***Original Research Article***

**THE IMPACT OF GENDER EQUALITY POLICY ON GIRLS’ ENROLLMENT RATES IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS:** **A CASE STUDY OF GICUMBI AND KICUKIRO DISTRICTS, RWANDA**

**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the influence of gender equality policy on girls' enrollment rates in public secondary schools in Gicumbi and Kicukiro Districts, Rwanda. Grounded in social justice theory, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach within a pragmatist paradigm, employing a convergent parallel and correlational research design. Data were collected from 450 respondents using questionnaires, focus group discussions, and documentary reviews. The sample included 52 head teachers, 261 students, and 137 parents, selected using Slovin’s formula to determine the sample size. The findings reveal a positive correlation between gender equality and girls' enrollment rates, with gender equality accounting for 22.2% of the variation in enrollment (R² = 0.222). The results highlight that effective gender equality measures contribute to increased enrollment, supported by positive perceptions of gender-inclusive environments. The study revealed challenges based on economic barriers, gender-insensitive language, and limited female participation in decision-making. The study recommends strengthening gender-sensitive policies, expanding affordable education opportunities for low-income female students, and further investigating the impact of gender equality education on students' attitudes and academic performance in public secondary schools.

*Keywords*: **Gender Equality, Girls Enrollment Rate, Public Secondary Schools**

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The Global Partnership for Education's January 2025 report highlights progress in gender equality in education, though disparities remain, especially for girls in rural and low-income areas. The report emphasizes the importance of having diverse teachers and leaders to foster inclusive, stereotype-challenging learning environments. Additionally, global research highlights persistent gender discrimination in education, showing that teachers often give boys more attention and identify them more frequently (Tupper, 2020). This unequal treatment contributes to the ongoing gender gap in education. Girls, especially at the secondary level, experience higher rates of exclusion than boys, with the gap widening as education progresses (UNESCO, 2018). *The Progress of the World’s Women* 2019-2020 report emphasizes that slow progress on gender equality and women's empowerment hinders goals such as poverty reduction and universal education, illustrating the interconnectedness of these global challenges (United Nations, 2019).

Achieving gender equality in secondary education in Africa is vital for reducing poverty and empowering women to improve household welfare, education, and healthcare. It also ensures equal opportunities for all, as recognized globally. Educating girls is a key strategy for improving health outcomes and boosting economic productivity. Despite the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's goal of ensuring equal education, fewer girls than boys attend school, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where 61% of girls do not complete secondary education (UNESCO, 2018). In this region, girls are more likely than boys to be excluded from education, due to poverty and traditional gender roles. However, when girls have access to education, they often pursue their studies with high levels of motivation (UNESCO, 2018). In Kenya, girls face sexual and reproductive health-related risks, but school attendance helps reduce these dangers. While recent government initiatives to provide free primary and secondary education have increased overall attendance, significant inequalities persist, especially in rural areas, where girls continue to face barriers to education (UNICEF, 2019).

In Rwanda, traditional gender roles limit women’s participation in social, economic, and educational development. Despite government commitments to international education targets, higher education remains underdeveloped. To address low enrollment and education efficiency among girls, Rwanda introduced a girls' education policy in 2008 aimed at eliminating gender disparities in education, training, and management while promoting sustainable progress (UNICEF, 2019). Although girls' access to primary education has improved since 1994, their participation in secondary education remains lower than that of boys. Challenges like high dropout rates, low completion levels, and poor transition to higher education persist. In 2009, only 47.9% of girls advanced to secondary school, and they represented just 25.9% of students in higher education (MINEDUC, 2019).

**2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Gender Equality in Education**

Gender equality in education is crucial for sustainable development and global progress, empowering individuals, particularly women and girls, to participate in society and the economy. The European Union's policies on the right to development emphasize poverty reduction, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Giralt, 2024). This aligns with global trends which highlight the importance of addressing gender disparities in education, particularly in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, cultural values, early marriages, and financial barriers significantly hinder girls' education, with socio-economic development heavily dependent on overcoming these challenges (Doğan & Kirikkaleli, 2021). Educational initiatives such as scholarships and safe learning environments, and awareness campaigns to challenge gender roles, have proven essential in improving girls' educational outcomes (Raymond, 2020).

