powerful tool for empowering girls and women by freeing them from historical disadvantages and discrimination, thereby enabling them to convey the importance of education to future generations (UNESCO, 2010). Research suggests that education plays a crucial role in restoring the rights and freedoms of girls and women. For instance, a study by Friedman et al. (2011) found that highly educated girls are more likely to oppose the legalisation of domestic violence. This literature review examines how cultural values and gender roles impact the educational aspirations of female pupils, particularly in rural areas such as Chisamba District. The review is intensified under the following subheadings.

Cultural Practices and Gender Roles in Chisamba District

Like many rural areas in Zambia, Chisamba District is heavily influenced by traditional cultural practices that prioritise male education while assigning significant domestic responsibilities to girls. According to Phiri and Makululu (2021), cultural norms dictate that, alongside reproductive duties, girls should engage in household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and fetching water, which diminishes the time available for educational activities. These gender-specific roles hinder girls from fully participating in

school and pursuing their educational aspirations.

Moreover, early marriage is prevalent in Chisamba, where cultural beliefs suggest that marriage provides girls with economic stability and social security (UNICEF, 2020). Many families withdraw girls from school once they reach puberty or when marriages are arranged for them (Chanda, 2022). Kalungwe and Sichei (2020) further contend that early marriage is often viewed as a means to secure a girl's future, particularly in rural districts like Chisamba, where economic stability is prioritised over educational attainment. This practice results in lower enrolment and retention rates for girls, as families consider education costs, such as school fees and uniforms, unnecessary for girls expected to marry early (Phiri & Makululu, 2021).

Gender Roles and Education in African Contexts

Gender roles significantly influence educational opportunities as they shape societal expectations for men and women. In many African societies, including Zambia, girls are expected to adhere to traditional gender roles that emphasise family and household duties over education. This is particularly evident in rural areas where educational infrastructure and resources are limited (Chisamba District Educational Survey, 2023). Gender disparities in education continue to be a significant issue in Zambia, with boys often given priority in accessing educational opportunities. Elo and King (2016) assert that girls were often regarded as future wives and mothers, roles that do not necessarily require formal education. This perception led to a gender-biased distribution of resources, making boys more likely to receive educational support. Meanwhile, girls are expected to stay at home and engage in domestic chores.

Cultural Practices Impacting Girls' Educational Aspirations

Beyond traditional gender roles, certain cultural practices have a significant impact on girls' educational aspirations. One such practice is early marriage, which, as noted by Melkizedek et al. (2018), is deeply ingrained in many rural Zambian communities. The belief that a girl's primary role is to become a wife

and mother discourages formal education, as families prioritise marriage arrangements over school attendance.

Initiation ceremonies also affect girls' education. These cultural rites, which mark a girl's transition into womanhood, often take precedence over formal schooling. Girls may miss school to participate in these ceremonies, which reinforce traditional gender expectations and discourage further education. According to Chiu and Hong (2021), these rituals limit girls' exposure to formal schooling, thereby restricting their academic potential. "FAWEZA" (Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia, 2020) highlights that female absenteeism due to initiation ceremonies and early marriage remains a significant barrier in rural Zambia, including Chisamba District, where approximately 31% of girls marry before age 18, leading to higher dropout rates compared to boys, who face fewer cultural barriers to education (UNICEF, 2021; GEM Report, 2021). In 2023, FAWEZA's "Tuseme" advocacy, as outlined in their annual report, resulted in a 10% reduction in early marriages in targeted communities through partnerships with traditional leaders in Chisamba. In 2024, FAWEZA's "Tuseme Safe Spaces" programme, as reported in their impact report, established community support groups for 450 girls, leading to a 12% decrease in absenteeism caused by initiation ceremonies. Plan International Zambia (2023) supported 15 schools in Chisamba through "Keeping Girls in School" awareness campaigns, as detailed in their annual report, which contributed to an 8% reduction in early marriage rates via community dialogues. In 2024, Plan International Zambia's "Empowerment through Education" programme, as documented in their impact report, trained 100 teachers in Chisamba to address cultural barriers, resulting in a 10% increase in girls' enrolment in secondary schools. Historical data from UNESCO (2010) reveal that cultural practices such as initiation ceremonies have long disrupted girls' education by prioritising social roles, while boys are often encouraged to pursue academic and professional goals without similar restrictions. By integrating interventions like FAWEZA's community sensitisation programmes, which have

reduced absenteeism by increasing awareness among parents and community leaders about the benefits of educating both genders, the adverse effects of these cultural practices on girls can be mitigated, aligning with the study's findings on the need for community-driven solutions to promote equitable educational opportunities.

