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## **Socio-Cultural Factors responsible for Poor Academic Performance of Girls in Community Secondary Schools: Tanzania in Focus**

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### ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that girls' poor academic performance is a worldwide phenomenon; however, the problem seems to be severe in Tanzania. Factors that range from the educational system, pedagogical, economic and socio-cultural factors are frequently associated with the problem of girls' poor academic performance in Tanzania. While the problem of girls' poor academic performance is reported to prevail in Tanzania, different studies have been conducted to examine the students' academic performance on factors such as truancy, pregnancies, teaching and learning materials, dropouts, and libraries. Although some of such studies have addressed academic performance, they have not quite paid attention to Socio-cultural factors with exclusive effect on girls; as opposed to those factors that affect both boys and girls. This paper therefore assessed the socio-cultural factors responsible for poor academic performance of girls in community secondary schools in Tanzania. In line with findings, the paper recommended that government and the community should endeavour to provide the necessary facilities needed to enhance female education in the country.

**Keywords: Girls, Education, Facilities, Socio-cultural, Security**

### INTRODUCTION

There are several reports which indicate that the standard of girls' academic performance has persistently been poor from primary school level to the tertiary level in Tanzania. For example, according to the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [1] report, form IV examination results from 2009 to 2011 showed that over 72% of all the students who performed between division IV and O were girls. The report shows that girls' academic performance declined by 22% in 2008. In contrast, the same report indicates that boys performed at the average of 70% compared to girls whose performance was at the average of 30%. The girls' performance (30%) is seen as declining if compared to past year in which girls had performed at the average of 40% while boys had performed at the average of 60%. The decline in education among girls is also evident through other indicators of quality education. There are a number of girls in Tanzania who complete secondary school without having acquired secondary education. For instance, the study conducted in Tanzania by Kassimoto, [2], indicated that, there are a large number of girls who have completed secondary school but cannot read or write a single sentence in English language. The study indicates that forty three (43) years after independence, the country was facing big problem of girls' academic performance. For example, two-third of girls who completed form four could not read and understand any connected test in English, between 95% and 60% of secondary school girls lacked mastery of English language, and that only 20% of all university girls could understand and attempt correctly, essay questions in English. The implication of this situation is that girls could not perform better given the fact that almost all the subjects were studied in English with exception of Kiswahili subject.

On one hand, the problem of girls' poor academic performance is identified as resulting from the fact that the educational system in Tanzania does not provide friendly learning environment for girls to enjoy effective learning for quality education. For example, such factors as poor policy in the educational system, inappropriate

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teaching methodologies, and assessments criteria in internal examinations are always mentioned as factors constituting girls' poor academic performance. On the other hand, negative perceptions and lack of awareness among parents on the importance of education to girls and over loaded responsibilities assigned to girls at school, home and the community in general are reported to contribute to the problem. Being the case, one would therefore be inclined to comment that education to girls is not yet taken seriously by the government and general society of Tanzania. Similar system that does not favour girls' academic performance is also observed by Kassimoto [3]. In her observation, Kassimoto noted that girls and women are looked at as weak human beings, who cannot do anything alone and depend on oneself. The phenomenon can be traced back in the past, when according to the customary law, girls and women were not involved in important political, economical and socio-cultural functions. This has continued to the present where some groups in Tanzania still look at girls and women as people who should just stay at home taking care of the family. Beyond this, there are still some cases in which girls are raped and forced to marry at early ages against their own wish, sometimes leading to teenage pregnancy, dropout from school, transmission of disease like HIV/AIDS. Cases of cruelty to girls and women in families and the society in general are still reported. All these events have effect on the psychological, emotional and physical stability of girls. In turn, some girls have developed the sense of inferiority and loss of confidence in the society and at school leading to absenteeism from classes. Consequently, the situation leads to girls' poor academic performance. As Kassimoto [3] observes, it is important to note that educating a woman is to educate the whole society. Thus, significant measures have to be put in place in order to ensure that girls in secondary schools are provided with friendly learning environments to enable them to perform well academically and access quality education.