In countries like Rwanda, gender equality in education is not only crucial for empowering women but also for promoting economic and health outcomes. Educated women contribute significantly to the workforce, family income, and children's education, helping to break the cycle of poverty (Nyiransabimana & Jarbandhan, 2024). Policies that prioritize women's access to education, healthcare, and economic resources, along with international partnerships, have supported this progress (Niyonzima & Bayu, 2023). Furthermore, systemic changes that challenge limiting gender roles, promote gender-sensitive education, and highlight female role models in leadership are vital for creating a more equitable society (United Nations, 2019). These combined efforts advance both gender equality and broader socio-economic development.

Studies on girls' education in Rwanda highlight both progress and persistent challenges in improving academic outcomes. Tuyishime and Andala (2021), reveal strong support for gender-sensitive teacher training and alternative education for girls, with 53.1% and 86.4% of participants, respectively, backing these policies However, the study also emphasized the need for policy evaluation and improved implementation to enhance educational efficiency. Similarly, Uwineza *et al.* (2018) observed higher enrollment of girls in public primary schools and noted low enrollment at the secondary level, citing issues like funding shortages and social resistance. These findings suggest that policy interventions need to address socio-cultural barriers to make girls' education more inclusive and accessible.

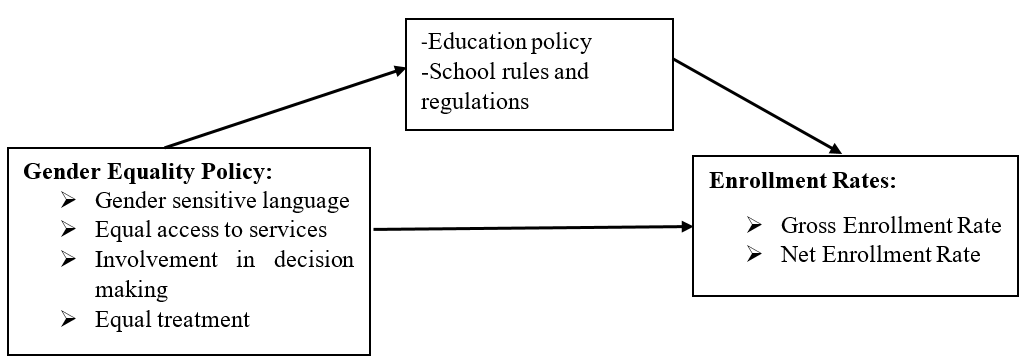
On the other hand, Bikorimana *et al*. (2024) identified key socio-economic and cultural barriers such as early marriage, household duties, and gender-based discrimination in the Huye district, which significantly hinder girls' access to education compared to boys. Nyiransabimana and Jarbandhan (2024) also highlighted financial obstacles and cultural biases as major causes of early dropout rates among girls, particularly in day schools. Both studies underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach that combines policy implementation with efforts to overcome cultural and socio-economic obstacles to improve girls' educational outcomes in Rwanda. This trend indicates that despite policy support, targeted interventions are still needed to tackle deep-rooted societal issues to foster gender equality in education.

**Social Justice Theory**

The social justice theory, introduced by John Rawls (1971), concerns itself with the fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities in society. In the context of education, this theory builds on efforts for access to education regardless of their socio-economic and environmental factors. Additionally, improving gender equality in education can include measures to prevent gender-based violence and harassment within schools, to ensure that girls feel safe and secure in their learning environments. From a Social Justice perspective, education extends beyond academics, as it also includes integrated support services such as counseling, health education, and mentorship programmes, all of which address the comprehensive needs of female students. These initiatives empower girls by offering them both academic and emotional support. Social justice theory advocates for active collaboration among educators, policymakers, parents, and communities to create a supportive network that promotes the well-being and success of marginalized social groups such as female students. This collective approach is essential for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment. The approach can enhance advocacy efforts for girls’ education at local, national, and international levels.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study deals with the assessment of the relationship between gender equality policy and girls’ enrollment rates in public secondary schools. This shows the interrelationship between the variables. Thus, this indicates how gender equality policy as independent variable influence on girls’ enrollment rates as dependent variable. It is represented here in Figure 1. Generally, it indicated how gender equality policy contributes to girls’ enrollment rates.

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*Figure 1* **Gender Equality Policy On Girls’ Enrollment Rates**

The Figure 1 shows the relationship between independent and dependent variables as well as intervening variables of the research problem. The independent variable is gender equality policy and dependent variable is girls’ enrollment rates. The intervening variable shows how girls’ enrollment rates increased when gender equality policy was effectively implemented. Generally, effective implementation of gender equality policy like gender sensitive language, equal access to services, involvement in decision making and equal treatment lead to the increase of both gross enrollment rate and net enrollment rate.

