

**GENDER NORMS AND HOUSEHOLD POWER RELATIONS IN
PARENTAL DECISION-MAKING ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN
MBARARA DISTRICT, UGANDA**

AINEBYONA SHEILA

23/U/05284/EVE

2300705284

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**A RESEARCH PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL
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DECLARATION

I, **AINEBYONA SHEILA**, hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and has not been submitted for any degree or award at any other university.

Signature:  Date: 01/09/2025

AINEBYONA SHEILA

23/U/05284/EVE

2300705284

APPROVAL

This research dissertation has been submitted with the approval of my supervisor.

Signature: Date:

SUPERVISOR: DR.MUGISA JULIUS

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, whose unwavering support and encouragement have made my academic journey possible. I also dedicate this work to all the children in Mbarara District and beyond who strive for education despite the barriers they face.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

MoES - Ministry of Education and Sports

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

PTA - Parent-Teacher Association

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

UBOS - Uganda Bureau of Statistics

UN - United Nations

UNECA - United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

UPE - Universal Primary Education

USE - Universal Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines gender norms and household power relations in parental decision-making on children's education in Mbarara District, Uganda. Despite significant progress in expanding access to education through policies such as Universal Primary Education and Universal Secondary Education, gender disparities in educational retention and completion persist. The study is guided by three objectives: to examine parental decision-making in children's school enrolment, to explore how decision-making power between fathers and mothers influences the allocation of educational resources between boys and girls, and to analyse how intra-household decision-making power affects children's enrolment, retention, and educational resource allocation.

The study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design, drawing on in-depth interviews with a father and a mother, a key informant interview with a head teacher, focus group discussions with six parents, and an observation checklist. The findings reveal that household decision-making remains predominantly patriarchal, with fathers holding final authority in educational matters. Cultural norms systematically disadvantage girls' education, with beliefs about boys as future providers and girls as temporary family members influencing resource allocation. Educational resources are allocated unequally, with boys prioritized when resources are limited. While enrolment appears equal at primary level, disparities emerge in retention and progression. Extended family members play a dual role, either supporting or undermining education, and attitudes toward girls' education are changing but practice often lags behind.

The study concludes that achieving educational equity requires addressing household power dynamics and cultural norms, not only school-level factors. Recommendations focus on engaging fathers, empowering mothers economically, challenging harmful gender norms, reducing education costs, and strengthening school support systems. The study contributes to understanding the complex interplay of gender, household power, and education in rural Uganda, offering insights for policy, practice, and further research.

Keywords: Gender norms, household power relations, parental decision-making, children's education, Mbarara District

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Education is globally recognised as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development (United Nations, 2020). Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, while Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN, 2020). Despite these global commitments, significant gender disparities in educational access, retention, and completion persist, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, reflecting the continued influence of socio-cultural and economic constraints.

Globally, an estimated 129 million girls were out of school in 2023, including 32 million of primary school age, 30 million of lower secondary age, and 67 million of upper secondary age (UNICEF, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be out of school, and only 52% of girls complete lower secondary education compared to 62% of boys (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). These disparities highlight the persistent role of gender norms, poverty, and structural inequalities in shaping educational participation. Gender dynamics, understood as the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, and power relations between men and women, play a central role in determining access to resources and decision-making authority within households (Eagly & Wood, 2020). In many patriarchal societies, men dominate financial and strategic decisions, including those related to children's education, while women's roles are often confined to caregiving. Consequently, educational investments may reflect gendered preferences that favour boys over girls, particularly in contexts of limited resources, whereas more egalitarian households tend to exhibit more equitable educational outcomes (UN Women, 2022).

In Uganda, gender dynamics are deeply embedded within cultural norms and social institutions that shape family structures and child-rearing practices. Although the country has made notable progress in expanding access to education through policies such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), household-level gender relations continue to influence actual schooling outcomes (UNESCO, 2023). Evidence suggests that while mothers often support continued schooling for daughters, their limited bargaining power

and economic dependence may constrain their influence over final decisions (Nakato & Adiga, 2024). Parental decision-making is therefore a critical determinant of children's educational trajectories, particularly in resource-constrained settings where families must prioritise among competing needs. Studies indicate that boys are more likely than girls to be prioritised for continued schooling when financial constraints arise, driven by norms that position boys as future economic providers while associating girls with domestic roles (Kabir & Hassan, 2023; UNECA, 2024). In this study, parental decision-making is conceptualised across three interrelated dimensions: enrolment, retention, and the allocation of educational resources.

