Reversing Gender Gap in Schooling and Child Protection: Addressing Boy Vulnerabilities in Tanzania

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Abstract: This study examined the emerging gender gap in schooling and child protection in Tanzania, where notable gains in girls' empowerment contrast with the growing marginalization of boys. Despite global and national initiatives advancing girls' rights, boys continue to experience significant yet under-recognized vulnerabilities, including sexual abuse, child labor, emotional distress, and school dropout. Guided by Gender and Development (GAD) theory, a qualitative multiple case study design was employed across Arusha, Kilimanjaro, and Manyara regions. A total of 270 participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives: 90 from Arusha, 100 from Kilimanjaro, and 80 from Manyara, representing students, teachers, parents/guardians, social welfare officers, police officers, NGO representatives, government officials, and community leaders. This strategy enabled comparisons across urban and rural contexts while highlighting gendered experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis and analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that interventions such as scholarships, mentorship, financial support, and safe accommodation have significantly improved girls' enrollment, retention, and wellbeing. Conversely, boys' vulnerabilities remain largely overlooked due to rigid masculinity norms, community perceptions, and girl-centered policies. School practices exacerbate this imbalance, as girls' absenteeism prompts immediate intervention while boys' challenges often go unaddressed. The study concludes that sustainable gender equity requires inclusive policies and balanced interventions addressing risks for both sexes. Recommendations include gender-inclusive policy reforms, targeted support for boys, equitable school monitoring, community sensitization on harmful gender norms, and longitudinal research to guide evidence-based interventions.

Keywords: Gender Gap, Child Protection, Boys' Vulnerabilities, Girls' Empowerment, Schooling, Tanzania

1. Introduction

Globally, the empowerment and protection of girls have remained central in human rights and development discourse since the late twentieth century (Zickafoose et al., 2024). A major milestone was the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, where 189 governments adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, calling for the elimination of violence against women and girls and equal educational opportunities (UN Women, 1995). These commitments informed large-scale international and national initiatives aimed at redressing historical gender inequalities. Recent international frameworks including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Generation Equality Forum, and UNESCO's 2023 Gender Strategy continue to reinforce girls' rights, emphasizing education, protection, and participation (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Over the past three decades, these global efforts have led to measurable progress. School enrollment for girls has risen, child marriage has declined in many regions, and

awareness of gender-based violence has increased (UN Women, 2025; UNICEF, 2022; UNESCO, 2025a) Across Africa, regional instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child have strengthened obligations to protect girls' rights. East African governments, including Tanzania, have aligned national policies with global commitments by integrating gender equity targets into education, health, and child protection systems.

In Tanzania, policies such as the Education and Training Policy (2014) and the National Strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Children (2016–2021) have prioritized the girl child due to her historical vulnerability to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and school exclusion (Reshi & Sudha, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). As a result, substantial investments from government, civil society, and donors have supported girls' school enrollment, menstrual health, safety, and community sensitization.

However, emerging research highlights that boys and young men also face significant yet under-recognized vulnerabilities. Global evidence shows that approximately one in seven men experienced childhood sexual abuse, but cases involving boys often remain unreported due to stigma and gender norms that discourage boys from expressing vulnerability (Koech et al., 2023). Recent African studies increasingly document boys' exposure to sexual exploitation, emotional neglect, child labor, and school dropout, revealing structural blind spots in current protection systems (UNESCO, 2025b; Desmond et al., 2024).

Using GAD theory, the introduction of boys' vulnerabilities does not undermine gains made toward empowering girls; rather, it strengthens the broader aim of promoting gender-inclusive development. GAD emphasizes relational analysis how social structures create unequal outcomes for both females and males and therefore supports a more balanced understanding of child protection.

This evolving landscape demonstrates the need for gender-responsive frameworks that address vulnerabilities across both sexes. Positioning boys' protection needs alongside girls' does not diminish the legitimacy of girls' empowerment; instead, it advances the principle of ensuring that no child is left behind.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite notable progress in promoting girls' rights globally and nationally, current child-protection frameworks remain heavily skewed toward addressing the vulnerabilities of girls while under-recognizing the risks faced by boys. While prioritizing girls has been essential due to historical gender discrimination, the growing evidence reveals that boys also experience significant levels of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (UNESCO, 2025b, UNESCO, 2024; Zickafoose et al., 2024). However, entrenched cultural norms discourage boys from disclosing abuse, and stereotypes associating vulnerability exclusively with girls contribute to systemic underreporting.

