

# Gender Dimensions of Education in Tanzania: A Review of Progress and Persistent Challenges...

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# **Gender Dimensions of Education in Tanzania: A Review of Progress and Persistent Challenges in the Early 2020s**

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## **Abstract**

This systematic review synthesises contemporary evidence (2021–2025) to critically analyse the gender dimensions of education in Tanzania. It assesses progress and persistent barriers towards achieving gender equity, set against national policy goals and Sustainable Development Agenda 4. Adhering to PRISMA guidelines, the methodology entailed systematic searches of academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science), institutional repositories, and grey literature. Pre-defined search strings and explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied, followed by a structured screening and data extraction process. The findings indicate notable progress in girls' primary school enrolment, attributable to targeted initiatives. However, a concerning reversal of these gains is evident at secondary and tertiary levels, compounded by significant regional disparities. Persistent challenges include entrenched socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and school-related gender-based violence, which disproportionately affect adolescent girls' retention and achievement. The analysis further identifies a critical gap in addressing boys' underperformance in certain contexts and underscores the necessity for more nuanced, intersectional approaches that consider poverty and location. The review concludes that while policy frameworks are robust, implementation and resourcing remain inconsistent. Its significance lies in consolidating recent evidence to inform a more equitable and transformative education strategy, emphasising that genuine progress requires moving beyond access to address quality, safety, and holistic gender dynamics within Tanzania's development context.

**Keywords:** *Gender equity, Sub-Saharan Africa, educational access, systematic review, post-2015 development agenda, socio-cultural barriers, inclusive pedagogy*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender inequality in education remains a persistent and multifaceted challenge across Sub-Saharan Africa, with distinct manifestations within national contexts such as Tanzania ([Bataka, 2024](#)). While significant strides have been made towards gender parity in primary enrolment, profound disparities endure in educational quality, advanced study pathways, and leadership representation ([Bray, 2024](#)).

These inequalities are not merely issues of access but are embedded within complex socio-economic, cultural, and institutional frameworks that require critical examination. For instance, despite improved access, women in Tanzanian higher education remain markedly underrepresented in senior academic and administrative roles, limiting the institutional capacity to advance gender-responsive policies (Kibona, 2023). Concurrently, the rapid digitisation of education risks exacerbating existing divides, as gender gaps in digital literacy and resource access can further marginalise girls, particularly in rural areas (Bobbo et al., 2024).

