**Impact of Cultural Norms on Girls’ Dropout Rates in Public Secondary Schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County, Kenya**

**ABSTRACT**

Globally, education has been identified as one of the pillars to promote intellectual knowledge and enhance development in society. However, there has been concern related to the girls dropping out of schools in Garissa County, Kenya. This study then investigated assessed the influence of cultural norms on girls dropping out from public secondary schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County in Kenya. This study targeted a population comprising of five secondary schools in Garissa Township Sub County. The unit of enquiry was; five heads of department for guidance and counselling, five principals, and a total of 3,169 female students. The study purposively sampled the; five principals, five head of guidance and counselling in these schools as key interview informants. Simple random sampling was employed to select 10% of the girls, resulting to a sample size of 317 respondents. The study used mixed-methods, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Questionnaire and interview schedules were be used to collect data. The analysis encompassed quantitative analysis to produced descriptive statistics correlation analysis to yield inferential statistics and thematic analysis for qualitative data. The study concluded that cultural norms have statistically significant positive impact on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County, Kenya p<0.01; r=0.702). The study recommended for engaging community in educational campaigns. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for implementing specific interventions and policies aimed at addressing cultural norms obstacles and decreasing the incidence of females dropping out of public secondary schools.

Keywords: Girls’ Dropout Rates, Cultural Norms, Public Secondary Schools

**Introduction**

Globally, education has been identified as one of the pillars to promote intellectual knowledge and enhance development in society (Zickafoose et al., 2024). The under-representation of girls in schools is a serious problem in many parts of the world and especially in Africa. In the light of dynamically changing occurrences demanding women to become breadwinners, providing education to girls equally becoming vital, in every society, in order to make them self- reliant. Efforts have been laid to promote education among the children to ensure equality in accessing education. However, there has been disturbing trend of inequality in accessing education among the youths in various countries worldwide due to gender imbalance. One of the features that has been projected to cause this gender inequality is socio-economic factors such as cultural customs. A report by UNESCO (2021) concerning global education monitoring indicated that socio-economic factors like poverty and cultural customs has played a bigger role in accelerating the issue of girls’ dropping out from public schools.

In Africa, gender inequality in education, largely driven by socio-economic factors, has been widely observed. Many traditional African communities place less value on girls’ education compared to that of boys. Several studies within the African context have identified socio-economic conditions as the primary contributors to this disparity. A study conducted by the African Union (2021) found that low household income among many African communities was a key factor contributing to high dropout rates among girls. The report also highlighted that social factors, particularly cultural customs, often fail to recognize or respect the importance of educating girls to the same extent as boys. As a result, many families do not prioritize investing their limited resources in girls’ education.

Macro-level strategies, such as free school uniform distribution, free education, and school feeding programs, along with micro-level interventions, including scholarships, child-friendly school environments, guidance and counselling, and child safety measures, have been implemented to mitigate school dropout rates in Ghana (Yeboah-Ebong, 2016). The study by Yeboah-Ebong (2016) indicated that early school leaving among students in both urban and rural areas is primarily driven by child labour, teenage pregnancy, and poverty, among other factors. In Tanzania, the study by Mduma (2019) aimed to develop a data-driven approach to identify and predict students at risk of dropping out, with the goal of facilitating targeted intervention programs. a. The study found identified age, parental income, and gender as the key determinants of secondary school dropout.

In Kenya, the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) by the government aimed to make education affordable and accessible to all children (Musangi et al., 2017), while also addressing challenges such as low-quality education, illiteracy, and poor completion rates. Additionally, the Kenyan government has implemented several initiatives to enhance access, retention, and education quality, including infrastructural development through the Constituency Development Fund (C.D.F.) and Centres of Excellence, the Digital Literacy Programme (DLP), sanitary towel distribution programs, low-cost boarding and mobile schools in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), the Tusome Project (2015–2018), the School Health and Nutrition Programme, and the Kenya Primary Education Development (PRIEDE) Project (2016–2019). Furthermore, policies promoting school re-entry for girls after early pregnancy (since 1994), addressing harmful cultural practices, and education in emergencies have also been put in place to support student retention.