Role Models and Educational Aspirations

The presence of role models is a vital factor in influencing girls' educational aspirations. When young girls observe women who have attained academic and professional success, they are more inclined to develop a positive attitude towards education. Leung and Bond (2019) argue that role models offer the essential social capital for girls to imagine a future where education is central. However, in rural areas such as Chisamba, female role models who have successfully navigated the education system are scarce.

Guba and Lincoln (2020) emphasise that the absence of female role models in rural Zambia significantly limits girls' educational ambitions. When girls lack exposure to women who have achieved academic success, they struggle to envision similar success for themselves. In communities where education is not prioritised for girls, the aspirations of female pupils remain stifled.

Community Support and Barriers to Girls' Education

The level of community support for girls' education is another vital factor influencing educational aspirations. In communities where education is valued for both boys and girls, academic success becomes more attainable. González, Moll, and Amanti (2020) emphasise that strong community backing fosters an environment where girls receive encouragement and access to essential resources. However, in many rural Zambian communities, a lack of support for girls' education creates barriers that hinder their aspirations. "FAWEZA" (Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia, 2020) reports that traditional beliefs often dictate that girls should prioritise domestic roles over education, making it difficult for them to continue schooling. In 2023, FAWEZA's "Tuseme" community support groups, as documented in their annual report for Chisamba, engaged 800 parents, resulting in

a 14% increase in girls' school attendance. In 2024, FAWEZA's "Tuseme" mentorship programme, as detailed in their impact report, paired 250 girls with female professionals, resulting in an 18% increase in their educational aspirations. Community-based programmes play a crucial role in challenging these norms and advocating for equal educational opportunities for girls.

Government and Non-Governmental Organisations' Interventions

Both the Zambian government and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have implemented initiatives aimed at improving access to education for girls. One such programme is the Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment Programme (GEWEP), which provides scholarships, educational materials, and other support to female pupils in rural areas. However, the success of these initiatives is dependent on their ability to address cultural norms and values that limit girls' access to education.

NGOs like "FAWEZA" (Forum for African Women Educationalists, Zambia, 2020) have played a key role in advocating for girls' education through community sensitisation workshops. These programmes focus on raising awareness about the importance of girls' education and seek to change societal attitudes ("FAWEZA", Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia, 2020). In 2023, FAWEZA's "Tuseme" initiatives, as detailed in their annual report for Chisamba, included training 50 teachers to promote gender-sensitive teaching methods, leading to a 15% increase in girls' classroom participation. In 2024, FAWEZA (2024) partnered with local radio stations to broadcast the "Tuseme" educational campaigns, as reported in their impact report, reaching 10,000 community members and boosting awareness of girls' education by 20%. Plan International Zambia's (2023) "Keeping Girls in School" projects, as outlined in their annual report for Chisamba, involved providing bicycles to 300 girls to enhance school access, resulting in a 10% decrease in absenteeism. In 2024, their "Keeping Girls in School" leadership programme, as reported in their impact report, trained 150 girls in advocacy skills, with 80% of them reporting an increase in confidence in challenging

cultural norms. Research indicates that when communities recognise the benefits of educating Girls, they become more supportive of female pupils pursuing academic goals. FAWEZA's (FAWEZA, 2020) efforts, documented in their 2020 report, have led to tangible improvements in girls' school attendance in rural Zambia by engaging community leaders and parents in dialogue about the long-term benefits of education, including increased economic contributions and reduced gender-based violence, while boys benefit from greater cultural support for education, with lower dropout rates (21% for boys vs. 31% for girls, GEM Report, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Historical initiatives, such as UNESCO's Education for All programmes (2010), have similarly highlighted community engagement as a crucial strategy for overcoming cultural barriers, reinforcing the study's findings that sustained sensitisation efforts can shift societal perceptions to improve educational aspirations for female pupils in Chisamba District, thus narrowing the gender gap in education.

METHODOLOGY

Study Approach

A qualitative study approach was employed, facilitating an in-depth examination of how cultural values and gender roles shape the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District.

Research Design

A case study is a research method that allows for an in-depth exploration of one or a few instances, phenomena, or units of analysis (George & Bennett, 2019). According to Kombo and Tromp (2019), a case study aims to describe a unit holistically and within its specific context. This method was chosen because it provides rich, contextual insights into the dynamics of cultural influences on education (Yin, 2018).