**3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper employed quantitative research approach and descriptive research design. The approach was selected due to its strengths in enabling the researcher to collect objective data that can be statistically analyzed to determine patterns of gender equality policy and girls' enrollment in schools. The design was chosen because it helps in systematically describing the characteristics of a population, without manipulating any variables and hence, examine the influence of gender equality on girls' enrollment rates in public secondary schools. **The Yamane formula** was used to get a manageable sample size of 260 respondents. Questionnaire was the main research instrument used in data collection.

**4. RESULTS**

The aim of this study was to evaluate the influence of gender equality on girls’ enrollment rates in public secondary schools. This section presents both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses conducted in this study.

**Descriptive Statistical Analyses**

Findings presented in Table 1 shows the influence of gender equality on girls’ enrollment rate in secondary schools.

*Table 1* Perceptions of Students on Gender Equality (N= 260)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S/N** | **Statements** | **STD** | **D** | **N** | **A** | **SA** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Remarks** |
| 1. | Gender sensitive language is used in this school. | 19  (7.3%) | 7  (2.7%) | 15  (5.8%) | 102  (39.2%) | 116  (44.6%) | 4.12 | 1.124 | High |
| 2. | My school satisfies the needs of female students’ participation | 3  (1.2%) | 22  (8.5%) | 20  (7.7%) | 111  (42.7%) | 103  (39.6%) | 4.12 | .953 | High |
| 3. | The leadership of this school provide equal access to services for both boys and girls. | 8  (3.1%) | 12  (4.6%) | 10  (3.8%) | 69  (26.5%) | 161  (61.9%) | 4.40 | .983 | Very High |
| 4. | Girls are involved in decision making in this school. | 8  (3.1%) | 24  (9.3%) | 44  (17.0%) | 79  (30.5%) | 104  (40.2%) | 3.95 | 1.106 | High |
| 5. | Community sensitization to education improves students’ participation in my school. | 7  (2.7%) | 15  (5.8%) | 50  (19.2%) | 100  (38.5%) | 88  (33.8%) | 3.95 | 1.003 | High |
| 6. | Equal treatment increases girls’ hope about education | 4  (1.5%) | 12  (4.6%) | 8  (3.1%) | 79  (30.4%) | 157  (60.4%) | 4.43 | .879 | Very High |
| 7. | Girls are involved in leadership of this school | 5  (1.9%) | 12  (4.6%) | 9  (3.5%) | 79  (29.2%) | 158  (60.8%) | 4.42 | .908 | Very High |
| 8. | Both girls and boys are provided equal access | 10  (3.8%) | 17  (6.5%) | 9  (3.5%) | 77  (29.6%) | 147  (56.5%) | 4.27 | 1.064 | High |
|  | **Grand Mean/SD** |  |  |  |  |  | **4.20** | **1.00** |  |

**Note: 1-1.8**(Very Weak), **1.9-2.6**(Low), **2.7-3.4**(Average), **3.5-4.2**(High) **& 4.3-5**(Very High) (Nassar *et al.* 2021).

**Key**: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 =Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 =Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

**SD=** Standard Deviations.

**Source:** Field Data (2024).

The findings of this study revealed a grand mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation of 1.00, indicating agreement with gender equality practices in public secondary schools. While most respondents were in support of these practices, individual statements reveal both strengths and areas for improvement. The first significant observation is that the leadership in these schools was perceived as providing equal access to services for both boys and girls, as indicated by a very high mean score of 4.40.

The findings suggest school leaders are committed to ensuring equal access to educational resources for all students. A high mean score of 4.28 indicates significant efforts to eliminate gender barriers, promoting an inclusive, supportive learning environment for both genders. Furthermore, the schools are positively perceived for involving girls in leadership roles, reflected by a mean score of 4.42. The high scores of 4.43 also indicate that equal treatment enhances girls’ confidence, motivation, and aspirations, enhancing their academic success and future leadership potential.

Even though schools are perceived positively in terms of their provision of equal access and leadership opportunities for girls, there is moderate satisfaction with the use of gender-sensitive language, receiving a mean score of 4.12. This reveals that language used may not invariably reflect a commitment to gender equality. Such inconsistency can potentially reinforce stereotypes and consequently limit girls' self-perception. Despite there being equal opportunities, language use can influence attitudes and negatively impact girls' confidence, highlighting the need for improved gender-sensitive language to better support empowerment and equality in schools. The mean score of 4.12 indicates that still schools have room to improve in fully supporting female students' participation to address their specific needs to foster an environment where all students can thrive.