Uganda's policy interventions have significantly increased enrolment rates, with primary school net attendance reaching 93% for girls and 92% for boys, and secondary attendance at 48% for girls and 51% for boys by 2025 (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2025). However, disparities persist at higher levels, with only 38% of girls completing upper secondary education compared to 45% of boys (UNESCO, 2023). These outcomes suggest that increased access has not translated into equitable educational attainment. Household-level gender dynamics remain a key explanatory factor, as fathers often retain decision-making authority over financial resources, while mothers' influence remains limited. During periods of economic stress, such as income shocks or seasonal downturns, families may prioritise boys' education while reducing investment in girls, reinforcing existing inequalities (Nakato & Adiga, 2024; Kabir & Hassan, 2023).

Mbarara District in south-western Uganda provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. The district is predominantly inhabited by the Banyankole, whose cultural traditions and economic practices shape gender relations within households. Historically, practices such as bride price reinforced perceptions of daughters as economic assets tied to marriage, which in turn influenced parental attitudes toward investing in girls' education. Although these practices have evolved, underlying norms regarding gender roles and expectations remain influential (Karakora, 2014). The district's economy, largely based on cattle keeping and crop farming, further reinforces gendered divisions of labour, with men controlling key productive assets and women contributing primarily through unpaid domestic and agricultural work. These dynamics have implications for how families allocate educational resources, particularly when children's labour is required to support household livelihoods.

The district also exhibits significant variation between urban, peri-urban, and rural settings, each characterised by different socio-economic conditions and exposure to changing gender

norms. While urban areas may promote more egalitarian attitudes due to increased access to education, media, and employment opportunities, rural areas often maintain more traditional practices. At the same time, broader shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing inequalities. School closures between 2020 and 2021 were associated with increased teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and school dropouts, with girls' return to school lagging behind that of boys (UNICEF, 2023). These developments highlight the vulnerability of girls' education to disruptions and the role of household decision-making in mediating these effects.

Despite the complexity of these dynamics, important knowledge gaps remain. Existing studies have largely focused on national-level trends and institutional barriers, with limited attention to how intra-household decision-making processes unfold in specific local contexts such as Mbarara District. There is insufficient understanding of how fathers and mothers negotiate educational decisions, how power relations shape outcomes when preferences differ, and how these dynamics vary across socio-economic and geographical contexts within the district. Furthermore, the influence of extended family members, children's own agency, and post-pandemic changes in parental attitudes toward education remain underexplored. The lack of context-specific, gender-disaggregated data further limits the ability to design effective interventions.

Understanding gender dynamics in parental decision-making in Mbarara District is therefore critical for addressing persistent disparities in educational access and outcomes. By examining how gender norms, household power relations, and socio-economic factors interact to shape decisions regarding children's education, this study seeks to provide nuanced, context-specific insights that can inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting equitable educational opportunities for both boys and girls, in line with the aspirations of SDG 4 and SDG 5.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite global recognition of education as a fundamental human right and sustained efforts by the United Nations through Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 to promote gender equality, disparities in educational outcomes between boys and girls persist. While many countries, including Uganda, have achieved near gender parity in primary school enrolment, inequalities remain evident in retention, progression, and completion, with girls disproportionately affected. In Uganda, government initiatives such as Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda,

have significantly expanded access to education. However, increased access has not translated into equitable outcomes, as girls continue to experience higher dropout rates due to early marriage, teenage pregnancy, domestic responsibilities, and financial constraints. This indicates that structural and policy-level interventions alone are insufficient to address persistent gender inequalities in education.

Emerging evidence suggests that household-level dynamics play a critical role in shaping children's educational outcomes. While existing studies in Uganda have largely focused on institutional and policy barriers, limited attention has been given to parental decision-making processes within households. Decisions regarding school enrolment, continuation, and allocation of limited educational resources are often influenced by gender norms, cultural beliefs, and intra-household power relations. In many cases, patriarchal structures grant greater decision-making authority to male household heads, which may result in the prioritisation of boys' education over that of girls when resources are constrained. These dynamics highlight the importance of examining how social and cultural factors within households contribute to unequal educational outcomes.

