

# Policy Approaches for Addressing Gender Relations Influencing Girls' Dropout in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools: Perspectives from Naila Kabeer's Social Relations Approach

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## Abstract

The high dropout rate of girls in secondary education remains a significant challenge across Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. While existing research often attributes this trend to limited academic performance and various socio-economic factors, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the role of gender relations. Consequently, there has been minimal application of gender analysis frameworks to fully understand or address the root causes of this issue. This qualitative desk study was guided by Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach (concept 2: Social Relations), in doing a gender analysis of the school environment with the aim of establishing how educational and gender policies address gender relations influencing girls dropout in Zimbabwe secondary schools. Information for the study was obtained from the review of documents selected by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) method. Findings indicate that while policies such as the Education Amendment Act (2020) and the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy (2025-2030) exist, their implementation often fails to address gender relations that safeguard deep-seated patriarchal norms, unequal intra-household resource allocation, and gendered safety concerns that drive dropout. The study recommended an integrative policy framework, which advocates for a multi-level, relational policy intervention that targets the rules, resources, activities, people and power dynamics governing gender relations in educational spaces in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Gender analysis, gender relations, girls' dropout, social relations approach, policy

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## 1. Introduction

Despite near-parity in Zimbabwe primary school enrolment, secondary school completion rates for girls remain concerningly low (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022). Girls have increasingly higher dropout rates than boys where 8,000 more girls than boys left secondary school in 2021, double the disparity in 2019 CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education) and GPE (Global Partnership for Education) Secretariat, 2025; Nkala, 2025). Girls who are in the lowest wealth quintile affected most. For many girls, failing to complete secondary school remains a reality that contributes to poverty and social injustice for women CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education), and GPE Secretariat 2025. Kigotho (2025) reiterates by saying that the low levels of girls' completion of secondary school affects future life choices which perpetuates gender inequality in all sectors of national development.

Research has shown that girls' dropout from secondary school is a multifaceted phenomenon, often reductively attributed to poverty (Nyathi, 2025) and other factors such as patriarchy and school environments that are not gender responsive. The argument in this study is that the continued dropout of girls from secondary school is a reflection of causes of inequality that still need corrective attention. Most of the established causes for dropout have been discussed at length but the problem remains. In some contexts, it is even getting worse. It is the conviction of this study that there is need for educational specialists and policy practitioners to establish the unattended causes and put in place possible redress for the realization of improved retention of girls in secondary schools in Zimbabwe and other countries that are facing a similar problem especially in Southern Africa. This study adopted a gender analysis approach in examining unattended causes of girls' dropout from secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

Gender analysis is a systematic methodology used to identify and understand the differences in the lives of women, men, girls, and boys (Sida, 2015), specifically regarding their roles, power dynamics, and access to

resources (EIGE, n.d; UNDP, 2024). Gender analysis aims at ensuring that policies and projects promote equality rather than reinforcing existing disparities (UN Women, 2022; UNDP, 2016). In this study, the use of a gender lens proved appropriate because it shifts focus from merely counting female participation to analysing the power dynamics, rules, and institutional structures that create inequalities. Gender analysis frameworks are effective for identifying hidden biases in schools, curricula, and policies that perpetuate unequal, gendered outcomes. In this study, the gender analysis tool targeted the examination of educational and gender policies in order to establish how they are failing to bring interventions for reduced dropout of girls. For this cause, the SRA proved the most appropriate, only concept 3 (social relations) of this framework was operationalised.

The primary policy circular regarding pregnant girls in Zimbabwe is the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Policy Circular Minute P35 of 1999 (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 1999) (sometimes referred to as the "Re-entry Policy" or "Guidelines for the Management of Pregnant Girls in Schools". It is considered the "primary" policy circular because it address the issues of pregnancy, one of the main causes of secondary school girl dropout in Zimbabwe. This policy was reinforced and updated by the Education Amendment Act of 2020, (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020), which codified the right of pregnant students to remain in school and return after giving birth. This implies that schools cannot expel students on the grounds of pregnancy. This policy allows pregnant girls to continue with their education until they finish. Such girls are entitled to three months or more of maternity leave, after which they can resume studies. Schools are expected to provide counselling and a non-discriminatory, supportive environment for pregnant learners. This policy facilitates the return of adolescent mothers to school. New regulations (S.I 13 of 2025) further emphasise that schools must provide psychosocial support to pregnant pupils. The other policy analysed in this study is the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy (ZNGP2025-2030). Only section 3.6 of the ZNGP was subjected to gender analysis. This section is entitled: Equal Access to Education Innovation and Skills Development. The aim of this section is to eliminate discrimination by enhancing equal access to education and training for men, women, girls and boys (ZNGP, 2025-2030).

