

PERCEIVED GENDER INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN RURAL AREA OF OSUN CENTRAL SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

The study examined Stakeholders perceived impact of gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District of which two specific research questions were raise. The study adopted a qualitative research design. The participants of the study include 2 teachers, 2 parents, 4 students, and 2 community leaders making a total of 10 participants purposively selected from Ada Village, a rural area in Boriipe, Osun Central Senatorial District which was the research setting. A semi-structured interview was conducted and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that stakeholders in Osun Central Senatorial District offer a multifaceted perspective on gender inequality in education. While traditional beliefs and economic limitations create significant barriers for girls, there seems to a growing awareness of the importance of girls' education. In addition, the study demonstrated that cultural beliefs discourage girls from pursuing academic excellence. The study recommended that concerted efforts are needed at multiple levels. Community leaders, parents, teachers, and students must be engaged in dialogue and education to challenge and change entrenched beliefs that disadvantage girls.

Keywords: Girl-child Education, Gender Inequality, Access to Education, SDG 4, Gender Discrimination

Introduction

Education is a cornerstone of personal and societal development. It empowers individuals by providing the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and contribute to the world effectively. Education fosters critical thinking, enhances communication abilities, and promotes individual growth. On a societal level, educated populations drive economic growth, improve health outcomes, and foster social stability. As such, Barbosa and Souza (2021) noted that education is a key driver of innovation and progress, helping societies to address complex challenges and seize new opportunities. Therefore, access to education becomes sacrosanct for societal development.

Access to education is a fundamental human right; this was well articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 goals (Krupar & Taneja, 2020). This is because it ensures that all individuals, regardless of their background, gender or socio-economic status, have the opportunity to benefit from education's transformative power. Access to education is about more than just enrollment in schools; it encompasses the availability of quality learning environments, competent teachers, and appropriate learning materials (Lee, 2013). Bantekas, (2023) asserted that when access to education is equitable, it promotes social inclusion and reduces disparities, providing everyone with the chance to improve their life circumstances.

However, in rural areas, access to education can be particularly challenging due to obvious factors like poverty, geographical isolation, and cultural barriers. Agile (2018) stated that these challenges often result in lower educational attainment and perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality among indwellers. As such, ensuring access to education in these areas is vital for breaking these cycles and promoting sustainable development. Andries et al. (2022) opined that education in rural areas not only enhances the prospects of individuals but also contributes to the overall development of the community by fostering a more skilled and knowledgeable population. While this may sound good in terms of achievement of SDG 4 goals, Ajala and Alonge, (2013) pointed out that gender inequality among other remain a major challenge in rural areas.

Gender inequality significantly impacts access to education, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms and economic constraints often exacerbate disparities (Babatunde et al., 2019). Kazeem et al. (2010) asserted that gender roles, deeply ingrained in many rural societies, frequently prioritize boys' education over girls'. This was also well-documented in the study of Akinbi and Akinbi (2015). This bias stems from the belief that boys are future breadwinners, while girls are expected to manage household responsibilities. As a result, Ngwoke (2020) study suggest that families with limited resources often choose to invest in their sons' education while deprioritizing or neglecting their daughters' educational needs. This perpetuates a cycle of inequality, as uneducated women are less likely to achieve economic independence or participate fully in societal development (Egbulonu & Eleonu, 2018).

In rural areas, the impact of gender inequality on education is compounded by various barriers. For instance, Thomas et al. (2014) asserted that long distances to schools can pose significant safety concerns for girls, deterring their attendance. Moreover, another main barriers pointed out by Babatunde et al. (2018) is the fact that rural schools often lack adequate sanitation facilities, which can be particularly problematic for girls during menstruation, leading to higher absenteeism and dropout rates. Additionally, cultural practices such as early marriage and child labor disproportionately affect girls, cutting short their educational journeys and limiting their future opportunities (Alabi & Alabi, 2014).