This imbalance has produced a protection gap in which boys' needs are insufficiently defined, inadequately monitored, and rarely targeted in policy interventions. Research highlights the rising prevalence of boys' school dropout, involvement in hazardous labor, sexual exploitation, and mental health challenges yet these issues remain peripheral to mainstream gender agendas (UNESCO, 2025a; Mtebe & Mkumbo, 2024; UNICEF, 2023). Without an expanded understanding of gender vulnerabilities, policy frameworks risk reinforcing a one-sided model of protection that excludes boys.

The significance of this problem lies in its long-term implications for child welfare, educational equity, and social development. When boys' vulnerabilities are ignored, unaddressed trauma can contribute to poor educational attainment, delinquency, cycles of violence, and reduced future opportunities. Therefore, a more inclusive, evidence-based approach is urgently needed to ensure that both boys and girls receive equitable protection and support.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Underpinning

This study is grounded in Gender and Development (GAD) theory, which offers a robust framework for analyzing gender relations and addressing structural inequalities (Moser, 1993). Unlike Women in Development (WID), which focused primarily on integrating women into existing systems, GAD interrogates the underlying power dynamics, social norms, and institutional structures that shape gender roles (Cornwall, 2016; Razavi & Miller, 1995). GAD positions both women and men as active agents within gender systems and recognizes that development processes must transform unequal relations rather than simply incorporate disadvantaged groups (Elson & Seth, 2019).

Recent literature emphasizes that GAD provides a relational lens useful for identifying emerging vulnerabilities among boys without minimizing the marginalization historically faced by girls (Mtebe & Mkumbo, 2024); UNESCO, 2025a). In the Tanzanian context, GAD's focus on social structures, cultural norms, and shifting gender expectations is especially relevant for understanding how girl-centered

interventions may unintentionally create gaps in the protection of boys.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Globally, the women's and girls' empowerment agenda has gained prominence since the Beijing Conference (1995), influencing policies focused on education, protection, and participation (UN Women, 2025). Evidence from 2020–2025 shows continued progress: improvements in girls' enrollment, reductions in harmful traditional practices, and increased investment in safe schools (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023; UN Women, 2025).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, targeted interventions such as scholarships, mentoring, menstrual hygiene support and safe spaces have effectively reduced barriers faced by girls (Agyeman et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2024); UN Women, 2025). However, emerging research reveals persistent and sometimes growing vulnerabilities among boys. Studies indicate that boys increasingly face school dropout, hazardous work, peer violence, and emotional neglect (Zickafoose et al., 2024; Desmond et al., 2024). Despite these trends, gender policies continue to disproportionately focus on girls, creating an imbalance highlighted by several scholars (Xu et al., 2022; Koech et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025b).

Boys are also less likely to report abuse due to masculinity norms and fear of stigma (Xu et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Recent movements such as *#MeTooGarçons* provide evidence of systemic neglect of male survivors, highlighting the urgent need for gender-inclusive policies. Research in Tanzania similarly documents rising cases of sexual exploitation, dropout due to poverty, and societal expectations that require boys to be resilient (UNICEF, 2023; Mtebe & Mkumbo, 2024).

African scholarship remains limited in examining boys' experiences within empowerment frameworks, revealing a significant knowledge gap. Guided by GAD theory, this study addresses this gap by analyzing relational gender dynamics and emphasizing the need for inclusive, contextually grounded interventions.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the emerging gender gap in schooling and child protection in Tanzania. A multiple case study design was employed, involving the Arusha, Kilimanjaro, and Manyara regions. This design was selected because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex, context-dependent phenomena across multiple sites, capturing variations in cultural norms, educational practices, and empowerment initiatives (Thomas, 2016). Both urban and rural areas were included to provide a comprehensive understanding of contextual influences.