Recent research findings and government data shared by Angeline Gata, the then Deputy Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe, show that from 2024–2025 the secondary school dropout rates for girls in Zimbabwe remained high despite various initiatives put in place to address the issue. Observations made by Chinyoka, & Museba (2024) reiterates these observations. While policy innovations allow pregnant girls to stay in school, nearly 50,000 learners dropped out in 2024, with 3,324 girls specifically leaving secondary school due to pregnancy in the first half of that year alone (Change Radio Zimbabwe, 2024; MoPSE, 2025). Systemic barriers continue to undermine efforts to address girls' dropout. Only 14% of girls complete upper secondary school, a figure that collapses to 1% for the poorest quintile, as economic hardship forces families to prioritize school fees for boys or marry off daughters for financial relief (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2024). Furthermore, the CAMFED Early Warning System identifies that long travel distances (up to 22km) and inadequate menstrual hygiene infrastructure remain primary drivers of dropout (CAMFED, 2025). Besides these mentioned causes, this study aimed at finding out how gender relations influence the persistent dropout and how policy is addressing these social relations of gender.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1. Naila Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach*

This gender analysis of policy was guided by Naila Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach (SRA) Only concept 3 (social relations) was operationalised. In this gender analysis framework, 'social relations' imply the structural relationships that create and reproduce systemic differences in the positioning of different groups of people. Such relationships, determine whom people are, what roles and responsibilities they play, and what claims they can make? Social relations determine rights, and the control that people have over their lives and those of others (March, Symith & Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Social relations produce crosscutting inequalities, which ascribe each individual a position in the structure and hierarchy of their society (March et al 2005). In line with recent scholarship, the SRA has been suggested as a critical lens for examining how institutions perpetuate disadvantage across micro, meso, and macro levels. This gender analysis framework also challenges ideological neutrality of educational institutions. Kabeer (2020), is of the view that gender inequality is a structural issue embedded within five interconnected institutional dimensions of rules (formal policies and informal norms), resources (distribution and access), people (socially defined roles and identities), activities (division of labour), and power (the overarching force shaping relations) through which

inequality is reproduced. The use of this gender analysis tool is further justified by the need to shift attention from blaming girls for dropping out to examining institutional practices that marginalise them. For instance, restrictive re-admission policies for pregnant students (rules), unequal access to scholarships or sanitary products (resources), expectations of girls' domestic responsibilities (activities and roles), and exploitative teacher-student relations (power) collectively constrain participation. This perspective emphasises transforming structures of inequality rather than merely addressing their symptoms.

### **3. Research Objective**

The main aim of this study was to establish the extent to which current Zimbabwean education and gender policies effectively address the relational gender dynamics driving girls' dropout in secondary schools.

### **4. Methodology**

This study is structured as a qualitative desk study. Information for the study was obtained from the review of documents selected by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) method. The review process is represented in Figure 1. The study obtained information relating to gender and educational policies from online databases. These databases included Google scholar, Taylor and Francis Online and Taylor & Francis Open. The search was done using keywords from the research objectives.

The data collection process was carried out manually based on content analysis such as article type, journal name, year of the publication topic, title and research methodology. The inclusion criteria (IC1), that guided the preparation of the systematic literature review was as follows;

- i) The study used accessible and original peer reviewed research articles which are written in English and covering issues on gender and education policies
- ii) The peer reviewed documents were selected from the period 2021 to 2026 and
- iii) Studies that focussed on Zimbabwe.

IC2 (Inclusion Criteria 2) focussed on published work on education and gender policies and how they address the gender relational dynamics in secondary schools. From this literature, the intention was to establish how policies interrogate and address gender issues that negatively affect girls' retention in secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

From the identified literature, the initial sample had 78 articles based on abstract and key words. The articles that were not opening full content were 35. After reading, the entire content the study chose 24 articles while 10 rated inappropriate in line with IC1 & IC2. Finally, the total number of articles used in systematic review was 14 and these were used to discuss the gender relational dynamics that influence girls' dropout from secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

### **5. Literature Search**

Databases Used: Taylor and Francis Online; Taylor and Francis Open and Google Scholar

Key words: "secondary school girls' dropout"; gender relations"; social relations approach" and gender and education policy"

Below is the literature search flow diagram.