The involvement of girls in school decision-making received a moderate perception score of 3.95, indicating a gap in efforts to include them. Empowering girls through student councils, focus groups, mentorship, surveys, leadership training, and girl-focused initiatives can improve participation. Including girls in committees and fostering a supportive environment will ensure their voices are heard, leading to more inclusive policies and better consideration of their unique perspectives in decisions affecting their education and well-being. Community sensitization to education received a moderate perception score of 3.95, highlighting the need for increased engagement, especially in supporting girls’ education. To improve this, schools can organize awareness campaigns, community meetings, and collaborate with local leaders. Additionally, leadership programmes for girls, workshops for parents, and showcasing success stories can raise awareness about the importance of supporting girls’ education. Strengthening partnerships and involving the community in school events will enhance the support network and encourage greater involvement in educational initiatives.

In the review of the documents in school heads’ office, the data on the enrollment rates of students is as presented in Table 2.

*Table 2* Students’ Enrollment Rates in Schools

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Students’ Enrollment** | **2020/2021** | | **2021/2022** | | **2022/2023** | |
| **Reviewed Documents** | **45** | | **45** | | **45** | |
| **Gender** | M | F | M | F | M | F |
| Mean | 104.0000 | 97.7000 | 108.9000 | 92.1000 | 84.6667 | 78.4000 |
| Std. Dev. | 35.44009 | 34.05241 | 29.o6487 | 26.16380 | 28.99138 | 20.36446 |
| Min | 59.00 | 45.00 | 62.00 | 51.00 | 75.00 | 67.00 |
| Max | 165.00 | 146.00 | 156.00 | 134.00 | 140.00 | 132.00 |

**Source:** Field Data (2024).

The enrollment data across three academic years revealed gender disparities in mean scores. In 2020/2021, male students had a significantly higher mean score (104.0) than females (97.7). This trend continued in 2021/2022 with males at 108.9 and females dropping to 92.1. By 2022/2023, both genders experienced declines, with males at 84.67 and females at 78.4. The gap in female enrollment was attributed to socio-cultural barriers, economic obstacles, gender-insensitive language, and limited community engagement, all contributing to lower academic performance and retention for girls. The mean scores show a consistent performance gap, with males generally outperforming females. The higher standard deviation in female performance suggests unequal access to resources or opportunities. This reflects ongoing gender inequality, impacting girls' education. The variability in enrollment data indicates inconsistent access to or support for girls' education across Districts, which may extend nationwide.

**Inferential Statistical Analyses**

Prior to running the regression analysis, it was interesting to conduct pairwise correlation analysis for more accurate determination of reliability. The analysis aimed at indicating, first, whether or not the variables were correlated. The findings show that gender equality and girls’ enrollment have a positive and significant correlation at the coefficient of r=0.418, p-value < 0.05. The rule of thumb suggests that the item-to-total correlation (r) should exceed 0.03 and the correlation has to be significant (Hair *et al.* 2006). Therefore, the results across gender equality and girls’ enrollment rates had a positive and significant relationship in public secondary schools in Rwanda. The same results are obtained with a parametric test (Table 3).

*Table 3:* **Correlations (Non-parametric)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Correlations (non-parametric)** | | |
| Testing Variables | | **Gender Equality** |
| **Gender Equality** | Spearman's rho Correlation | **0.418\*\*** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| Total number of respondents 260 | | |
| \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | |
| \*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). | | |

*Table 4* **Correlations (parametric)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Correlations (parametric)** | | |
| Testing Variables | | **Gender Equality** |
| **Gender Equality** | Pearson Correlation | **0.391\*\*** |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.000 |
| Total number of respondents 260 | | |
| \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). | | |

Table 3 and 4, reveal that gender equality has a statistical significance weak positive correlation with the girls’ enrollment rate in public secondary schools where r = .418 (0.391 parametric case)with the P-value of .000 < .05. This shows that promoting gender equality in public secondary schools plays a significant role in the promotion of girls’ enrollment rate in such schools.