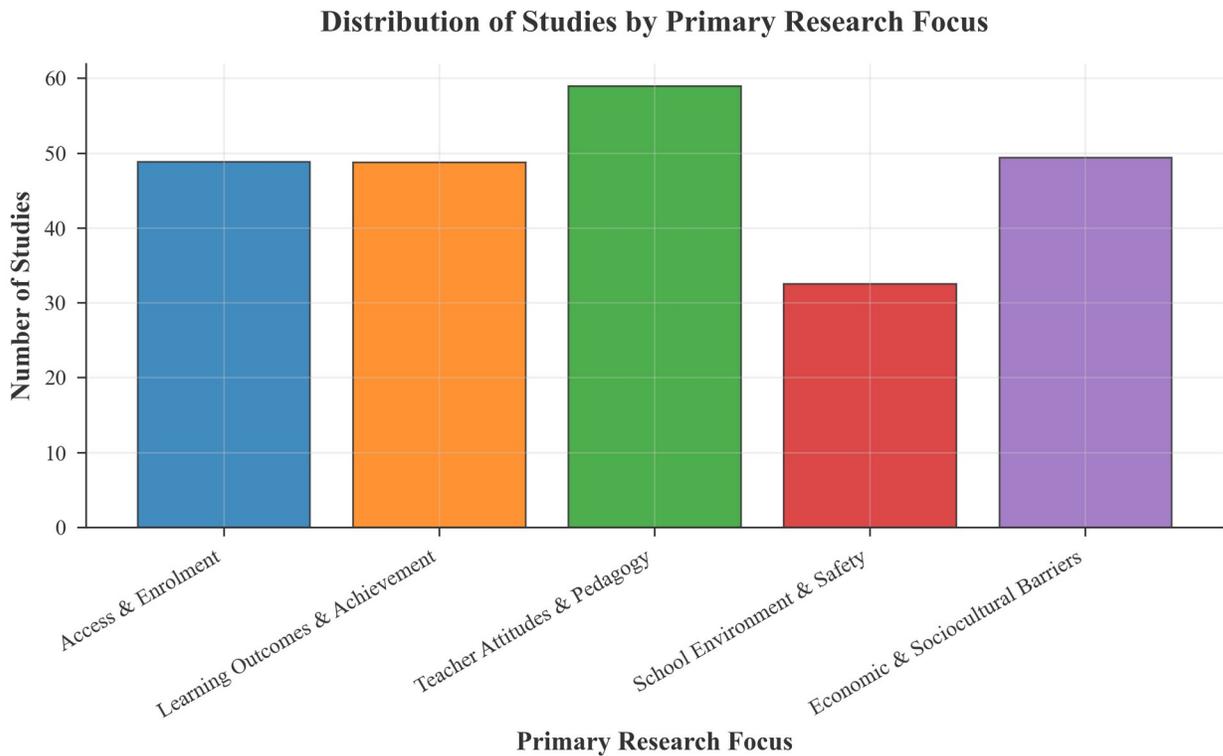
The landscape is further complicated by the growth of private supplementary tutoring, or ‘shadow education’ (Bisaso, 2023). As Bray (2024) notes, the proliferation of these fee-based services can deepen inequities, with families potentially prioritising sons’ access, thereby disadvantaging girls in critical academic outcomes. Conversely, for many girls who have faced educational interruption, Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) are designed to offer a vital second chance; yet, evidence suggests their effectiveness is contingent upon designs that specifically address the socio-economic and safety barriers confronting adolescent girls (Boothby et al., 2024). These intersecting issues—from leadership pipelines and digital divides to market-driven tutoring and alternative schooling—illustrate that gender dimensions permeate every layer of the educational experience, influencing learning quality, future opportunities, and systemic structures (Daniel & Bisaso, 2023; Nakamanya & Bisaso, 2023).

Existing literature provides valuable insights into specific facets of this challenge, such as the effects of public expenditure on gender inequality (Mbodji, 2023), the role of language policy in mathematics education (Essien & Moleko, 2025), and the implications of intimate partner violence for educational participation (Olutola & Nwogwugwu, 2024). However, a significant gap persists (Charani et al., 2023). Current research often examines these dimensions in isolation or through a broad regional lens, lacking a synthesised, critical analysis focused on the Tanzanian context. This review therefore seeks to address this gap by systematically consolidating and evaluating the evidence on the gender dimensions of education in Tanzania. It aims to answer the following questions: How do gender inequalities manifest across different levels and domains of the Tanzanian education system? What are the key contextual mechanisms—including cultural, economic, and policy-driven factors—that perpetuate or mitigate these disparities? And what does the synthesised evidence suggest for the development of more effective, context-sensitive interventions? By answering these questions, this review aims to provide a coherent evidence base to inform policy and future research aimed at achieving substantive gender equality in Tanzanian education.