Despite these sustained interventions by both Government of Kenyan and non-state actors, harmful cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early child marriage, and entrenched patriarchy have continued to persist and intensify across Kenya (Andiema, 2021). In Kenya, the government has acknowledged that there are still existence of gender-inequalities in various part of the county and polices are being developed to encourage gender equality. These deeply rooted and outdated traditions have significantly impeded the academic advancement of girls, particularly in the northern and north-eastern regions of the country. In these contexts, cultural norms and values profoundly shape educational aspirations, often placing limited value on formal education for girls. As a result, the phenomenon of girls dropping out of public schools has been widely documented, with scholars consistently identifying socio-cultural and economic challenges as key drivers of this trend (Ndivo, Mwania & Mumo, 2021). . The north-eastern region, in particular, continues to register alarmingly high dropout rates among girls, highlighting the urgent need for culturally sensitive and community-driven solutions.

In accordance with Dagane and Aden (2021), North Eastern Kenya, including Garissa County, continues to experience persistent socioeconomic issues that have a direct influence on access to excellent education, particularly among female students. Rigid gender norms have exacerbated these difficulties by limiting females' educational prospects. In the case of Abdi and Ahmed (2021), entrenched traditional views have become so ubiquitous that many households value customary and informal practices over formal education. Early marriage ranks as one of the most serious challenges impeding girls' education, and it is particularly common in Garissa County. According to Save the Children (2021), early marriage continues to be a major cause to high dropout rates among girls in public schools, hindering attempts to achieve gender equality in education throughout the area.

Research shows that prohibitive social and cultural practices have been the main obstacle to girl child education in developing countries including Kenya ( Mackatiani, Mackatiani, & Atieno, 2022; Mungania, 2021; Maichuhie, 2020). The study by King’ondu and Mbirithi (2025) firmly established that cultural norms constitute a significant barrier to student retention in public day secondary schools. The researchers demonstrated that practices such as initiation rites, early marriages, polygamous family structures, and traditional economic obligations substantially hinder school retention, particularly for female students. These socio-cultural expectations often compel girls to assume adult responsibilities prematurely, thereby disrupting their academic progression and limiting future opportunities. Similarly, the research conducted by Mungania (2021) presented compelling evidence that entrenched cultural practices continue to undermine girls’ participation in public secondary education in Kenya. The findings confirmed that traditions such as female genital mutilation (FGM), prioritization of dowries, household responsibilities, and gender bias favouring boys' education perpetuate the marginalization of girls within the education system. These practices not only devalue girls’ education but also contribute directly to high dropout rates, as many girls are withdrawn from school to fulfill roles prescribed by long-standing cultural expectations.

Some of the transformative campaigns being encouraged in the county include creating awareness that promotes gender equality and encouraging education to all evenly (Republic of Kenya, 2021). For this reason, this study aimed to explore deeper in this issue to come up with findings that will call for enhanced recommendations to leaders and policy makers to formulate policies that will curb this issue in the region.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Girl-child education plays a critical role in society by contributing not only to individual empowerment but also to the economic development of both the girl and the broader community (Mackatiani, Mackatiani & Atieno, 2022). In Kenya, the government has made significant efforts to support learners at all levels to remain in school and complete their studies. This is evident in initiatives such as the provision of bursaries and subsidized secondary school fees. However, despite these interventions, the issue of girls dropping out of school has become a concern. Statistics indicate that, in Kenya, more than 10% of girls who enrol in Form One do not complete secondary education (Oduya, 2020). This non-completion of high school limits girls’ opportunities and achievements, while also increasing the socio-economic burden on society. Moreover, high dropout rates among girls may impede the realization of Kenya Vision 2030's Social Pillar, which aims to create a fair and democratic society, with education and training as key drivers of transformation. Numerous studies have suggested that cultural norms are significant contributors to school dropout among girls (Mackatiani, Mackatiani & Atieno, 2022; Mungania, 2021; Kisaka, 2015). In particular, research by Kisaka (2015) revealed a lack of gender balance in school dropout rates in Garissa and Ijara constituencies, attributing the disparity to ignorance and nomadic lifestyles, which reinforce cultural practices that suppress girl-child education. Barriers to girls' education range from deeply embedded societal norms and beliefs, negative parental attitudes toward female education, and gender-based domestic expectations, to factors within the school environment itself. However, existing literature has left a significant gap by failing to focus specifically on Garissa Sub-County and analysed the relative influence of cultural norms on girls’ school dropout rates. This study sought to fill that gap by focusing on Garissa Sub-County and examining how cultural norms specifically contribute to secondary school dropout among girls. Consequently, this research lock theses gap by assessing impact of cultural norms on girls’ dropout rates in public secondary schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County, Kenya.

