

Progression in secondary school education in Zimbabwe: A mirage for rural female students

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ABSTRACT: *Despite Zimbabwe being a signatory to various international gender equality treaties and protocols, rural female students' progression in education at one secondary school remains a mirage. In this context, this study sought to explore factors influencing rural female students to either progress or not in secondary school education. Data generation, analysis, and discussion were grounded in an emancipatory paradigm and qualitative approach. Against this background, the researchers used document analysis, interviews, and focus group discussion in sourcing information. As sources of data, thirty rural female students and five class teachers from one secondary school were purposively selected to form the sample for the study. Generated data were analyzed and discussed according to themes derived from the research questions. In this context, results from the analyzed and discussed data revealed numerous gender-related policy guidelines that advocate for rural female students' progression in secondary school education. It was also noted that socialization was the protagonist in influencing rural female students on whether to progress or not to progress in secondary school education. In addition, the findings revealed that female students encounter multi-faceted obstacles in their progression in secondary school education. Therefore, from these results, the researchers concluded that multiple obstacles make rural female students' progression in secondary school education a mirage. In this context, researchers recommended that parents or guardians transform their mindsets toward the rural female students' progression in secondary school education and beyond.*

KEYWORDS: Progression, mirage, rural female student, secondary school education, Zimbabwe.

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1. Introduction

According to UNICEF (2011), developed and developing nations have crafted various policy guidelines that ensure females' empowerment with the aim for them to fully participate in social, economic, and political activities. This calls for equal treatment and equal access to opportunities on one hand and equality of outcomes on the other (Msoffe, 2016). Thus, females and males are offered equal chances and treatment regarding the right of entry, participation, and progression in education in an environment free from stereotypes (UNWomen, 2014). It is against the background that many countries globally have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Sections 29 and 30), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Section 26), Convention on the Elimination of all Forms

of Discrimination Against Women (1991), Beijing Declaration on the Platform for Action (1995), 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender and Equality in Africa, Dakar Platform for Action, Beijing Declaration, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, and Sustainable Development Goals (Dube, 2013). Therefore, it can be argued that these conventions supposedly brightened the expectations of disadvantaged groups, wishing to have a gender-neutral, and gender-sensitive approach to education, among other things (Chikuvadze & Matswetu, 2013; Matswetu & Bhana, 2018). In this regard, the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution referenced the protocols to justify the need to promote gender equality and equity in all spheres of the economy (Musingafi & Mafumbate, 2014). In addition, the constitution made void all laws, procedures, and

cultural practices, which interfere with females' rights (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2013). It can be acknowledged that in the statement of national objectives, equality and equity are emphasized, and where suitable females are talked about in detail (Chikuvadze, 2020). Thus, in principle, Zimbabwe has taken indispensable steps, through policy proclamation, to answer back on issues concerning premature exit from secondary school (Zengeya, 2011).

In complementing the government's effort, some non-governmental organizations in rural settings provide stationery and furniture and pay school fees for some disadvantaged rural students (Nyamanhindi & Mukoyi, 2023; UNESCO, 2011). All these efforts are strong indicators of a commitment by the stakeholders in education geared toward providing a platform for both female and male students to participate and progress in education. Bridgeland et al. (2006); Hallfors et al. (2011); Mawere (2012); Shadreck (2013), in contributing to the debate on school dropouts, argue that to help adolescent students stay in secondary school, there was a need to improve teaching and curricula to make secondary education more relevant and engaging to enhance the connection between school and work; improve instruction and access to support for struggling students; ensure adult-student solid relationships within the school; build student-student relationship within the school, and improve the communication between parents and school. From the above discussion, it can be acknowledged that most of these studies are narrating and making some of the recommendations about these issues were mostly from other people's perspectives (i.e., teachers, parents/guardians, policymakers, among others) on issues focusing on child marriage, determinants of the prevalence of child marriage, legal and development driving rural female students to participate and progression in education (Buckler et al., 2022; Rosemary, 2015). Thus, the disadvantaged rural learners' voice is silent in most of these studies (Chenge et al., 2017; Muzingili & Muchinako, 2016). Therefore, the impetus of this study was to gain insights through the lens of disadvantaged rural female students.