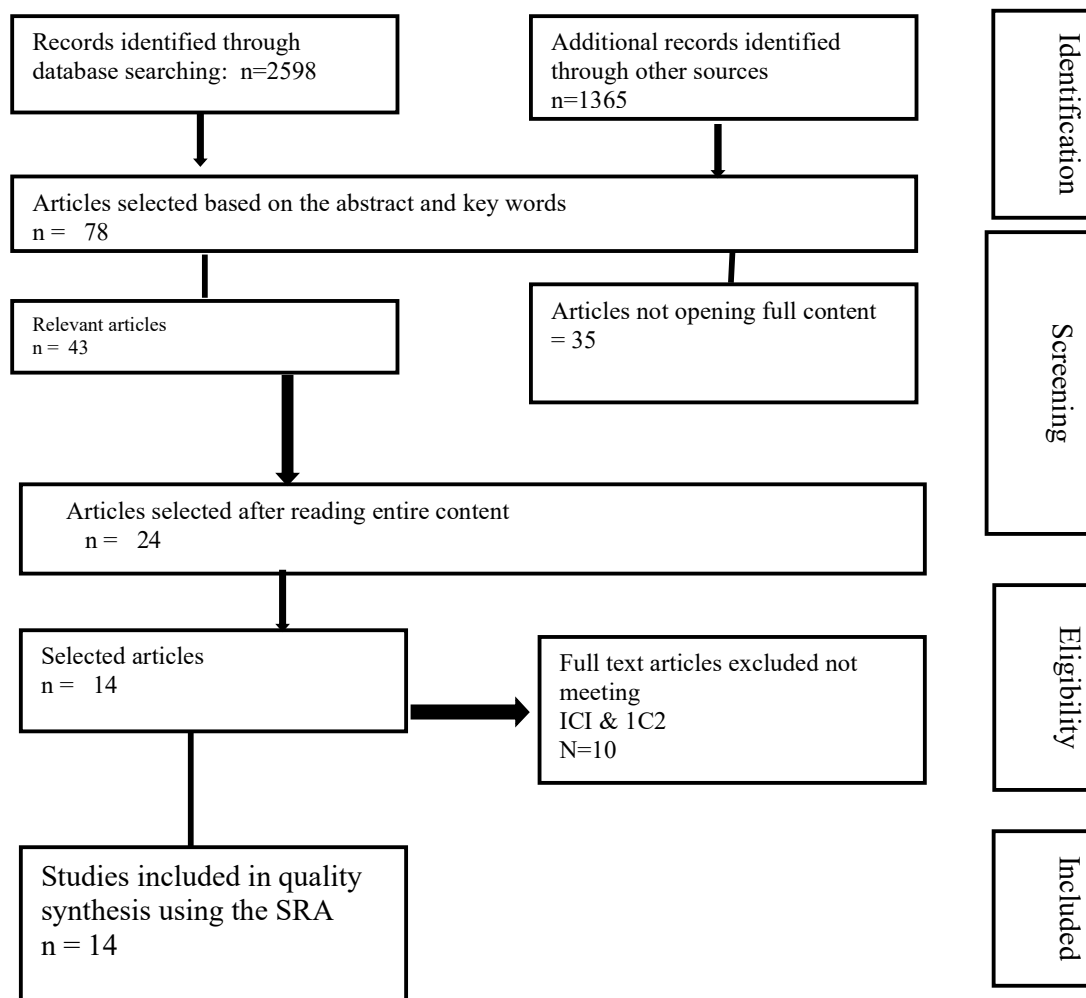


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram  
 Source: Research Process

## 6. Discussion of Findings

Findings from the study show that there is a persistent gap between the transformative intent of gender policies, and the institutional realities that shape girls' educational experiences in Zimbabwe secondary schools. Despite the existence of global, regional, and national frameworks promoting gender equality, evidence consistently shows that entrenched social relations and institutional practices continue to reinforce dropout. Using Naila Kabeer's Social Relations Approach (SRA), concept 2, the findings are organised around the household, community and school, each of which contributes to sustaining gender relations that influence girls' dropout in secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

### 6.1 Household Institution: Patriarchal Rules versus Policy Expectations

The study established that there is limited research done on gender relations as a cause of dropout of girls from educational institutions. Evidence gathered in this study shows that relations of gender underlie gender socialisation that takes part in the family, the school or the community. These gender relations are situated in patriarchy, so they promote bias against females. For example, in case of scarce resources, some families prefer to send the boy to school and not the girl child. Another example is that gender relations in the family leave

domestic and caregiving responsibilities mainly for girls.