The economic implications of gender inequality in education are profound. educated women tend to have fewer, healthier children, and they are more likely to participate in the workforce, contributing to the economic well-being of their families and communities (Heath & Jayachandran, 2016). Conversely, when girls are denied education, it not only hampers their personal development but also stunts the economic growth of the entire community (Oluwatayo & Ojo, 2017). Mefeuwo (2022) argued that educated women are instrumental in driving economic development and innovation, and their absence from the workforce represents a significant loss of potential. Furthermore, gender inequality in education reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities. Amoke et al. (2012) noted that without education, women are less likely to engage in civic activities or assume leadership roles, perpetuating their marginalization in decision-making processes. This exclusion weakens the overall governance and development of rural communities, as the perspectives and talents of half the population are overlooked (Nakpodia & James (2012).

Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been designed which vividly give some theoretical foundation on the impact of gender inequality in access to education. However, one theory, essential to this study, is the intersectionality theory:

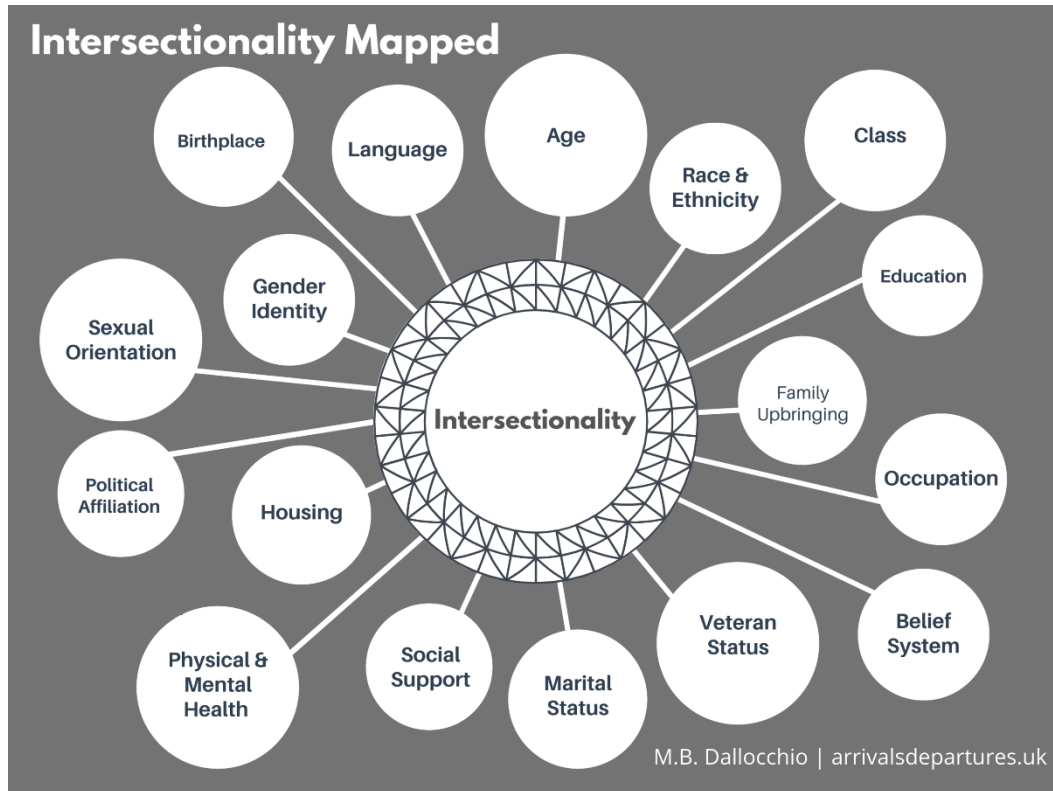


Fig 1: Intersectionality Mapped; (Source: adopted from Dallochio, 2021)

Intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, examines how various social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and others intersect and create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Al-Faham et al., 2019). The theory posits that these identities do not operate independently of one another; instead, they interact to shape the specific experiences of individuals, leading to unique forms of oppression and privilege.