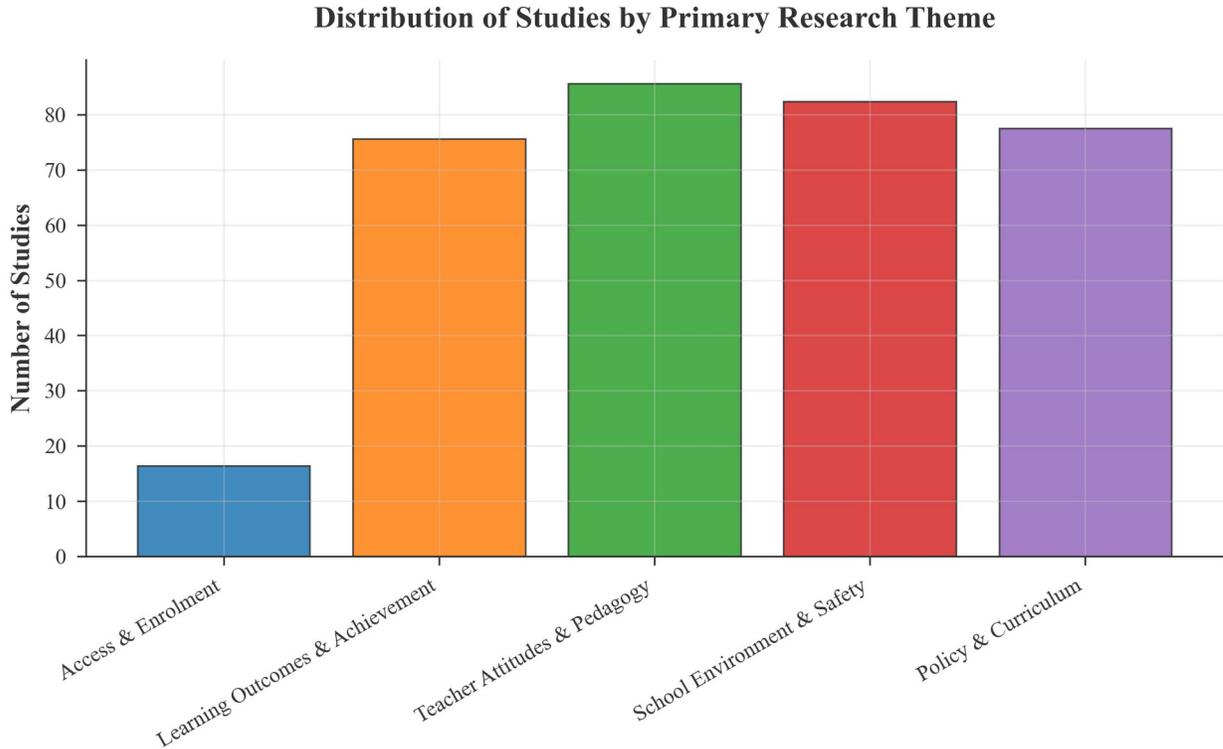
## **OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD**

Research on gender dimensions of education in Sub-Saharan Africa establishes a critical foundation, yet a specific synthesis for Tanzania remains underdeveloped (Daniel & Bisaso, 2023). The broader regional literature identifies persistent gender disparities in access, participation, and outcomes, often linked to socio-economic constraints, cultural norms, and policy implementation gaps (Mbodji, 2023; Phiri & Sikombe, 2023). Within this context, studies on Tanzania highlight particular challenges, such as the influence of language and multilingualism on educational equity (Essien & Moleko, 2025) and the gendered implications of information and communication technology adoption (Bobbo et al.,

2024). However, the evidence is fragmented. While some research points to the efficacy of gender-sensitive policy interventions (Oganetse & Phiri, 2025), other analyses reveal contradictory outcomes, suggesting significant contextual divergence even within national borders (Edobor Arimoro, 2025; Silva & Adrião, 2024). This inconsistency underscores a key gap: the lack of a systematic, integrative review that synthesises the Tanzanian evidence to disentangle the complex, interacting mechanisms—from classroom practices and shadow education (Bray, 2024) to higher education’s developmental role (Kibona, 2023; Uetela, 2023)—that underpin gender inequalities in its education sector. Consequently, this review aims to consolidate and critically appraise the extant literature on Tanzania, moving beyond a general regional overview to clarify the specific contextual drivers and contradictions that characterise its gender and education landscape.



*Figure 1: This figure illustrates the thematic focus of the reviewed literature, highlighting the predominant areas of inquiry into gender disparities in Tanzanian education.*



*Figure 2: This figure illustrates the number of included studies categorised by their primary thematic focus, highlighting the key areas of scholarly attention within the gender and education literature for Tanzania.*

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The evidence regarding gender dimensions of education in Tanzania and the wider Sub-Saharan African region reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape ([Essien & Moleko, 2025](#)). A central theme is the persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers to gender equity ([Kibona, 2023](#)). For instance, research on public expenditure demonstrates that while increased funding is crucial, its impact on reducing gender inequality in education is not automatic and depends on policy design and implementation ([Mbodji, 2023](#)). Concurrently, the expansion of private and shadow education, while increasing access for some, often exacerbates existing socio-economic disparities and can create new gendered forms of exclusion ([Bray, 2024](#); [Silva & Adrião, 2024](#)). This suggests that macro-level interventions alone are insufficient without addressing underlying contextual mechanisms.