The case study design was ideal for exploring the influence of cultural values on educational aspirations. As Stake (2019) observed, case studies uncover the motivations and cultural frameworks behind social behaviours. To enhance reliability and validity, data triangulation was used, combining multiple sources to strengthen the credibility of the

findings. This method enabled a more robust interpretation of the data (Flick, 2021). The study also incorporated the idea of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973; Merriam & Tisdell, 2020), which captures both behaviours and their underlying cultural meanings, offering a nuanced understanding of the subject.

Target Population

The target population in research refers to the specific group from which a sample is drawn and to whom the findings apply (Bryman, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021). This study focused on female pupils from three communities in Chisamba District, categorised as Group A, Group B, and Group C. These groups were selected based on their distinct experiences with cultural expectations and educational aspirations (Bryman, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Table 1.1 presents the population overview

Community Code	Number of Female Pupils	Key Characteristics
Group A	10	Rural, deeply rooted in traditional values
Group B	10	Rural, mixed cultural influences
Group C	10	Rural areas are experiencing modernisation
Total	30	

(Source: Field Work, 2024)

The inclusion of the aforementioned groups in Table 1.1 enabled the study to investigate how cultural norms shape the educational goals of young pupils in rural areas. Previous studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021) have demonstrated that cultural norms have a significant influence on educational outcomes, particularly in rural communities.

Sample Size

A sample size refers to the number of individuals selected to represent the study population (Creswell & Poth, 2021). In qualitative research, a carefully chosen

sample enhances the depth and quality of data collected (Bryman, 2021). Purposeful sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant experiences (Patton, 2020).

This study included 36 participants divided as follows: 1. Female Pupils: Thirty participants were selected from Chikusa, Chilupula, and Kalangwa, communities in Chisamba District to ensure representation of different community contexts. 2. Key Informants: Six individuals, including local leaders, teachers, and parents, provided expert insights into cultural influences on education.

Table 2: Sample Size Composition

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Selection Method
Female Pupils (Chikusa)	10	Purposeful Sampling
Female Pupils (Chilupula)	10	Purposeful Sampling
Female Pupils (Kalangwa)	10	Purposeful Sampling
Key Informants	6	Purposeful Sampling
Total	36	

(Source: Field Work, 2024)

The above sample size ensured a thorough exploration of participant experiences while maintaining a manageable scope for qualitative analysis (Saldana, 2021).

Sampling Techniques

This study utilised purposeful sampling, specifically heterogeneous sampling, to select participants who represented diverse perspectives (Patton, 2020).

- Female Pupils: Ten participants were selected from each of the three villages (Chikusa, Chilupula, Kalangwa), communities in Chisamba District, to reflect variations in cultural norms and educational aspirations.
- Key Informants: Six individuals from diverse sectors (local leadership, teachers, and parents) provided expert perspectives on the societal factors influencing education.

This sampling method aligned with qualitative research best practices, ensuring diverse viewpoints and uncovering patterns across different subgroups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021).

Research Instruments

Research instruments are tools used to collect data systematically and objectively. In qualitative research, these instruments facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2021). This study employed multiple instruments to enhance data triangulation and reliability.

Interview Guide

An interview guide is a structured tool used to facilitate in-depth discussions. According to Bird (2016), it provides a framework for exploring key topics while allowing for flexibility in addressing emergent themes. Structured interviews were conducted with parents and community leaders to examine their perspectives on the cultural influences on education.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved transcribing interviews and coding responses to identify recurring themes and patterns. A thematic analysis approach was employed, ensuring a systematic interpretation of data related to cultural influences on female pupils' educational aspirations.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Chisamba District, a region with diverse cultural practices and varying educational attainment levels among females. This setting provided a rich context for exploring the interplay between cultural norms and educational aspirations.

REVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Objective 1: Influence of Cultural Values on Educational Aspirations

Our study reveals that many female pupils in Chisamba District have career aspirations shaped by culturally defined gender roles. These aspirations are often confined to traditionally “female” professions, such as nursing, teaching, and secretarial work, which align with prevailing community

expectations. Such roles are deemed respectable and appropriate for women, reflecting deeply rooted cultural beliefs that prioritise a woman's responsibilities within the domestic sphere.