In relation to the research on stakeholders' perceived impact of gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District, intersectionality offers a nuanced lens through which to examine the compounded disadvantages faced by rural girls. This theoretical approach underscores that gender inequality in education cannot be fully understood or addressed without considering other intersecting social categories and their related power dynamics. In the context of rural Osun Central, intersectionality reveals that gender inequality is intertwined with rurality, economic status, cultural norms, and possibly other factors such as ethnicity or disability. Stakeholders in this region may perceive the barriers to girls' education not merely as

issues of gender, but as problems exacerbated by the socio-economic conditions prevalent in rural settings. For instance, poverty in rural areas have been found to force families to prioritize boys' education over girls', seeing boys as future breadwinners while girls are expected to undertake household chores or early marriages (Ofoha, 2013; Hedges et al., 2016; Jamal, 2016). Thus, economic hardship intersects with gender norms, creating a complex matrix of disadvantages.

Moreover, cultural and traditional beliefs prevalent in rural Osun Central can deeply influence gender roles and expectations, further impacting girls' access to education. These cultural norms often favor boys' educational pursuits while viewing girls' education as less valuable, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality. From intersectionality theory perspective, this highlights the complex, multi-dimensional nature of discrimination, emphasizing cultural and traditional beliefs factors do not operate in isolation but interconnect to impact individuals' experiences and access to education. Additionally, the geographic isolation of rural areas can limit access to quality education, adequate school facilities, and trained teachers, all of which have been shown to disproportionately affect girls (Smith-Evans et al., 2014; Epstein et al., 2017; Sperling & Winthrop, 2015). The combination of gender and rurality creates specific challenges, such as long and unsafe travel distances to school, which may discourage parents from sending their daughters to school due to safety concerns. Intersectionality helps in understanding how these geographic and infrastructural issues intersect with gender, highlighting the need for multifaceted interventions that address both physical accessibility and gender-specific safety concerns. It is on this basis, this current study investigated stakeholders perceived gender inequality impact in access to education in rural area of Osun Central Senatorial District.

Statement of the Problem

Gender inequality in access to education remains a significant issue in rural areas of the Osun Central Senatorial District, Nigeria. Despite global and national efforts to promote gender equality and universal education (Krook & Norris, 2014; Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021), entrenched cultural norms, economic constraints, and infrastructural deficiencies continue to create substantial barriers for girls. These challenges manifest in lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and poorer academic performance for girls compared to boys (Adedokun et al., 2016; King & Winthrop, 2015). Traditional beliefs that prioritize boys' education over girls', compounded by economic pressures that lead families to invest more in sons' education, perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage for rural girls (Boyi, 2014). Additionally, inadequate school facilities, long travel distances, and safety concerns further discourage girls from attending school regularly, exacerbating the gender disparity (Achor, 2019).

The persistent gender gap in education in these rural communities has profound implications for the socio-economic development of the region. Limited access to education for girls restricts their future employment opportunities, economic independence, and overall quality of life, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Moreover, the broader community suffers as the potential contributions of

educated women to local development and social progress remain untapped. Therefore, this study aims to explore and understand the perceptions of various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, community leaders, and students, regarding the impact of gender inequality on educational access in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate Stakeholders perceived impact of gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District. Specifically, the study;

1. Investigated the perceptions of stakeholders (teachers, parents, community leaders, and students) regarding gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District.
2. Explored the cultural beliefs that stakeholders perceive as contributing to gender inequality in education access in Osun Central Senatorial District.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of stakeholders (teachers, parents, community leaders, and students) regarding gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District?
2. What are the cultural beliefs that stakeholders perceive as contributing to gender inequality in education access in Osun Central Senatorial District?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the stakeholders' perceived impact of gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of the Osun Central Senatorial District. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the contextual factors influencing gender inequality in education (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The research was conducted in Ada Village, a rural area with an estimated 3,234 population in Boriye, Osun Central Senatorial District, Nigeria (Osun State Government Annual population report, 2022). This region was selected due to its distinctive characteristics regarding gender disparity in educational access and the presence of diverse stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and community leaders.