A total of 270 participants were purposively selected from the three regions to provide rich, diverse perspectives on gendered experiences. In Arusha, 90 participants were involved, including 20 students (10 boys and 10 girls), 15 teachers, 30 parents/guardians, 2 social welfare officers, 5 police officers, 10 NGO representatives, 5 government officials, and 3 community leaders. Kilimanjaro included 100 participants, comprising 20 students (10 boys and 10 girls), 15 teachers, 40 parents/guardians, 3 social welfare officers, 7 police officers, 5 NGO representatives, 5 government officials, and 5 community leaders. In Manyara, 80 participants were engaged, including 20 students (10 boys and 10 girls), 20 parents/guardians, 10 teachers, 3 social welfare officers, 8 police officers, 5 NGO representatives, 5 government officials, and 9 community leaders. Participants were purposively selected due to their direct involvement in, or knowledge of, gender empowerment and child protection initiatives. The sample size was determined based on the principle of information-rich cases and practical considerations of accessibility and diversity across stakeholder groups (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Interviews targeted social welfare officers, police officers, NGO representatives, community leaders, and government officials to explore policies, practices, and barriers to boys' empowerment. FGDs were conducted with students, teachers, and parents to understand cultural and contextual factors influencing girls' empowerment and boys' vulnerabilities. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis using an iterative process to identify patterns, recurring themes, and contextual factors affecting empowerment and gender balance. Coding was conducted inductively, starting with open codes developed from participants' responses, then refined into categories and overarching themes. Peer debriefing and cross-checking of codes enhanced credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014).

Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and permissions were secured from local authorities. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while assent and parental consent were obtained for student participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The researcher's positionality and reflexivity were explicitly considered to mitigate

potential biases while interpreting participants' experiences.

Limitations of the study include its focus on only three regions of Northern Tanzania, which may limit generalizability to other regions. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential for social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive topics such as abuse and gender norms. Despite these limitations, the methodology provided in-depth insights into the factors shaping girls' empowerment and the under-recognized vulnerabilities of boys within the Tanzanian context.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Progress in Girls' Empowerment

The study revealed substantial progress in girls' empowerment across Northern Tanzania, reflected in heightened community awareness of gender-based violence (GBV), improved enrollment, and better retention rates. Affirmative action, scholarships, mentorship programs, financial support, and safe hostels significantly contributed to these gains. Programs such as GEPaN, Hope Children's Support Organization, and Rafiki-SDO in Arusha; Harambee Foundation–Babati, OMAWA Tanzania, and Pamoja Leo Projects in Manyara; and Courage House, Good Hope Support Organization, and KYGN in Kilimanjaro (Moshi) have provided holistic education and protection support. A teacher observed:

> *"Nowadays, the enrollment and retention of girls in school is high due to the support provided by NGOs and the increased emphasis placed by the government on the education of the girl child."* (Teacher 17, 03/08/2025)

These findings align with recent studies highlighting continued improvements in girls' education through targeted interventions (UNESCO, 2025a; Koech et al., 2023; Agyeman et al., 2020). They also demonstrate GAD theory in practice: interventions addressing systemic barriers for girls have successfully enhanced their agency and participation, reflecting the relational aspect of gendered opportunities (Elson & Seth, 2019). However, participants raised concerns that the focus on girls only may inadvertently marginalize boys, echoing Asadullah and Chaudhury (2009) and newer evidence from Tanzania and Sub-Saharan Africa showing emerging gender disparities for boys ((Zickafoose et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024; Xu et al., 2022). This underscores the relational dynamic emphasized in GAD theory: empowering one gender without simultaneously addressing structural conditions affecting the other can unintentionally reinforce inequality.

4.2 Persistent Challenges for Girls

The study revealed that despite these gains, girls continue to confront Gender Based Violence (GBV), rural–urban disparities, and socio-economic pressures. A social welfare officer explained:

> *"Even though programs exist, some girls in rural areas still drop out due to early pregnancies or household responsibilities. Access to schools and support is uneven."* (Social Welfare Officer 9, 02/08/2025)

These observations reflect persistent structural barriers, consistent with both historical findings (UNICEF, 2023) and contemporary literature (UNESCO, 2025b; Desmond et al., 2024; Mtebe & Mkumbo, 2024). From a GAD perspective, these barriers demonstrate how intersecting social, economic, and cultural factors shape differential access to empowerment, requiring interventions that account for local norms, gendered responsibilities, and socio-economic contexts.