Gender relations dictate who should do what? Where? With what resources? For which outcome? The duties and responsibilities of care giving and domestic work disadvantage girls more than it does for boys. These duties take a lot of girls' time and they are labour intensive, which takes away girls' time for homework and personal study. Poor preparation for school activities leads to poor performance at school, increased absenteeism, and reduced motivation.

Observations from this study show that protective policies and programs designed to support vulnerable learners are frequently undermined by entrenched household norms that are superimposed on oppressive gender relations. Overall, household-level gender relations emerged as one of the most significant barriers to girls' sustained participation in education, showing how informal rules override formal/ policy recommendations for access to education for all.

Evidence across the reviewed studies highlighted that community norms linking female honour to sexuality perpetuate stigma around menstruation and pregnancy. Findings established that girls face unsafe school environments, including sexual and gender based harassment on the way to school especially those who travel long distances to school. Early marriages come as an outcome of oppressive gender relations that characterise communal relations. The family and community institutions therefore reinforce educational exclusion by normalising practices and communal relations of gender that directly contradict formal rights-based commitments as dictated by policy.

### *6.2 School Institution: Bureaucratic Inequality and Policy Implementation Gaps*

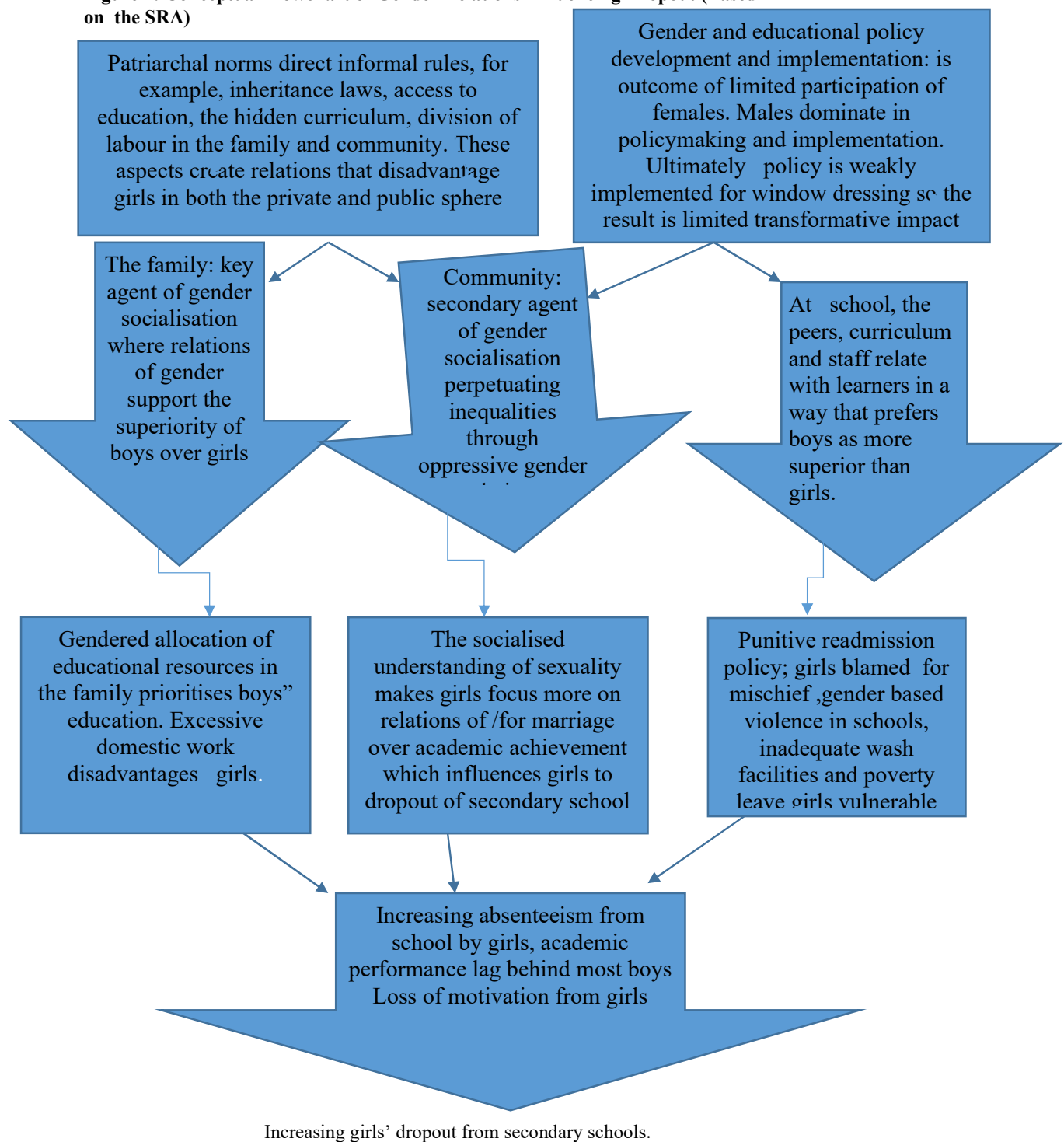
The study established that schools often reproduce inequality through bureaucratic processes that are oblivious to oppressive gender relations that keep girls as subordinate to boys and men. Policies guaranteeing the right to education for pregnant and married girls fail to articulate how gender relations in the school and community contribute to girls' dropout from the school. Resource shortages were a recurring theme, particularly inadequate water and sanitation, for hygiene (WASH) facilities. These shortages create environments where girls felt excluded or unsafe. Curricula that failed to challenge gender stereotypes further reinforced harmful informal rules that perpetuate oppressive gender relations that victimise girls. As a result, schools are not functioning as transformative spaces but instead act as sites where inequality is reproduced, neutralising the intent of progressive gender equality initiatives.