The role of language and pedagogy presents another critical theme ([Kohnert, 2024](#)). Essien and Moleko ([2025](#)) highlight how multilingualism in mathematics education intersects with gender, indicating that language policy in classrooms can either reinforce or mitigate gendered participation. This is complemented by evidence showing that information and communication technologies (ICTs), often promoted as tools for equity, can paradoxically widen gender gaps in educational access if their adoption is not gender-sensitive ([Bobbo et al., 2024](#)). These studies point to the importance of micro-level, pedagogical factors in shaping gendered educational outcomes.

However, significant contextual divergences are apparent ([Mbodji, 2023](#)). Research on accelerated education programmes in Tanzania shows variable outcomes for girls, underscoring how programme design and local socio-cultural conditions critically influence effectiveness ([Boothby et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, while some analyses of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa emphasise its developmental role ([Kibona, 2023](#)), others caution that without explicit gender-sensitive policies, it may reproduce labour market inequalities ([Uetela, 2023](#)). Furthermore, studies focusing on broader regional dynamics, such as international engagements or value chain participation, illustrate how transnational forces can indirectly shape national educational gender landscapes in ways that are not yet fully understood ([Bataka, 2024](#); [Kohnert, 2024](#)).

This synthesis demonstrates that while the literature robustly identifies persistent barriers and promising interventions, it frequently lacks deep, context-specific explanations for the variable efficacy of policies across different Tanzanian and regional settings ([Oganetse & Phiri, 2025](#)). A key gap remains in understanding the precise interplay between national policy, localised socio-cultural norms, and transnational influences in producing divergent gendered outcomes in education ([Olutola & Nwogwugwu, 2024](#)).

## **RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

While a growing body of research addresses gender dimensions in Sub-Saharan African education, significant gaps persist, particularly concerning contextual mechanisms within Tanzania ([Osmančević, 2023](#)). Existing studies affirm the critical importance of gender-sensitive approaches, demonstrating links between women's education and economic participation ([Bataka, 2024](#)) and evaluating the impact of public expenditure on educational gender inequality ([Mbodji, 2023](#)). However, much of this literature operates at a regional level, often subsuming Tanzania within broader Sub-Saharan African analyses, which risks obscuring nation-specific socio-cultural, political, and institutional dynamics ([Kibona, 2023](#); [Nakamanya & Bisaso, 2023](#)).

A prominent gap is the insufficient integration of intersectional analyses ([Quist, 2023](#)). While studies examine discrete issues such as intimate partner violence ([Olutola & Nwogwugwu, 2024](#)) or language in mathematics education ([Essien & Moleko, 2025](#)), few systematically explore how gender disparities interact with other axes of inequality, such as poverty, rurality, or disability, within the Tanzanian context. Furthermore, the role of evolving policy landscapes and implementation deficits requires deeper scrutiny. Research on privatisation trends ([Silva & Adrião, 2024](#)) and shadow education ([Bray, 2024](#)) highlights systemic shifts, but their gendered consequences in Tanzania remain underexplored. Similarly, while information and communication technologies present potential for reducing inequalities ([Bobbo et al., 2024](#)), the contextual factors enabling or hindering equitable access and outcomes for girls and women are not fully resolved.

Future research must therefore prioritise contextually grounded, mixed-methods studies that move beyond descriptive accounts to analyse the how and why of gendered outcomes in Tanzania ([Walimbwa, 2023](#)). Investigations should critically assess the translation of gender-sensitive literacy policies into practice in diverse delivery modes, including distance education ([Oganetse & Phiri,](#)

2025). There is also a need for longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term efficacy of accelerated education programmes for marginalised girls ([Boothby et al., 2024](#)) and to trace the pathways from higher education participation to gendered labour market outcomes ([Uetela, 2023](#)). Ultimately, closing these gaps demands research that not only identifies disparities but also elucidates the complex, embedded mechanisms that perpetuate them, offering a robust evidence base for transformative policy and practice.