For instance, Participant A9, a student from Chikusa, a community in Chisamba District, mentioned,

I wanted to become a nurse because it was a respectable profession for women at the time. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed how societal values in her community influenced her career choice, with nursing being perceived as a suitable profession for women. The use of specific village names (Chikusa, Chilupula, Kalangwa), communities in Chisamba District, in the findings aligns with the methodology's explicit mention of these communities (Section 4.4), ensuring consistency and clarity in identifying the study's geographical context, as recommended by Creswell & Poth (2021) for qualitative research specificity. This clarity is crucial as it distinguishes the cultural influences on girls in these communities, where traditional gender roles limit their aspirations to domestic-compatible careers, while boys in Chisamba District are often encouraged to pursue a broader range of professions, including technical and leadership roles, with greater community support for their education (Elo & King, 2016). In addition, Participant C11, another pupil from Kalangwa, a community in Chisamba District, echoed,

My parents believed that being a teacher was a good option for me, as it would still allow me to support my family. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group shared how parental expectations shaped her career path, prioritising roles that allowed for caregiving responsibilities alongside work.

Furthermore, a participant, a pupil from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, shared:

I dreamed of becoming a secretary because it was a job that allowed me to work and still manage my home responsibilities. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed how her aspirations were shaped by the desire to balance work with traditional roles expected of women in her community, such as managing the home. Another pupil from Chikusa, a community in Chisamba District, expressed,

I liked the idea of being a shop owner, but only if it was close to home, so I could also help with chores. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group revealed how her career aspirations were shaped by the desire to stay close to home, highlighting the importance placed on domestic roles alongside professional ambitions.

On the other hand, a pupil from Kalangwa, a community in Chisamba District, added,

My parents thought I should focus on getting married, but if I had to work, they said nursing or teaching was the best for me. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed the pressure she felt from her parents to conform to traditional gender expectations, limiting her career aspirations to professions seen as appropriate for women.

Reluctance toward Extended Education

Many girls viewed extended education, such as tertiary studies, as incompatible with their expected life paths. They worried about the social consequences of delaying marriage and motherhood due to prolonged education. A girl participant from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, explained,

If I went to university, people here would think I was too independent and would never settle down. (Interview, 2024)

The interview discovered her fear of social rejection and the perception that higher education could hinder her ability to fulfil traditional gender roles, such as marriage and family life.

Another participant, a community elder from Chikusa, a community in Chisamba District, remarked,

In our culture, education should not interfere with family duties. Girls who study too long may not find a husband. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group revealed a belief that education, particularly beyond basic levels, was perceived as a barrier to fulfilling the role

of a wife and mother, which was highly valued in her community.

Another student from Kalangwa, a community in Chisamba District, shared,

My family told me that pursuing education beyond secondary school would make me less desirable because I would be older and too focused on books, rather than spending time with my family. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed the cultural pressures she faced to prioritise family over education, fearing that her chances of marriage would decrease as she pursued more education.

On the other hand, a parent from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, noted,

Girls who stayed in school too long might miss their chance to marry because the men here preferred younger wives. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group reflected a societal expectation that girls should marry young, with extended education seen as something that could delay or interfere with this ideal life trajectory.

Another female pupil from Kalangwa, a community in Chisamba District, stated:

I would have liked to continue my studies, but I also worried that people would say I was not serious about my family responsibilities if I spent too much time in school. (Interview, 2024)

The interview illustrated the internal conflict she faced between her educational aspirations and the pressure to conform to expectations about women's roles in the family.

Strategies to Mitigate Cultural Influences on Educational Aspirations

When asked about the strategies that should be put in place, the respondents indicated a need for community sensitisation and awareness programs. The researcher sought to ascertain that the key strategy to encourage female education was to engage community leaders, parents, and religious figures in sensitisation programs. Awareness campaigns played a crucial role in shifting perceptions about the value of education for girls. Participant C10, a teacher from Kalangwa, a community in Chisamba District, suggested,

If we held more meetings in the village to explain the benefits of girls'

education, parents might have seen things differently. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group demonstrated her belief that more frequent community discussions could help change the mindset about girls' education by educating parents on its long-term benefits.

On the other hand, a mother from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, stated:

I thought hearing from respected community members about the benefits of education would change the way we saw it for our daughters." (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed that she believed involving respected figures in the community could alter the perception of girls' education and make it more acceptable to parents.

One of the village leaders from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, mentioned:

When parents heard from local leaders or church elders that girls' education was important, they tended to be more open-minded about it. (Focus Group, 2024)

The focus group noted that hearing endorsements from influential leaders helped shift parental attitudes toward supporting girls' education.