4.3 Neglect of Boys' Vulnerabilities

A significant finding is the continued invisibility of boys' vulnerabilities. Rising cases of sexual abuse, neglect, child labor, and school dropout were reported, yet these challenges remain under-recognized in both policy and programmatic interventions (Xu et al., 2022; Mtebe & Mkumbo, 2024; Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2021). A police officer noted:

> *"Boys rarely report abuse because of stigma. People assume they are strong and should handle it themselves. This makes it hard for us to intervene in time."* (Police Officer 6, 09/08/2025)

A community leader added:

> *"Programs focus on girls, which is important, but boys are left behind. Some end up in labor or dropping out, and nobody notices."* (Community Leader 10, 03/09/2025)

These accounts align with recent research showing that rigid masculinity norms and societal expectations discourage boys from seeking help, creating a "reverse gender gap" (UNESCO, 2025a; Desmond et al., 2024).While girls' empowerment interventions demonstrate progress, GAD theory suggests that such interventions must also consider relational impacts, neglecting boys can reproduce systemic inequalities in education and protection, illustrating how power dynamics shape vulnerabilities across genders (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

4.4 Cultural and Social Factors

Traditional social norms reinforce boys' invisibility in education and protection systems. Whereas girls benefit from mentorship, scholarships, and safe spaces, boys are expected to exhibit resilience and self-reliance. These findings mirror global evidence (Koech et al., 2023); UNESCO, 2025b) and underscore the need for interventions that challenge socially constructed gender roles. By applying GAD theory, it becomes clear that gendered power relations and expectations must be transformed to ensure boys' wellbeing without undermining girls' progress.

4.5 Silence around Boys' Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of boys emerged as a particularly silenced issue. Unlike girls, whose cases prompt rapid intervention, boys' abuse often remains hidden due to stigma and cultural norms. A police officer explained:

> *"Boys rarely report sexual abuse. Even when we receive cases, families often try to hide it. The community does not talk about it, unlike cases involving girls."* (Police Officer 3, 09/08/2025)

This silence has critical consequences for boys' mental health, education, and social development, highlighting a protection gap noted in recent studies (UNESCO, 2024; Koech et al., 2023; Desmond et al., 2024). School practices intensify this inequity, as absenteeism for boys is often ignored, while girls' absences trigger prompt interventions. From a GAD lens, these findings illustrate the relational effects of gender policies: prioritizing one group without addressing systemic power imbalances leaves other vulnerable populations at risk, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, gender-transformative interventions.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study reveals a critical paradox in Tanzania's education and child-protection landscape: while sustained investments have significantly advanced girls' empowerment through mentorship, scholarships, financial support, and improved safety measures boys' vulnerabilities remain largely unrecognized within policy and practice. This imbalance demonstrates that current gender-focused approaches, though impactful, may unintentionally widen a reverse gender gap by leaving boys at increased risk of school dropout, sexual abuse, hazardous labor, and psychosocial distress.

Guided by the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, the study affirms that gender equity is relational; gains for one group cannot be fully sustained when the intersecting vulnerabilities of the other remain unaddressed. Conceptually, the findings expand the discourse by highlighting boys' marginalization as an overlooked dimension of gender inequality, calling for a shift toward more holistic and inclusive frameworks.

Moving forward, sustainable gender equity requires policies and interventions that deliberately respond to the needs of both girls and boys. This involves addressing harmful masculinity norms, strengthening evidence-informed decision-making, and transforming community-level perceptions that inhibit boys from expressing vulnerability. A gender-responsive, child-centered policy architecture supported by robust data systems, stigma-free reporting mechanisms, and integrated psychosocial support will help close protection and educational gaps.

5.2 Recommendations

To guide such progress, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Design policies and programs that explicitly target boys' educational and protection needs, ensuring that interventions address both girls' and boys' vulnerabilities.
2. Integrate mentorship, counseling, and safe spaces for boys to support their educational and psychosocial wellbeing.
3. Conduct community sensitization programs aimed at transforming restrictive norms around masculinity and promoting inclusive gender attitudes.
4. Implement systematic monitoring of gender-disaggregated indicators, such as enrollment, retention, absenteeism, and psychosocial wellbeing, to inform responsive interventions.
5. Embed gender literacy and relational education into school curricula to foster equitable mindsets among students, teachers, and parents, cultivating boys as active allies for gender equality.

Ultimately, the study positions gender equity not as a zero-sum game but as a balanced, inclusive process. By revealing the critical gaps in boys' protection and educational experiences, it offers both conceptual and practical insights: sustainable empowerment demands policies and interventions that respond to the needs of all children. Addressing these gaps is essential not only to prevent the unintended marginalization of boys but also to strengthen societal resilience, reduce cycles of poverty and violence, and ensure that the promise of gender equity translates into tangible, lasting outcomes for the next generation.

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