2. Literature review

This study was framed through the lens of post-structuralist feminist and social-ecological thought to gain insights into how power is gendered in social and historical contexts (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Through this framework, our discourse analysis rural female students' progression in secondary school education (Lazar, 2005). In this context, we acknowledge that though there is diversity in the conceptualization of equality and equity in education, there is consensus in comprehending rural female progression in school as a phenomenon attributable to the interaction of multiple factors (i.e., individual, family, community and school) (Singh & Mukherjee, 2018). This is against the background that although Zimbabwe has made much effort to introduce principles of equality in different spheres of life, gender stereotyping remains a concern in education (Makwanise, 2023). In this context that gender equality and access to quality education were central to global sustainable development (Miotto et al., 2019).

Most rural females face societal disadvantages, making their experience of poverty different from that of males (McGinn & Eunsil, 2017). The gender socialization process from family to different societal levels and the deep-rooted patriarchal norms in African culture of which Zimbabwe is not an exception, where males have power over females (UNESCO, 2017). It has been observed that girls-child rights are ignored in areas where patriarchal norms are entrenched, particularly in rural contexts (Badri, 2014). Many research studies have attempted to interrogate factors contributing to female students' progression in education to meet the United Nations' targets (i.e., Education for All, Millennium Development Goals, and Sustainable Development Goals). Findings from these studies acknowledged the existence of various factors that impact how and why female students progress or drop out of secondary school education (Habtam & Abebaw, 2023). These factors are conflicts, perseverance of violence, high cost of living, and natural phenomena (Mahoney, 2018). Thus, it can be acknowledged that secondary schools inclusive of their stakeholders (i.e., parents/guardians,

teachers, government or civic organizations) are accountable not only for educating rural female students in preparation for future career opportunities, nevertheless to also for hastening the closure of the gender gap (Griffith, 2010). In addition, it fosters rural female students' inclusion in basic education programs by designing gender-inclusive teaching-learning activities (Linley & George-Jackson, 2013). This calls for the need to comprehend the existing societal systems which marginalize rural female students in secondary education and then forward possible solutions to enhance students' school attendance and their results. In this regard, education is a significant aspect of closing this gender inequality gap, and rural secondary schools are privileged to lead this transformation. It is against this background that was aimed at exploring factors that are driving rural female students out of secondary education, despite gender-related policy guidelines in education. Accordingly, the following questions were raised:

How do enacted policies influence rural female students' progression in secondary school education?

How has socialization influenced rural female students' progression in secondary school education?

What obstacles do rural female students encounter in their secondary school education?

3. Methodology

This section articulates the framework that guided data generation, analysis, and discussion. This section interrogates the following section: research design, participants, methods, data analysis, and ethical issues.

3.1 Research design

This study adopted an emancipatory paradigm and qualitative approach as the researcher sought the opinions and experiences of the selected participants in their natural settings (Ridder, 2017). The researchers found it suitable since they needed a detailed understanding of the issue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). Furthermore, this paradigm and approach allowed for generating rich and thick data by revealing participants'

insights concerning their lived experiences (Creswell & Maietta, 2013). The study was conducted at a selected rural secondary school in one province in Zimbabwe.

3.2 Participants

To generate information that enabled us to provide answers raised in this paper, data was sourced primarily from rural female students and class teachers. These participants were selected because they were directly involved in the secondary school teaching-learning process. Therefore, the sample for rural female students was 30, and 5 class teachers were purposively selected. Their selection was based on their vast experience and knowledge of the issue in question (Alston & Bowles, 2009). Hence this assisted the researchers in gaining in-depth indulgence into the issue under investigation (Farrugia, 2019).

3.3 Methods

The data generation methods for this study were document analysis, interviews, and focus group discussions. Data generation was done through document analysis (i.e., Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education policy circulars, national gender policy, enrollment documentation, attendance registers, minutes of school and departmental meetings) and interviews (i.e., personal interviews and focus group discussion (Dambudzo, 2014; Republic of Zimbabwe, 2006; 1996). Thus, the researchers employed both structured and unstructured interview questions to source data from rural female students and class teachers. The focus group discussions in this study involved 12 rural female students on their opinions and ideas about rural female students' low rate of progression in secondary school education.