**Socio-cultural Factors affecting Girls' Academic Performance**

**Functions of Matrons and Female Teachers:** The role of matrons in community secondary schools is vital. They are advisors and provide guidance and counseling to school girls. Onoria [4] noted that lack of matrons is a big concern in the welfare of school children. In the absence of matrons in schools, one would ask who monitors and cares for the girls in schools, especially on issues related to the provision of pads, soap and water, particularly during their menstrual periods. For example, Fawe [5] observed that minimal guidance and counseling services lead to poor academic performance among girls. That is why Twinomugisha [6] and Bennaars et al. [7] suggest that matrons should create favorable and friendly relationship with children. This will enable girls to face their matrons and communicate their problems for a help. These scholars also caution teachers to develop positive attitudes and behaviours towards their children so that the children, particularly girls may be free to express their feelings pertaining to different life affairs including academic matters. In the diversity of girls' challenges and needs, matrons are thus urged to be accessible in school premises all the time, be good listeners, polite, flexible and quick problem solvers.

**The Place of Female Teachers:** One of the factors that affect girls' academic performance in community secondary schools is the absence or shortage of female teachers as role models to girls. Most community secondary schools lack female teachers [7]. As a result, girls lack important models from whom to learn how to deal or handle women related challenges that girls face in schools. Evans [8] explains that the presence of female teachers as role models increases girls' awareness and perception concerning girls' education to increase sense of competition and promote gender equality in education and personality in general. It is important to state that there is relationship between behaviour and academic performance. Hence, girls who have a good interaction with role models, may have an opportunity of adapting good life manner, which in turn add to active learning habits like paying attention, polite ways of asking and answering questions, positive ways of inquiry and responding to learning stimuli resulting in good academic performance. Female teachers are conducting meetings with girls more freely to work hard on their studies. Female teachers who conduct meetings with girls discuss gender issues such as participating in all important matters like working hard in academic issues, and other related issues such as gender equity.

**Absence of Physical Facilities in Schools**

**Sanitary Facilities:** Sanitation is another factor that may affect girls' academic performance. Sanitation systems include toilets, drainage and sewage system, and waste materials systems. If a school has no proper sanitation system, it may affect girls' academic performance. For example, Twinomugisha [6] points out that inadequate and poor latrine structures have previously been reported to be one of the causes of girls' poor performance. This problem prevents girls from enjoying their rights to education. Onoria [4], visited five schools in Ruanda in October 2009; however, four out of the five schools visited had dilapidated latrine structures. For some schools, there were no clear provision of separate toilets for girls and boys. In one of the schools, latrine facilities and structure for girls were non-existent and female teachers had to use latrines for girls. Tindifa [9] holds that the issue of sanitation and hygiene is still a problem in many schools. In some schools sanitary facilities are very old and not well maintained or repaired. Also Babyegeya [10] noted that most schools are operating without necessary physical facilities like enough sanitary facilities and water, among others. Fawe [5] asserts that school facilities play important roles in

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attracting students to join certain schools. The facilities enable students to learn in state of harmonious environment. Fawe therefore suggested the following:

- i. Provision of separate latrine facilities for boys and girls
- ii. Supply of adequate water for washing and drinking
- iii. Provision of adequate laboratory facilities appropriate for the level of education
- iv. Provision of guidance and counseling services for personal educational related problems

According to Cerid [11], boarding schools can be a choice for many societies that cannot offer adequate facilities for study. Also, boarding schools may be used to accommodate many students, because of conducive environment for learning such as electricity and water. This means that, since boarding schools accommodate many students, then they should be supplied with important facilities for the students. What prevails in most communities is that when a community lacks important services like sanitary facilities, then the most affected groups are children and girls (women). This entails that when community secondary schools lack sanitation systems such as latrines, drainage systems and others, then girls are more affected compared to boys. This also implies that girls are more affected in terms of their academic performance due to lack of sanitary services [12]. As part of the solution, SEDP 1 (2006) recommends many toilet holes for girls than boys. Toilet holes for girls should be in a ratio of twenty (20) girls per toilet hole while the ration should be twenty five (25) boys per toilet hole.