### *6.3 The missing link in policy commitments*

The study established that Zimbabwe has adopted 'progressive' gender and educational policies and strategies that articulate strong commitments to gender equality in education. However, gender inequality in education continues to prevail. Policy is addressing some of the causes of inequality while remaining oblivious of how such factors as gender relations in the community and the school influence girls to leave school prematurely. The underlying cause for this reality is that, policy is failing to adopt an all-encompassing approach in addressing causes of gender inequality in education, thereby, failing to influence change for improved gender equality in education. The recently introduced Zimbabwe National Gender Policy (2025-2030) section 3.6 states that there are deep-rooted gender disparities in access, retention, and completion particularly at upper secondary and tertiary level. Policy speaks of provision for equal access to education and training for men, women, girls and boys by advancing a comprehensive and inclusive education agenda (National Gender Policy 2025) but it does not show how it will be achieved. Like in previous versions, the ZNGP (2025-2030) is rather too general by giving a taken for granted (neutral approach) to issues of gender inequality. Policy is failing to give the gender specific causes and solutions of inequality. When policy fails to give executable solutions to gender problems, Kabeer (1994) explains them as gender blind policies for they perpetuate existing inequalities. Gender relations in schools take away girls' voice and it limits their academic potential, ultimately they dropout. The general approach that characterise gender and educational policies in addressing oppressive gender relations perpetuates various inequalities in education and other sectors of development.

The diagram below demonstrate how gender relations are influenced by patriarchal norms, weak gender and education policy implementation in disadvantaging girls.

**Figure 2: Conceptual Flowchart of Gender Relations Influencing Dropout (Based on the SRA)**



## 7. Conclusions

This systematic review, guided by the PRISMA model and framed through Naila Kabeer's SRA, demonstrated that girls' dropout in Zimbabwean secondary schools is not simply a matter of poverty or individual choice but a systemic outcome of intersecting gender relations in secondary schools and communities. Household norms continue to prioritise boys' education and burden girls with domestic responsibilities. Community practices such as early marriage and stigma around menstruation reinforce exclusion. Schools, despite progressive legislation, often reproduce inequality through oppressive gender relations that manifest in punitive practices, inadequate resources, and pedagogy used in gender-biased curricula. Despite the fact that government institutions articulate strong commitments to gender equality, these commitments fail to deliver transformative change due to existing gender relations that underlie relationships in the school and the community.

## 8. Recommendations

Dropout is a systemic issue requiring a multi-level, relational framework. Zimbabwe should adopt an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses household norms, community practices, school environments, and state/market structures. This means combining legal enforcement, resource investment, curriculum reform, and community engagement to developing mental cognitions that challenge patriarchal approaches in all social relationships in the community and the school.

## 9. Suggestions for further research

This study examined the school environment through a gender lens to determine how policy addresses gender relations influencing girls' dropout in secondary schools. Only one tenet of the SRA guided the study. To uncover the subtle, often overlooked drivers of secondary school girls' dropout, the study recommends that future research utilise all tenets of Kabeer's (1994) Social Relations Approach (SRA), in a single study, to further examine secondary school environments for factors that continue to push girls out of school.

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