3.4 Data analysis

In addition, data generation, processing, analysis, and reporting were considered intertwined, the researchers took data analysis, and interpretation as an ongoing, iterative process (Chimbi & Jita, 2021). The sourced data was analyzed according to themes; that are, researchers looked across all the data and

categorized it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Permission to gain into the school under investigation was sought and granted by the responsible authority. Thereafter, the researchers organized a meeting with the school authorities and the targeted participants to clarify the study's objectives. After fully explaining the nature and purpose of the study, the participants consented to engage in the planned data generation process was sought.

4. Results

There has been a transformation from concentrating on access to schools to considering what occurs in secondary schools (Dziva, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Hence, in this section, generated data was analyzed guided by the following themes: policies that promote rural female students' progression in education, socialization and its influence on rural female students' progression in secondary school education, and obstacles encountered by rural female adolescent students in their progression in secondary school education.

4.1. Policies and their influence on rural female students' progression in secondary school education

In this section, data generated from the rural female students and class teachers are presented, analyzed, and interpreted to gain insights into the influence of gender-related policies and procedures (i.e., national gender policy 2013-2017) on rural female students' progression in secondary education. In line with the theme, one of the participants exclaimed the following:

"Yes, through our interactions with students from other schools, I have heard of the existence of some materials to do with the girl-child. However, at our school, I have never come across a document that guides our stay as girls" (Focus Group Discussion Participant 2)

In support, one participant in an interview revealed that:

"Since I have transferred to this school, we have never conducted an assembly where the school head will address policies that protect us for progression in education. Like what we did in our previous school, where twice a week,

an assembly was conducted with students [both females and males] being addressed on issues affecting their education progression. But since I came to this secondary there is nothing along those lines" (Rural female student 29)

From the participants' responses, it can be noted that various conventions and treaties (i.e., the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child) that advance the girl child's right to education, not much was being to do at the selected secondary school. This was supported by one of the class teachers postulated that:

"Though the recently amended Education Act [Chapter 25:04] was supposed to aid our day-to-day operations as teachers or those activities to do with students' empowerment are available, they are not easily accessible. In addition, we were not inducted on how best some of the contents of the act can be infused in our teaching-learning activities" (Class teacher D). In the same vein, one of the participants highlighted that: *"Yes, we have heard from our class teacher that there were guidelines in education concerning the empowerment of the girl-child but no concrete information was availed to us in that regard"* (Rural female student 16)

In buttressing the above contributions, another class teacher highlighted that:

"Since we have limited access to the policy documents it becomes difficult to plan for the guidance and counseling activities focusing on issues to do with gender issues. I think that if these documents [i.e., the constitution, national gender policy, etc.] are made easily available to both teachers and students, it can assist us in coming up with activities that align with their objectives. I guess issues to do with student's empowerment [with specific reference to the disadvantaged rural female students] can easily be tackled in our guidance and counseling sessions" (Class teacher E)

In this context, the participants advocated for the availability of gender-related policy guidelines as this tends to create a favorable school environment that ensures the successful

empowerment of rural female students. In the same sense, the participants felt that there was still work to bridge the gap between gender-related policy guidelines intentions and the reality on the ground. Even though gender-related policy guidelines have been crafted to address constraints affecting the girl-child, there is a need to interrogate the extent to which they are operative. The findings concur with Mhlaba (2021); Zengeya (2014), who highlighted that the gendered-related policies and procedures are crafted to reduce the number of rural female students dropping out of secondary school. In support of the above notion, it was noted that teachers attend workshops to equip them with relevant knowledge and skills to promote rural female students' participation and progression in secondary school education (Chinkondenji, 2022; Shava, 2020). However, there was limited documentation on what they can use during their interactions with rural female students at school. In this context, the researchers deduced that though the government has put in place relevant policies and procedures targeted at promoting rural female students' progression in education at the secondary school understudy the intended beneficiaries have limited access to them. This is against the belief that these policy guidelines create a platform for equity in education, such that rural female students are able to overcome obstacles in pursuit of their educational potential.