The participants of this study include teachers, parents, community leaders, and students. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 participants who have direct stake in the community education in the region. This included two parents; representing households with school-aged children. Two teachers, offering insights from the local school. Two community leaders, providing a broader perspective on cultural and social norms of the community and four senior secondary students who attend school in the community.

Data was collected through a Semi-Structured Interview, these interviews structure serve as a guide that allows participant flexibility to explore emerging themes. Two main questions were asked to all the participant including “**Q1** – “*What can you say about gender inequality and how it affect girls and boys access to education in your locality?*” and **Q2** – “*Can you states some cultural beliefs encouraging gender inequality in education access in your locality?*”. The interview process took a span of two days and each participant took an estimated 30 minute to give answer to the questions. The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, following these steps:

1. *Familiarization*: the researcher transcribed the interviews followed by repeated reading to immerse in the data.
2. *Coding*: the researcher Generated initial codes from the data. These codes highlight significant features related to gender inequality and access to education. Also, to conceal the identity of the participants the research coded the participants names as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Parent 1, Parent 2, Community Leader 1, Community Leader 2, Student 1, Student 2, Student 3 and Student 4 for ease of identification.
3. *Theme Development*: the research then collated the codes into potential themes, which represent broader patterns in the data.
4. *Reviewing Themes*: the researcher refined the themes by checking them against the dataset to ensure they accurately reflect the data.
5. *Defining and Naming Themes*: the researcher then then categorized the themes into two namely: Perceptions on Gender Inequality in Education Access as well as Cultural Beliefs and Gender Inequality determining how it relates to the research questions.
6. *Reporting*: the researcher compiled the findings into a coherent narrative that addresses the stated research questions

With regard to ethical consideration, the participants was provided with detailed information about the study and their rights, and their consent were obtained before participation. The researcher ensure that all data where anonymized and stored securely to protect participants' identities. The researcher emphasized that participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time without any repercussions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Participant Profile

| Participants | Gender | Age |
|--------------------|--------|-----|
| Teacher 1 | Female | 35 |
| Teacher 2 | Male | 41 |
| Parent 1 | Female | 37 |
| Parent 2 | Male | 40 |
| Community Leader 1 | Male | 63 |
| Community Leader 2 | Male | 71 |
| Students 1 | Female | 15 |
| Student 2 | Male | 16 |
| Student 3 | Female | 14 |
| Students 4 | Male | 15 |

Teacher 1 response to Q1 - *"As a teacher in this district, I see the gender inequality in education every day. Many girls are forced to stay home to help with household chores or care for younger siblings. While boys also face challenges, they are more likely to attend school regularly. Cultural beliefs play a significant role here; many parents still believe that educating a girl is less important because she'll eventually marry and leave the family."* **Response to Q2** - *"One of the major cultural beliefs contributing to gender inequality is the perception that girls are primarily destined for marriage and motherhood. This view often leads to prioritizing boys' education over girls'. Many parents think that investing in a girl's education is a waste since she will eventually marry and leave the family."*

Teacher 2 response to Q1 - *"I notice that the dropout rate among girls is higher than boys, especially as they reach secondary school. This is due to early marriages and the expectation that girls should contribute to the household income through petty trading or farming. There is also a lack of female role models within the school system, which affects girls' motivation and aspirations."* **Response to Q2** - *There is also a belief that boys are more capable of succeeding in academics and future careers. This stereotype discourages parents from supporting their daughters' education. Additionally, there's a strong emphasis on girls' roles in maintaining the household, which is seen as more valuable than their education."*

Parent 1 response to Q1 - *"As a mother, I want my daughters to have the same opportunities as my sons, but it's difficult. Our financial resources are limited, and sometimes we can only afford to send one child to school. In such cases, we often choose the boys because they are seen as future breadwinners. It's a tough decision, but it's influenced by societal norms and economic realities."* **Response to Q2** - *"In our culture, there's a saying that educating a girl is like watering another man's garden. This reflects the belief that girls will marry and benefit another family. Such proverbs influence how much importance we place on educating our daughters compared to our sons."*