**Regression Analysis**

*Table 5* **Model Summary for Linear Regression Analysis**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Model Summaryb** | | | | | | | | | |
| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | Change Statistics | | | | |
| R Square Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig. F Change |
| 1 | .563a | .343 | .213 | .49660 | .222 | 24.323 | 3 | 256 | .000 |
| a. **Predictors:** (Constant), Gender Equality | | | | | | | | | |
| b. **Dependent Variable**: Girls Enrollment Rate | | | | | | | | | |

Table 5showed that there is a high positive degree of relationship between gender equality and girls’ enrollment rate in public secondary schools in Rwanda. This was shown by r = 0.561. Table 6 also indicates an R-square value of 0.343, meaning that an improvement in gender equity leads to a 34.3 percent increase in girls’ enrollment rate

*Table 6* Model ANOVA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ANOVAa** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Model | | | | | Sum of Squares | | Df | | | Mean Square | | | F | | Sig. | | |
| 1 | | Regression | | | 17.995 | | 3 | | | 5.998 | | | 24.323 | | .000b | | |
| Residual | | | 63.132 | | 256 | | | .247 | | |  | |  | | |
| Total | | | 81.127 | | 259 | | |  | | |  | |  | | |
| a. **Dependent Variable**: Girls Enrollment Rate | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b. **Predictors**: (Constant), Gender Equality  The results in the table 6 show the worth level with the P value of 000 < .05 which is fewer than 0.05. These findings indicate that the impact of Gender equality on girls’ enrollment is significant. Consequently, gender equality significantly influences girls’ enrollment rate in public secondary schools. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| *Table 7* **Model Coefficients of Gender Equality on Girls ‘Enrollment Rate**  **Coefficientsa** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **Model** | | | **Unstandardized Coefficients** | | | **Standardized Coefficients** | | **T** | **Sig.** | | **95.0% Confidence Interval for B** | | | **Correlations** | | | | | **Collinearity Statistics** | |
| **B** | **Std. Error** | | **Beta** | | **Lower Bound** | **Upper Bound** | | **Zero-order** | | **Partial** | **Part** | | **Tolerance** | **VIF** |
| 1 | (Constant) | | 1.229 | .316 | |  | | 3.889 | **.000** | | .607 | 1.852 | |  | |  |  | |  |  |
| Gender Equality | | .267 | .057 | | .280 | | 4.649 | **.000** | | .154 | .380 | | .391 | | .279 | .256 | | .837 | 1.195 |
| 1. **Dependent Variable:** Girls Enrollment Rate | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 7 presents a comprehensive summary of the regression coefficients for the computed variables on gender equality. The findings underscore the significant impact that gender equality has on the enrollment rate of girls in public secondary schools. The analysis reveals a standard beta coefficient of 0.280, which is statistically significant (P. 0.000). This indicates a strong positive relationship between gender equality and girls' enrollment, suggesting that for every one-unit improvement in gender equality, there is an increase of 0.280 units in the enrollment rate of girls in secondary schools in Kicukiro and Gicumbi districts, Rwanda.

**5. DISCUSSION**

The study focused on evaluating how gender equality influences girls' enrollment rates in selected public secondary schools, positing gender equality as a crucial predictor for educational policies regarding girls. It comprehensively examined eight critical aspects: the implementation of the use of gender-sensitive language, the satisfaction of female students' participation needs, equal access to resources and services, involvement of girls in decision-making processes, community sensitization regarding education, enhancement of student participation, fostering hope among girls through equitable treatment, and active participation in school leadership.

Findings illustrate a general adoption of gender-sensitive language within schools, leading to greater inclusivity. This aligns with Giralt (2024), who noted the positive impacts of gender-sensitive communication in cultivating an inclusive school culture. Similarly, Johnson (2022) emphasizes that effective communication enhances awareness of gender issues among students, cultivating a respectful environment. However, the study also identified inconsistencies in using a gender-sensitive language, particularly in informal interactions. Such disparities highlight possible gaps between established policies and their real-world application, potentially due to inadequate educator training or insufficient institutional support, as suggested by Niyonasenze *et al.* (2024).

Regarding female student participation, the results indicate that while schools generally aim to support involvement, discrepancies exist. Wanjiru (2023) noted similar trends, suggesting a broader need for comprehensive support systems, including mentorship and health education. Uwineza *et al.* (2018) added that inclusive decision-making processes are essential for achieving better engagement outcomes for female students. The findings further confirm a strong perception of equal access to services, necessary for effective school leadership and gender equality. Thomson *et al.* (2022) supports this notion, recognizing that well-implemented policies promote equal access to resources and academic support which reinforce the positive learning environment for all genders, as emphasized by Lee and Chang (2021).

Despite general agreement on equal access to resources, challenges persist. Doğan *et al.* (2021) note that subtle inequalities continue to affect the educational experience. Continuous feedback and regular assessments, highlighted by Bergstrom and Özler (2023), are crucial for gauging the efficiency of gender equality policies and ensuring that they yield real benefits for students.