**RESEARCH** **OBJECTIVE**

To determine the impact of cultural norms on girls’ dropout rates in public secondary schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County, Kenya p.

**THEORETICAL REVIEW**

This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which provides a holistic framework for understanding the complex, interconnected factors that influence human development across various ecological systems. According to this theory, environments such as cultural and economic contexts significantly shape human behavior and experiences, including educational outcomes for girls. The theory aligns well with the focus of this study, as it acknowledges the multifaceted challenges that hinder girls from accessing quality education in different environmental settings. It highlights the interconnectedness of cultural norms, schools, individuals, and communities, particularly in relation to social and cultural expectations. By examining the interplay among these ecological systems, this study aims to uncover the ways in which cultural customs and social dynamics contribute to the high dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools..

**EMPIRICAL LITERATURE**

A substnatial body of research has been undertaken on the impact of cultural norms on girls' dropout rates in public secondary schools, emphasising the significant association between traditional behaviours and educational attainment. The study by King’ondu and Mbirithi (2025) examined how cultural practices affected student enrolment and retention in public day secondary schools in Kinango Sub-County, Kwale County, Kenya. Using a mixed-method research design, the study collected data from principals, teachers, students, and parents across 21 public schools. The key findings revealed that initiation rites, early marriages, polygamous family structures, and traditional economic obligations significantly hindered both enrolment and retention. These practices disrupted students’ education, especially for girls, by pushing them into adult roles or family responsibilities prematurely. The study also highlighted inadequate parental support and high dropout rates linked to cultural expectations and economic limitations. Many students came from households where education was not prioritized due to long-standing traditional beliefs. To address these issues, the study recommended community sensitization, economic empowerment, school-based counseling, and legal action against early marriage. The study concluded that without tackling harmful cultural norms, efforts to improve educational outcomes in the region would remain ineffective.

The research by Mungania (2021) examined how socio-cultural practices affect the participation of Maasai girls in public secondary education in Kajiado County, Kenya. Using a mixed-methods approach, she collected data from education officials, teachers, and students to assess the impact of traditions such as early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and gender bias favouring boys’ education. The study found that these cultural practices significantly contribute to low enrolment and high dropout rates among girls. Deeply rooted beliefs often lead parents to prioritize dowry or traditional roles over schooling for their daughters. It was concluded that unless these cultural norms are addressed through community sensitization and attitude change, achieving gender equality in education in Maasai communities will remain a challenge.

Chege et al. (2019) carried out a study in rural areas that demonstrated the importance of community perceptions in determining girls' educational paths. The study demonstrated the way that community support influences a girl's ability to overcome obstacles and complete her education. Kisaka (2015) investigated the challenges girls face in secondary school education in Kenya's Ijara and Garissa constituencies. In accordance with the survey, there was no gender balance in dropout, enrolment, completion, and transition rates in schools in Garissa and Ijara Constituencies. This has been associated with illiteracy and nomadic lives, which bind groups to cultural customs while discouraging girl child education. The obstructions to girls' education spanned from cultural culture and beliefs, general parental attitude towards female education, societal biases against females' tasks in the house, and certain elements that function within the school.

**METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-method research methodology was employed in the study, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the influence of cultural norms on girls’ dropout rates in public secondary schools in Garissa Township Sub-County. The quantitative phase involved the collection and analysis of numerical data from students through structured questionnaires. This enabled a systematic examination of the frequency and statistical associations of identified variables. Concurrently, the qualitative phase utilized interviews with principals and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and perspectives regarding the challenges girls face in accessing and completing their education.

The target population for this study included five public secondary schools for girls in Garissa Township Sub-County, along with five Heads of Department (HoDs) for guidance and counselling, five principals, and a total of 3,169 female students. To select the sample, the study adopted a purposive sampling technique to include all five principals and all five HoDs responsible for guidance and counselling in girls' public secondary schools within the sub-county. For the student population, a simple random sampling method was employed to select 10% of the total 3,169 girls, resulting in a sample of 317 students.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, and inferentially using Pearson’s Product-Moment (PPM) Correlation Analysis, with the assistance of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 27. The findings were presented using frequency tables. Qualitative data were analysed verbatim, capturing participants’ responses in their original form to preserve the depth of insights.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The research administered 317 questionnaires to respondents, of which 264 were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 83.28%, which is considered good. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2013), a response rate above 70% is deemed good and acceptable for analysis.

This study examined the impact of cultural norms on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township; focusing key components of cultural norms, including gender discrimination, early marriages, initiation into adulthood, and the prevalence of child labor. Descriptive statistics were produced and the findings presented in Table 1.

Table 1-Components of Cultural Norms

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | | | |
|  | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| Gender discrimination | 264 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.8977 | .94374 |
| Early marriages | 264 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0530 | .90048 |
| Initiation into adulthood | 264 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.2045 | 1.05180 |
| Child labour availability | 264 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.0038 | .98080 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 264 |  |  |  |  |

The descriptive statistics for the components of cultural norms, specifically focusing on gender discrimination, early marriages, initiation into adulthood, and child labor availability, as presented in Table 1, were analysed to understand their effects on the educational development of girls. For gender discrimination, the mean score was 2.8977, which suggests a moderate perception of gender inequality in the school environment. As regards early marriages, the mean score was 3.0530, also indicating a moderate occurrence or perception of early marriages in the context studied.

Initiation into adulthood had a mean score for initiation into adulthood of 3.2045, showing that this cultural norm is moderately prevalent, with participants reporting initiation into adulthood as having a moderate impact on educational development. Child labor availability mean score was 3.0038, indicating that child labor is seen as moderately available or prevalent in the community. Overall, the data reveals that while cultural norms like gender discrimination, early marriages, initiation into adulthood, and child labor availability are perceived to have a moderate impact on the educational development of girls, there is notable variation in how individuals perceive and experience these factors. This diversity in responses could suggest differences in the way cultural norms influence educational opportunities and development across different communities or groups.

**CORRELATION ANALYSIS**

Using correlation analysis (at 95% confidence level) and with help of SPSS Version 27, the study tested the null hypothesis

*H0: There is no significant influence of cultural norms on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township*

The results were captured in Table 2.

**Table 2-Pearson’s Correlation Analysis of the Cultural Norms and School Dropout**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | |
|  | | Average Dropout | Cultural norms |
| Average Dropout | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .702\*\* |
| Sig. (2-tailed) |  | .000 |
| N | 264 | 264 |
| Cultural norms | Pearson Correlation | .702\*\* | 1 |
| Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 |  |
| N | 264 | 264 |
| \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). | | | |

The results show that at 0.05 significance level, the probability value (p-value) was less than 0.05 (p<0.01). In that the p-value was less than the 0.05 threshold, then null hypothesis was rejected and so there existed a significant relationship between cultural norms on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township. This meant that there was there was significant influence of cultural norms on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township. The Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was 0.702. Since Pearson’s r was greater than 0.6, then it implied that there was strong positive relationship between the cultural norms and dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township. In that the correlation coefficient (r) was positive, then the effect was positive. That is cultural norms have a statistically positive significant influence on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township This result underscores the importance of addressing cultural factors so as to reduce higher dropout rates among girls in the region.

**QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The response from the interview were analyse using qualitative analysis in which case the Key Interview informants (KII) consistently identified gender discrimination as a barrier to girls’ education. They explained that many households prioritize boys’ education over girls', often perceiving girls' roles as domestic or marital rather than academic. This discrimination manifested in reduced support for girls’ schooling, fewer educational resources allocated to them, and early withdrawal from school to assist at home.

Early marriages were also flagged as a persistent issue, where KII reported that some girls are married off shortly after reaching puberty, curtailing their academic pursuits. These practices are often culturally sanctioned and economically motivated, where the bride price becomes a greater priority than long-term education outcomes.

The cultural practice of initiation into adulthood recorded was cited as rampant, indicating its strong perceived impact. The KII explained that initiation ceremonies were rites of passage that often signalled the end of formal education for girls. After initiation, some communities consider girls ready for adult responsibilities, including marriage and homemaking, which leads to a sharp decline in school attendance.

Additionally, child Labor was explained as contributing to dropout rates. KII revealed that girls are often expected to contribute to household income through domestic work, small-scale vending, or helping in family businesses. This economic necessity, rooted in cultural norms around gender roles, takes precedence over schooling in many homes.

These qualitative findings underscore that cultural norms shape family and community attitudes toward girls’ education, leading to systemic withdrawal and reduced retention of girls in public secondary schools.

**CONCLUSION**

The study revealed a significantly positive impact of cultural norms on dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township, Garissa County, Kenya. The results of the Pearson's Correlation Analysis in this study show a strong positive relationship between the cultural norms and dropout rates among girls in public secondary schools in Garissa Township. Specifically, the correlation coefficient (r) was found to be 0.702, which reflects a significant positive association between the two variables. This suggests that as the influence of cultural norms increases, the dropout rates among girls in these schools also tend to increase. Further, the p-value statistic for the correlation was reported as 0.000, which is well below the standard significance level of 0.05. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the study failed to accept the null hypothesis, thereby concluding that there is a statistically significant relationship between cultural norms and dropout rates. The findings indicated that cultural factors such as gender discrimination, early marriages, initiation into adulthood, and child labor moderately impacted the educational development of girls. Among these, initiation into adulthood had the highest mean score, suggesting a notable presence of this cultural norm, followed by early marriages and child labor. Gender discrimination was also perceived as a moderate concern in the school environment.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Given the moderate prevalence of gender discrimination, early marriages, and initiation into adulthood, it is crucial to engage the community in educational campaigns to challenge harmful cultural norms. These campaigns should focus on promoting the importance of girls’ education and addressing the cultural biases that limit their opportunities. Community leaders, religious leaders, and local influencers can play a key role in shifting attitudes toward girls' education. Early marriage was identified as a significant factor influencing dropout rates. Schools should establish support systems specifically for girls at risk of early marriage, providing counseling services, legal assistance, and safe spaces to discuss concerns. Schools could also collaborate with local organizations that work on preventing child marriage and raising awareness of the long-term benefits of education for girls.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATION**

The findings of the present research emphasise the importance of context-specific, culturally aware, and inclusive educational initiatives in combating the high dropout rates of girls impacted by cultural norms in Garissa Township. Addressing these cultural barriers is critical not only for boosting girls' retention in school, but also for accomplishing larger goals in gender equity and national development.

It also highlights the need to strengthen enforcement of existing laws against early marriage and child Labor.

School-based interventions, such as counselling and gender-responsive practices, are essential to support at-risk girls.

Collaborative efforts among government, NGOs, and local stakeholders can enhance program impact, while data-driven monitoring and policy formulation will ensure targeted and effective interventions.

**SOCIAL IMPLICATION**

The findings would help in developing culturally sensitive community engagement involving elders, religious leaders, and parents to shift harmful norms affecting girls’ education.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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