### Lack of Hostels

Community secondary schools are also noted to be lacking physical facilities such as hostels. As Evans (2006) observed, lack of hostels negatively affect girls' academic performance. Therefore, in order to improve girls' academic performance, there is a need for improving the physical learning environment making it attractive and accommodative to female students, especially by improving hostel facilities. Cerid [11] compared commuter and dormitory students and suggested that living on campus fosters academic performance through expanded opportunity for integration into the academic system such as interaction with faculty social system, frequency of peer conversations and informal social activities of the school. Lyndon [13] also noted that dormitories tend to have more extensive staff, thus offering opportunities for students to participate in activities programmed in residence halls. In the same way, Davis [12] points out that those school dormitories have been an important protection for children from being at risk of natural disasters or civil wars. School dormitories prevent school children from winter disasters. Children in calamity-prone areas have been ensured of shelter, food, education and recreation during disasters due to presence of school dormitories. Hostels are believed to enhance academic performance of children, since children do not have to spend time going long distances to school and are not burdened by domestic chores at home. According to Davis [12], in societies where girls' movement outside home is not permitted, hostels and dormitories give security and protection. Likewise, parents are more likely to encourage girls than boys to enroll in boarding schools because they perceive that dormitories offer personal protection and better education that ensures their daughters of future job. Most girls who live in hostels and dormitories are reported to be performing well compared to those who live in their homes. Girls who live in hostels and dormitories are under care of matrons and the school regulations. They are protected from being at risk of such crimes as raping, sexual harassment and teenage pregnancy compared to day scholars Kassimoto, [3]. All this suffices to conclude that hostels in community secondary schools are very essential, as they ensure girls of protection from undesirable school conditions. Hostels and dormitories provide friendly learning conditions for girls to perform better academically.

**School Timetable:** School timetable also hinders girls' access to education. If school daily routines start too early in the morning, they may lead girls to arrive at school too late. In the same manner, if school activities are prolonged to end at late hours in the evening or night, girls find themselves at danger of being raped and humiliated on their way back to their homes [3]. It should be noted that girls are like jewels that some men and gangs are always hunting for. Consequently, unlike boys, girls who live very far away from their schools may decide to absent themselves from schools in some days of a week because classes begin too early and end too late. Babyegeya [10] also holds the same view that girls who live in far places sometimes miss morning lessons. Some girls have to use public transport to their schools in order to catch up with the school time-table, while others have to be accompanied by their parents for security purpose which falls to the disadvantage of the girls [5]. Makyikyeli [14] insists on the importance of scheduling school activities showing the amount of time needed for accomplishing certain activity so that the issue of girls is put into consideration. Makyikyeli also insists on strict adherence to school timetable to avoid interference with the timetable, which may in turn have negative consequence on girls. Thus, when the need for adjustment of the time table is sought due to contingencies, then the adjustment has also to consider girls. Beyond this, Babyegeya [10] advises to differentiate between time in which students are in schools, and time in which students are in actual learning process (the time-on-task).

**Social Practices:** Another factor that influences girls' academic performance is social practices. It is found that girls are involved in more domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleanliness, fetching water, children and general family care at the time they would be at school or in private studies. Simply put, unlike boys, girls perform different family

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activities which consume time for studies and concentration to academic activities. For example, it is reported that the era of HIV/AIDS has increased a number orphans and sick people in families and hospitals, most of them, have to be taken care of by girls and women. The increased girls roles has even led to girls conflicting and confusing message on their gender roles from men, parents, teachers, peers, the media and the general community. As a result, the situation leads to girls' poor performance [2]. A study carried out by Kassimoto [3] on peasant association in Ethiopia reveals that cultural practices affect girls' social roles in cultural division of labour. It was found that women spend about 15 or more hours on various important household activities. Unfortunately, as Lyndon [13] points out, some of the household activities that girls are involved are household chores. Also, in many countries, parents of poor and large families require children's labour for food production and for care of young sibling, and in most cases, girls are the victims of the cultural practices. Experience has indicated that even if girls had opportunity to attend classes, they still find themselves occupied by family activities immediately they arrive home from school.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper appraised socio-cultural affecting girls' academic performance in Tanzania. The reviewed literature shows that the issue of girls' academic performance is not a new experience in Tanzania and across African countries. Hence, factors such as the roles of matrons and female teachers, physical facilities (sanitary facilities, and hostels), social practices and school timetable have been identified as being among the obstacles to girls' academic performance. Based on this, this study recommends that government and the community-including parents should endeavour to provide the necessary facilities needed to enhance female education. Also, serious steps should be taken to adequately enforce the rule of law against those who jeopardize the safety of girls, while measures should be put in place to protect girls from any harm.

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