4.2. Socialization and its influence on rural female students' progression in secondary school education

The researchers in this section centre the analysis and discussion on the sex role socialization and its influence on rural female students' progression in secondary school education. First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge that in Zimbabwean rural communities, interactions between females and males are based on patriarchal expectations (Matswetu & Bhana, 2018), which can influence female students' progression in secondary school education. In this context, this section investigates the influence of sex-role socialization on rural female students' participation and progression in education at the secondary school under

investigation. In one of the interviews conducted, a participant reported that:

"At home, we as girls are treated differently from our brothers be they young or old. As for me, I have a lot of house duties before I go to school since I am the only girl in the family and my mother always is out of vending. I am the one who is supposed to cook, clean the house, wash clothes, and do other stuff. If I ask for help my two brothers say the girls have to do those work" (Rural female student 12)

Similarly, another interviewee shared the following:

"It is influencing me because both of my parents passed away so I am staying with my grandmother [my father's mother] so we are many grandmothers' grandsons and granddaughters. Our grandmother still has that mentality of thinking that educating a girl child is wasting a lot of money. She tends to favour men over us to the extent that she first buys books, uniforms, and school materials for them. Again, at school, most boys are doing well obtaining good results so I value myself less low than men" (Rural female student 3)

From the findings, the researcher noted the inflexibility of family and others around female students at school, embedded in an environment where roles and career paths are ascribed in line with one's sex, influenced the participants' decision-making in terms of progression in education. Thus, socio-cultural factors (i.e., beliefs, gender stereotypes) are responsible for some of the labeling, which can lead rural female students to lose confidence in whatever they do, be it at home or school. Typically, feminine roles deter rural female students from setting aside enough time to study since secondary education demands intense preparation through studying (Chikuvadze, 2020; Chikuvadze & Jacobs, 2021). Through the female students' participation in these gendered roles, she learns to accept as natural the sexist oppression out of which the values acquired are used to mirror her in the context of aspirations and expectations from society (Chikuvadze & Matswetu, 2013; Nsalamba & Simpande, 2019). Thus, one of the participants during the focus group discussion highlighted that:

“The behavioral norm of the parents at home is the main cause that divides gender roles between males and females in schools, and society takes cleaning as a labour division associated with women. The girls have tried to live up to societal demands by colluding with their subordination. Failure to follow some demands may result in one being called names” (Focus Group Discussion Participant 5). In sharing some cultural experiences, one participant noted, *“One of the girls in our class got married recently when she went to her church’s annual meetings. Her marriage was with the blessing of the parents”* (Rural female student 25)

It was further revealed that:

“Women should do household chores and care for the family and children as a culture in other nations. Remember, the new curriculum requires us to do a lot of research [tasks] after school or at home. But the workload at home limits us from doing these Continuous Assessment Learning Activities [homework] since we have no time for that. By the time I finish washing dishes after supper, it will be too late and, at the same time, exhausted. I will only be left with the simple task of taking a bath and then sleep” (Rural female student 21)

The above contributions agree with the content that in a patriarchal society, parents are seen as interrupting female adolescent students’ intense linkage with progression in secondary education. In support of Kurebwa (2014); Mkwanzani (2019) postulate that this limits the extent to which their capacity to progress in secondary education, ultimately culminating in them not fulfilling their dream of becoming valuable human capital that promotes the scientific and technological revolution. Against this background, liberal feminists argue that the norms acquired through the socialization process propagate females’ inequality in their progression in education. Along the same line, radical feminists insist that the existing hierarchical social interactions highlight the subservience of rural female students as low archivers in secondary education (Mandina, 2013). In other words, looking at the African context, it can be noted that in most instances, parents and socio-cultural influence whether or not rural female students progress in secondary school education (Samati, 2014). In any thrust

towards keeping rural female students, we need to take cognizance of the diverse nature and the obscurity of the factors, which can undesirably influence rural female students’ progression in secondary school education (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Thus, in a patriarchal society, girl-child is accorded inferior social status and always finds themselves under the control of males in different spheres of life (i.e., education) (Gutura & Manomano, 2018). From the above discussion, it can be acknowledged that rural female students’ progression in secondary school education is influenced by multiple drivers (i.e., social, and economic).