Parent 2 response to Q1 - *"I think both boys and girls should go to school, but there are safety concerns for girls. The journey to school can be long and dangerous, and there have been instances of harassment. This makes us hesitant to send our daughters, especially when they become teenagers."* **Response to Q2** - *"there is a cultural belief that boys are future breadwinners, so their education is seen as an investment in the family's future. For girls, their primary value is often tied to their role in the family and their potential dowry, rather than their intellectual or professional contributions."*

Community Leader 1 response to Q1 - *"Gender inequality in education is a big issue here. Our community values tradition, and traditionally, girls are prepared for marriage rather than for a professional career. However, we are starting to see the benefits of educating girls, like when they bring new skills and knowledge back to the community. We need more awareness programs to change these deep-rooted beliefs."* **Response to Q2** - *"Our traditions emphasize that a girl should be well-trained in domestic skills to make a good wife. This belief undermines the importance of her education. Many community members still believe that a girl's place is at home, assisting her mother, rather than in school."*

Community Leader 2 response to Q1 - *"There is a growing recognition that educating girls can uplift the entire community, but old habits die hard. We need more support from the government and NGOs to provide incentives for families to keep their daughters in school. Building more schools closer to our villages would also help alleviate some of the safety concerns parents have."* **Response to Q2** - *"Early marriage is another cultural norm that affects girls' education. Many families believe that marrying off their daughters early will protect them and secure their future. This practice is deeply rooted in our culture and often leads to girls dropping out of school at a young age."*

Student 1 response to Q1 - *"I love going to school, but it's not easy. My parents sometimes need me at home to help with the farm, and I am often late or miss school entirely. Some of my friends have dropped out because their parents do not see the point in educating girls. It's frustrating because I want to become a nurse and help my community."* **Response to Q2** - *"In our village, it's common for people to say that a girl who is too educated will become too independent and might not find a husband. This makes it hard for girls like me to convince our parents to support our education beyond primary school."*

Student 2 response to Q1 - *"In my opinion, girls should have the same right to education as boys. Some of my classmates have dropped out because their parents do not value their education as much. This inequality is unfair and holds back the entire community because educated girls can contribute a lot."* **Response to Q2** - *"I've heard elders say that a boy who isn't educated is a failed man, but they rarely say the same about girls. There is a belief that girls do not need much education because they will end up as housewives anyway. This mindset needs to change."*

Student 3 response to Q1 - *"Sometimes, I feel like the teachers don't expect much from us girls. It is like they don't believe we can achieve as much as the boys. This makes it hard to stay motivated, but I have big dreams, and I want to prove them wrong. I wish*

*there were more female teachers to look up to." **Response to Q2** - "People here often believe that girls are naturally less capable of handling academic pressures and should focus on learning household chores instead. This cultural belief makes it difficult for girls to aspire to professional careers or higher education."*

Student 4 response to Q1 - *"I see that my sisters have to work much harder than I do to balance school and home responsibilities. They often do more chores, and this affects their school performance. I think if we shared responsibilities more equally at home, it would help girls stay in school and succeed."* **Response to Q2** - *"Some boys think it's funny when girls try to compete academically because they've been told that girls are not as smart as boys. This belief is not just outdated but harmful, as it discourages girls from putting effort into their studies and limits their potential."*

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1: *What are the perceptions of stakeholders (teachers, parents, community leaders, and students) regarding gender inequality in access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District?*