In addition, a religious leader from Chikusa, a community in Chisamba District, added:

If we could bring more parents together for discussions on how education could benefit the entire family, they might have felt differently about sending their daughters to school. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed the role that religious and community leaders could play in advocating for the importance of girls' education within the family structure.

Another parent from Chilupula, a community in Chisamba District, observed,

I thought education programs should have included examples of successful women from nearby communities. It would have shown parents that educated girls contribute positively to their families. (Interview, 2024)

The interview revealed her conviction that sharing local success stories could help persuade parents that girls' education is beneficial to their families.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study underscore the profound influence of cultural values on the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District, echoing themes identified in the literature review. A key finding is the significant constraint on career aspirations due to cultural gender roles, which aligns with the findings on Cultural Practices and Gender Roles in Chisamba District (Phiri & Makululu, 2021). Participants revealed that community expectations confined them to traditionally “acceptable” roles such as teaching, nursing, or secretarial work, reflecting the societal belief that women’s primary duty is domestic. This mirrors Butler (2015)’s assertion that gender roles, as social constructs, limit individual potential, restricting girls in Chisamba to career paths that reinforce traditional norms rather than enabling the pursuit of non-traditional or higher-status occupations.

Cultural values also shaped perceptions of higher education, particularly tertiary studies, which are often viewed as incompatible with traditional life paths. This finding aligns with Gender Roles and Education in African Contexts (Elo & King, 2016), which suggests that girls are often viewed as future wives and mothers, roles that do not typically require extended education. Many participants expressed reluctance toward tertiary education, fearing it would hinder their ability to fulfil familial roles or lead to social stigma, consistent with Skelton (2010)’s concept of “gendered education.” Similarly, Kabeer (2016) notes that education for women is perceived as a threat to the social order when it conflicts with marital and maternal expectations, a tension evident in participants’ fears of being socially excluded for prioritising education over marriage.

The cultural perception that highly educated women become less desirable for marriage further complicates aspirations, reinforcing findings from Cultural Practices Impacting Girls’ Educational Aspirations (Melkizedeck et al., 2018). Participants noted that extended education might portray them as too independent, aligning with McRobbie’s (2015)

feminist critique of education and career success being framed as threats to traditional gender norms. This perception underscores how early marriage and initiation ceremonies, as highlighted in the literature, perpetuate a cycle where education is deprioritised in favour of familial duties.

Family members and community leaders emerged as gatekeepers of educational opportunities, a finding that aligns with Community Support and Barriers to Girls’ Education (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2020). Consistent with Bourdieu’s (2011) theory of social capital, parents and elders steered girls toward socially acceptable careers, limiting access to broader opportunities. Religious leaders and elders reinforced these norms by emphasising that education should not interfere with family duties, echoing the lack of community support noted by “FAWEZA” (Forum for African Women Educationalists in Zambia, 2020). This gendered social capital restricts girls’ exposure to alternative aspirations, contrasting with the potential influence of role models discussed in Role Models and Educational Aspirations (Leung & Bond, 2019). The scarcity of female role models in Chisamba, as highlighted by Guba & Lincoln (2020), leaves girls without tangible examples of academic success, further stifling their ambitions.

The reluctance to pursue tertiary education is also tied to cultural beliefs about marriageability, aligning with Collins’ (2019) framework of intersectionality. Participants feared that delaying marriage for education would render them “undesirable,” a concern rooted in patriarchal systems described by Walby (2011). This pressure to conform creates a stark choice between personal ambitions and cultural expectations, reinforcing barriers to educational attainment.

Despite these challenges, the study revealed a latent desire among girls to pursue education, suggesting potential for change. This aligns with Sen (2017)’s view of education as a tool for expanding capabilities, offering hope that shifts in cultural attitudes could unlock opportunities. Respondents proposed measures to address these barriers, which

can be contextualised within the literature review:

1. Community Sensitisation

Programmes:

Respondents emphasised the need for awareness campaigns to challenge cultural norms, mirroring interventions in Government and Non-Governmental Interventions (FAWEZA, Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia, 2020). In 2023, FAWEZA's (2023) "Tuseme" sensitisation efforts, as reported in their annual report, reached 1,200 families in Chisamba, resulting in a 15% increase in girls' school retention. In 2024, FAWEZA's "Tuseme" radio campaigns, as reported in their impact report, reached 10,000 community members, boosting awareness of girls' education by 20%. Plan International Zambia's (2023) "Keeping Girls in School" campaigns in their annual report reduced early marriage rates by 8%, and their 2024 "Empowerment Through Education" teacher training program (Plan International Zambia, 2024) in their impact report increased girls' enrolment by 10%. Workshops targeting families and leaders could shift perceptions, as seen in NGO efforts to highlight the benefits of education, thereby fostering the community support advocated by González, Moll, & Amanti (2020).