4.3. Obstacles encountered by rural female students in their progression in secondary school education

In discussing the influence of gender-related policy guidelines and socialization on rural female students’ progression in secondary school education, it is significant to take note of the obstacles encountered in the process. Against this background, this section highlights some of the obstacles rural female students encounter in their progression in secondary school education. In this context, one participant during a face-to-face interview highlighted that:

“At home, most of the time, I discuss my concerns with either my mother or elder sister, who is married and stays close by. Our father spends most of his spare time with the boys talking about family history, with limited attention to my concerns as a girl. He always reminds us that he has no time for feminine issues” (Rural female student 25)

In support, one of the participants gave this input:

“I lost my father when I was in Form 1, so my mother has been the one running around selling tomatoes and other things to raise my school fees. I have a brother who is in university so my mother is focusing the limited resources on him, such that at times being chased away from school due to non-payment of fees” (Focus Group Participant 1)

Sex roles indeed are at the core of how hierarchies are sustained in patriarchal settings. In most rural settings, females and males are brought up with different powers and perceived

abilities (Chinyoka, 2014). Therefore, long-established beliefs comprehensively influence their societal viewpoints, altering how adolescent female students comprehend what society normally expects from them. This is most likely to negatively influence rural female adolescent students' aspirations in life in general and career paths in particular. In addition, Dakwa et al. (2014) highlighted that the economic crisis in Zimbabwe had not spared the school children as many of them failed to pay their school obligations. Therefore, this results in rural female adolescent students dropping out of secondary school. It was further noted that despite female adolescent students receiving advice on whether or not to progress in education from their peers, the school's geographical location in this study was also considered a significant factor in their decision-making. One participant during the focus discussion explained:

"When I was doing my primary education, the school was very close to our village. However, the nearest secondary school is almost 8 - 10 kilometers away from our village, so walking or cycling to and from would have been a challenge. It is based on this reason that some girls ended up quitting school" (Focus Group Discussion Participant 11)

In addition to the above issue, another participant revealed:

"At home, after supper, mostly our grandmothers or aunties tell us folk stories, which from my analysis, their themes are centered on discouraging us from walking long alone distances for fear of being stolen for ritual purposes. Our elders or parents tend to look at us girls as people who are weak to defend themselves such that we always need to be protected" (Rural female student 4)

From the participants' responses, it can be acknowledged that ecological cues prompted a social identity threat to rural female adolescent students' progression in secondary education. This was a result of the geographical location of the secondary school, which made it difficult for the participants to progress with their education. From echoed sentiments, the researchers noted that rural female adolescent learners continue to be socialized along with the traditional expectations, as seen in the difference in nurturing

between adolescent females and males. In this context, the geographical setting may adversely influence rural female adolescent students' progress in secondary education (Mawere, 2012; Moyo et al., 2016). For example, Marongedza et al. (2023); Mughal et al. (2019) revealed that the distance traveled by adolescent female students from home to the nearest school might influence whether to progress or not to progress in secondary education. In this case, adolescent female students were negatively affected by the distance they walked from home to school. Hence, in some circumstances, it tends to influence them to drop out of secondary school education.

5. Conclusions

According to data from rural female students and class teachers, the study's results looked into factors driving rural female students' progression in secondary school education at a selected secondary school in one province. The results from many participants using the selected methods established that there were various gender-related policy guidelines in place to promote the progression of rural female students in secondary school education. However, it was revealed that rural female students' socialization influenced them to either progress or not in secondary school education. In addition, it was noted that rural female students faced numerous obstacles in their quest to progress in secondary school education. Therefore, it can be concluded that due to the existence of multiple factors that influence female students' participation in education, rural female students' progression in secondary school education remains a mirage. Though this has the potential to contribute empirical evidence on the factors influencing rural female students' progression in secondary school education, some limitations need to be addressed. For instance, since the scope of the study was a single secondary school in one province, it might have little impact on the generalizability of the results to other settings. Therefore, we recommend conducting other studies in other districts and provinces in Zimbabwe to tackle the above-mentioned limitation.

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