Theme 1: Perceptions on Gender Inequality in Education Access

Stakeholders in the Osun Central Senatorial District highlight a troubling issue of gender inequality in access to education, particularly in their community. Teachers report witnessing this disparity daily, noting higher absenteeism and dropout rates among girls (**Teachers 1 & 2**). These trends are often due to the demands of household chores and the pressures of early marriage consistent with Moses and Isaac (2019) findings. Such observations in Osun Central underscore a societal expectation for girls to prioritize domestic responsibilities over their education. Economic factors further seems to exacerbate this issue. Parents, especially mothers like **Parent 1**, express a desire for equal educational opportunities for their daughters but feel compelled by limited resources to prioritize their sons, who are perceived as future breadwinners which corroborates the outcome Elewa (2020) study. While the traditional mindset prepares girls for marriage, as attested by **Community Leader 1**, there is a growing awareness of the benefits that educated girls can bring to the community. **Community Leader 1** stresses the importance of awareness programs to challenge these deep-seated beliefs. The students themselves seems to feel the weight of this inequality. Girls like **Student 1** struggle to balance schoolwork with household chores, resulting in missed classes and poor academic performance. **Student 3** mentions a lack of encouragement from some teachers, which can be demotivating. Despite these challenges, students recognize the unfairness of the situation. Both male and female students, like **Student 2** and **Student 4**, acknowledge the potential of educated girls and the detrimental impact of gender inequality on the community's progress.

Overall, the stakeholders in Osun Central Senatorial District offer a multifaceted perspective on gender inequality in education. While traditional beliefs and economic limitations create significant barriers for girls, there seems to a growing awareness of the importance of girls' education. The proposed solutions, ranging from awareness programs

to practical measures like building schools closer to villages, offer a roadmap to bridge this gap and ensure equal access to education for all.

Research Question 2: *What are the cultural beliefs that stakeholders perceive as contributing to gender inequality in education access in Osun Central Senatorial District?*

Theme 2: Cultural Beliefs and Gender Inequality

As enumerated by the participants, cultural beliefs seems to significantly contribute to gender inequality in education access, indicated in the data. One pervasive belief is that girls are destined for marriage and motherhood, making their education a lower priority. Proverbs like "educating a girl is like watering another man's garden" reflect this sentiment (**Parent 1**). Boys, on the other hand, are seen as future breadwinners, justifying the investment in their education (**Parent 2, Community Leader 2**). This also supports the findings of Ofoha (2013) which concluded that cultural belief in Nigeria is a fundamental issue hindering girl child education. Additionally, there seems to be a stereotype that boys are naturally more academically inclined than girls, discouraging parents from supporting their daughters' education and deterring girls from aspiring to higher learning. This was seen in the remark of **Student 1** and **Teacher 2** about girls becoming "too independent" or not needing much education since they will be housewives, reflecting the cultural beliefs of the community also corroborated in the study of Amadi (2013).

Community Leader 1 believes that a girl's place is primarily at home assisting her mother, which hinders their access to schooling. The traditional emphasis on training girls in domestic skills to become good wives, as noted by **Student 2**, undermines the value of their education. Consequently, the cultural norm of early marriage significantly impacts girls' education (Moses & Fwa, 2019). Families often see early marriage as a way to protect their daughters and secure their future, leading to school dropouts (**Community Leader 2**). These cultural beliefs discourage girls from pursuing academic excellence, consistent with the submission of Happiness and Onoriode (2019). Boys might mock girls who try to compete academically, and girls themselves might internalize the message that they are not naturally gifted (**Student 3, Student 4**). This limits their educational goals and aspirations for professional careers.

Overall, all stakeholders, including teachers (**Teacher 1, Teacher 2**), parents (**Parent 1, Parent 2**), community leaders (**Community Leader 1, Community Leader 2**), and students (**Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, Student 4**), acknowledge the existence of cultural beliefs that disadvantage girls in education in Osun Central Senatorial District.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The perceived gender inequality impacting access to education in rural areas of Osun Central Senatorial District is deeply concerning and requires immediate attention.

Cultural beliefs, stereotypes, and traditional norms play a significant role in perpetuating this inequality, as evidenced by the data. Girls are often relegated to roles of marriage and motherhood, while boys are prioritized for education as future breadwinners. This results in limited educational opportunities for girls, hindering their academic potential and career aspirations. To address this issue, concerted efforts are needed at multiple levels. Community leaders, parents, teachers, and students must be engaged in dialogue and education to challenge and change entrenched beliefs that disadvantage girls. Additionally, targeted interventions such as awareness campaigns, scholarships, and mentorship programs specifically designed to empower girls and provide them with equal educational opportunities should be implemented.

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