The study also assessed girls' involvement in decision-making within school governance. While their participation was moderately acknowledged, the results indicated significant limitations, likely stemming from entrenched traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Irakoze *et al*. (2021) noted that schools’ initiatives to empower girls in decision-making may not be fully effective. The results suggest that sustained efforts are required to create enabling environments where girls' contributions are genuinely valued-a sentiment echoed by Otieno *et al.* (2024), who emphasize the importance of female role models in leadership.

Community involvement plays a critical role in enhancing girls' educational participation. Although community sensitization is recognized as vital, its perceived effectiveness remains moderate. Moyi (2020) emphasizes the need for robust community engagement strategies that foster understanding and commitment to educational initiatives, thereby supporting girls' involvement in governance. Qualitative data suggest that insufficient strategies and adverse socio-economic conditions may hinder effective community sensitization.

The study further indicated that equal treatment within schools significantly boosts girls’ optimism about their educational futures. A high mean score reflected the consensus that fairness and equal opportunities in schools enhance girls' confidence and aspirations, ultimately resulting into more academic engagement, as noted by the United Nations (2019). This finding align with those by Raymond (2020), reinforcing the critical role that gender equality plays in empowering girls to pursue their educational goals.

Additionally, there was strong support for the position that girls should hold significant leadership positions in schools. This is critical for both personal development as well as an exemplar for peers. Tibbetts and Smith (2023), argue that mentorship programmes and targeted training help to break gender barriers and foster equality in leadership roles.

However, the study also outlined a performance gap, with male students consistently outperforming their female counterparts over three years which is an indication of ongoing gender disparities in education. Contributing factors include socio-cultural norms that favour boys’ education and barriers such as early marriage, which hinder girls’ school attendance. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for achieving equitable educational access for girls, as stressed by Bergstrom and Özler (2023).

Inequitable language use in schools emerges as a notable hindrance to gender equality, adversely impacting girls’ self-esteem and academic engagement. Gender-sensitive language is fundamental in cultivating inclusivity and empowering all students. Educators must be trained on the consequences of their language use to foster an inclusive environment through reinforcement (Tibbetts & Smith, 2023).

Qualitative insights from parental focus groups affirm the significance of gender equality in improving girls’ enrollment rates, echoing Johnson's (2022) findings that equal opportunities and rights are vital for increasing educational access. Parents stressed that, beyond eliminating legal obstacles, it is essential to create environments which empower girls to pursue education. They underscored the importance of safe school facilities and adequate resources to attract girls in education, aligning with Niyonzima and Bayu (2023) on the interconnected nature of gender equality, access, and infrastructure for successful enrollment.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Based on research findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations for action were made. First, the Ministry of Education should prioritize enhancing gender-sensitive language and practices in schools. This includes providing gender sensitivity training for teachers and staff, ensuring inclusive communication, and fostering an environment that supports all students. Strengthening these efforts will create more equitable educational experiences for everyone.

Secondly, policymakers should focus on expanding horizons of access to affordable education for low-income female students. Providing financial support, scholarships, and targeted resources will empower these students, promote gender equality and access to education, which positively impacts communities and economies. Therefore, prioritizing gender-sensitive practices and expanding affordable education opportunities for low-income female students will foster equality, empowerment, and societal progress.

**6. CONCLUSIONS**

The study reveals a generally positive perception of gender equality policy and female students' participation in public secondary schools in Rwanda. Respondents acknowledge the supportive educational environment, with strong approval of the schools' efforts to meet the needs of female students, although improvements are needed. The perception of equal access to services and the involvement of girls in school leadership reflect the schools’ commitment to gender equality. However, areas such as the involvement of girls in decision-making, the use of gender-sensitive language, and community sensitization show moderate satisfaction, suggesting that these are key areas for further development. Overall, while progress is evident, continued efforts are necessary to fully enhance gender equality, leading to a high girls’ enrollment rate in these schools.

**DISCLAMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

I declare that no generative artificial intelligence technologies, including Large Language Models like ChatGPT or tools like COPILOT, were used in writing or editing this manuscript. All content is a result of personal knowledge, skills, and efforts. This commitment underscores the integrity and authenticity of the work, ensuring that all ideas and expressions stem solely from human creativity without automated assistance.

**COMPETING INTERESTS**

I have declared that no competing interests exist.

**COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER**:

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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