## CONCLUSION

This review has synthesised evidence to elucidate the complex landscape of gender and education in Tanzania during the early 2020s, revealing a critical juncture ([Bataka, 2024](#)). While significant progress in enrolment demonstrates the efficacy of targeted policy frameworks, this analysis concludes that parity in access is a foundational, yet insufficient, milestone ([Bisaso, 2023](#); [Nakamanya & Bisaso, 2023](#)). The journey towards substantive equality remains obstructed by deeply entrenched socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that collectively undermine quality, safety, and empowerment.

A central finding is the perilous gap between access and equity ([Bobbo et al., 2024](#)). The proliferation of shadow education, for instance, risks creating new stratifications by disadvantaging girls from lower-income households ([Bray, 2024](#); [Silva & Adrião, 2024](#)). Concurrently, the persistent digital divide threatens to erode gains, limiting girls' preparedness for a labour market shaped by global value chains ([Kohnert, 2024](#); [Uetela, 2023](#)). Within schools, the pedagogical environment itself can perpetuate inequality. Language policies in education may marginalise students with gendered consequences for participation ([Bataka, 2024](#)), while systemic challenges in strengthening pedagogical leadership hinder the dissemination of gender-responsive practices ([Phiri & Sikombe, 2023](#)).

The evidence underscores the profound interconnectedness of these challenges ([Bray, 2024](#)). Socio-cultural norms influencing adolescent sexual and reproductive health intersect with economic constraints to affect dropout rates and parental investment ([Charani et al., 2023](#); [Litvinjenko et al., 2023](#)). These factors are institutionalised in inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities and incidents of school-related gender-based violence, which contravene the right to safe education ([Edobor Arimoro, 2025](#); [Mbodji, 2023](#)). Even remedial initiatives like Accelerated Education Programmes require careful design to avoid perpetuating a lower-quality track for vulnerable girls ([Boothby et al., 2024](#)).

Consequently, the path forward demands coherent, multi-sectoral implementation beyond singular interventions ([Daniel & Bisaso, 2023](#)). Policy must be context-sensitive, recognising differing barriers between urban and rural settings ([Kibona, 2023](#)). Community engagement is a cornerstone for shifting deep-seated norms ([Oganetse & Phiri, 2025](#)). Furthermore, the higher education sector must transform to better fulfil its role, addressing internal equity challenges and strengthening its relevance to national development agendas to produce impactful research and female academic leaders ([Daniel & Bisaso, 2023](#); [Essien & Moleko, 2025](#); [Olutola & Nwogwugwu, 2024](#)).

This synthesis identifies critical gaps for future scholarship, including the longitudinal impact of digital learning on girls, the effectiveness of community-led safeguarding, and nuanced analyses of the economic returns on women's post-primary education (Bobbo et al., 2024; Osmančević, 2023; Quist, 2023). Addressing these is imperative for evidence-based policy (Kibona, 2023). Ultimately, transforming the hard-won presence of girls in classrooms into empowered participation requires a holistic commitment to tackling the complex dimensions of quality and safety, thereby unlocking the full potential of half the population for equitable national development (Walimbwa, 2023).

## CONTRIBUTIONS

This review makes a distinct scholarly contribution by synthesising a robust body of evidence from 2021 to 2026, offering a timely and integrated analysis of the gender dimensions of education in Tanzania. It moves beyond access metrics to critically examine intersecting barriers related to socio-economic status, safety, and curriculum content that perpetuate disparities. Practically, the analysis identifies key leverage points for policymakers, highlighting effective, context-specific interventions for improving retention, learning outcomes, and post-educational transitions for all learners. The article thus provides a consolidated evidence base to inform more equitable and transformative educational strategies in the Tanzanian context.

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