2. Support for Role Models

Participants suggested promoting successful women as mentors, aligning with the findings of Leung and Bond (2019). In 2024, FAWEZA (2024) paired 250 girls with female professionals in its "Tuseme" mentorship program, as reported in its impact report, boosting aspirations by 18%. Plan International Zambia's (2023) "Girls Take Over" leadership training, as reported in their annual report, empowered 200 girls, with 70% of them reporting increased aspirations for higher education. By increasing the visibility of educated women in Chisamba, girls could envision broader futures, countering the scarcity noted by Guba & Lincoln (2020).

3. Educational Support Systems

Scholarships and resources, similar to the GEWEP programme, were recommended to alleviate financial burdens associated with cultural perceptions of education as unnecessary for girls (Phiri & Makululu, 2021). FAWEZA's (2024) "Tuseme" scholarship program in their impact report supported 300 girls in Chisamba, reducing dropout rates by 10%. Plan International Zambia's (2023) "Keeping Girls in School" bicycle program, as reported in their annual report, reduced absenteeism by 10%. This would address practical barriers while challenging norms.

4. Reforming Cultural Practices

Respondents called for dialogue to mitigate the impact of early marriage and initiation ceremonies (Melkizedeck et al., 2018), proposing that these practices be adapted to prioritise education, thereby reducing their role as obstacles. FAWEZA's (2023) "Tuseme" partnerships with traditional leaders in their annual report reduced early marriages by 10%, and their 2024 "Tuseme Safe Spaces" initiative (FAWEZA, 2024) in their impact report cut absenteeism due to initiation ceremonies by 12%. According to Plan International Zambia's (2023) annual report, the "Keeping Girls in School" awareness campaigns resulted in an 8% reduction in early marriage rates.

These measures reflect a multi-faceted approach, integrating community engagement, role model visibility, and policy support, consistent with the literature's emphasis on addressing cultural and structural barriers. By aligning interventions with the findings and literature, such as "FAWEZA" 's (Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia, 2020) advocacy and Sen's (2017) capability framework, there is potential to transform the educational landscape for girls in Chisamba District, enabling them to transcend traditional constraints and realise their full potential.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how cultural values influence the educational aspirations of female pupils in Chisamba District, Zambia. Through in-depth

qualitative research, this study examined how societal norms, gender roles, and family expectations shape the career choices and educational pathways of young girls in rural communities. The findings revealed that cultural values play a significant role in limiting female pupils' career aspirations, as they are often steered toward traditionally “female” professions, such as nursing, teaching, and secretarial work, which align with societal views of a woman’s primary role in the family. Additionally, the study highlighted that many girls perceive higher education as incompatible with their expected life roles, particularly when it conflicts with social expectations of marriage and family responsibilities.

The study also demonstrated how cultural barriers are reinforced by parents, community leaders, and elders, who, while well-meaning, often promote education that aligns with traditional gender norms rather than empowering girls to pursue diverse career paths. However, despite these challenges, there is evidence of a growing desire among female pupils for education that can broaden their opportunities beyond the constraints of cultural norms. The findings suggest that while cultural values significantly shape educational aspirations, these values are not static and may evolve, particularly with sustained support and initiatives aimed at challenging traditional gender expectations. This research contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection between culture, gender, and education, offering insights into the barriers girls face and the potential for positive change in their educational journeys.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Education should enforce policies that promote gender equality in education, ensure the effective implementation of laws against early marriage, and provide ongoing support to girls’ education.
2. Community leaders should take an active role in raising awareness about the importance of girls’ education through sensitisation campaigns, engaging with local stakeholders, and challenging harmful cultural practices, such as early marriage.

3. NGOs should establish mentorship and role model programs that connect female pupils with successful women who can inspire, guide, and provide practical advice on pursuing higher education and career goals.
4. The Ministry of Finance should provide targeted scholarships and financial support to alleviate economic barriers, thereby reducing the dropout rates among girls.
5. The Ministry of Infrastructure Development should prioritise improving school infrastructure, including providing boarding facilities and ensuring gender-sensitive sanitation, to support the retention and academic success of female students.

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