In Mbarara District, although primary school enrolment reflects near gender parity, disparities in retention and progression persist, particularly among girls. These disparities are likely shaped by the interaction of socio-cultural expectations, economic pressures, and unequal power relations within households. However, there is limited empirical evidence specifically examining how these gendered dynamics influence parental decision-making on children's education in the district. The absence of such context-specific understanding limits the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in education and risks perpetuating existing disparities. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how gender norms, intra-household power relations, and socio-economic factors interact to influence parental decision-making regarding children's education in Mbarara District, and how these decisions contribute to unequal educational outcomes between boys and girls.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 Main Objective

To examine how gender norms and intra-household decision-making power influence parental decisions regarding children's enrolment, retention, and the allocation of educational resources between boys and girls in Mbarara District.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To examine parental decision-making in children's school enrolment in Mbarara District.
2. To explore how decision-making power between fathers and mothers influences the allocation of educational resources between boys and girls.
3. To analyse how intra-household decision-making power affects children's enrolment, retention, and educational resource allocation in Mbarara District.

1.4 Research Questions

4. How do parents make decisions regarding children's school enrolment in Mbarara District?
5. How does decision-making power between fathers and mothers influence the allocation of educational resources between boys and girls?
6. How does intra-household decision-making power affect children's enrolment, retention, and educational resource allocation in Mbarara District?

1.5 Scope of the Study

1.5.1 Time Scope

The study will focus on parental decision-making patterns regarding children's education within the current socio-economic and gender context of Mbarara District. The study focused on a 4 year period from 2022. This four-month duration is considered adequate to facilitate comprehensive fieldwork activities, including data collection through interviews, transcription of responses, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the compilation and submission of the final research report.

1.5.2 Content Scope

This study focuses on analysing gender dynamics in parental decision-making regarding children's education in Mbarara District. Specifically, it examines how gender norms, cultural beliefs, household power relations between fathers and mothers, and socio-economic factors influence decisions concerning children's school enrolment, retention, progression, and

allocation of educational resources. The study explores parental attitudes toward boys' and girls' education, differences in expectations for sons and daughters, and how economic constraints shape prioritisation within households. However, the study does not focus on school-level factors such as curriculum, teacher effectiveness, or institutional policies, except where they directly intersect with parental decision-making processes.

1.5.3 Geographical Scope

The study will be conducted in Mbarara District, located in southwestern Uganda. The district is selected due to its mix of rural and peri-urban communities, diverse socio-cultural practices, and observable patterns of gendered educational participation. The research will target selected households within chosen sub-counties of Mbarara District, specifically parents or guardians with school-going children, as they are directly involved in making educational decisions.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides an in-depth understanding of how gender dynamics influence parental decision-making regarding children's education in Mbarara District. By examining the role of gender norms, cultural beliefs, household power relations, and socio-economic factors in shaping educational decisions, the study will generate evidence that can inform gender-responsive policies and interventions aimed at promoting equitable educational opportunities for both boys and girls. The findings will be valuable to policymakers, particularly the Ministry of Education and district education authorities, by highlighting household-level factors that contribute to disparities in educational access and retention. Additionally, the study will support non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations working on gender equality and education by offering insights that can guide community sensitization and empowerment programs. Academically, the research will contribute to existing literature on gender and education by providing localized evidence from Mbarara District, thereby serving as a reference for future studies on gender relations and household decision-making in Uganda and similar contexts.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that explains how gender dynamics within households influence parental decision-making regarding children's education. In this study,

gender dynamics are conceptualized as the interaction of gender norms, cultural beliefs, intra-household power relations, and socio-economic factors that shape parents' attitudes and behaviours toward educational investment. These factors operate as independent variables that influence the dependent variable, which is parental decision-making regarding children's education.

Gender norms and cultural beliefs shape perceptions about the roles and future expectations of boys and girls, potentially influencing preferences for enrolment, retention, and level of investment in education. Household power relations, particularly the distribution of decision-making authority between fathers and mothers, determine whose preferences dominate in allocating educational resources. Socio-economic factors such as household income, parental education level, and employment status may further moderate these decisions, especially when families face financial constraints. These independent variables interact to influence parental choices concerning school enrolment, continuation, resource allocation, and prioritization between sons and daughters.

The framework assumes that where gender norms are rigid and decision-making power is unequal, girls may be disadvantaged in educational opportunities. Conversely, where gender norms are more egalitarian and decision-making power is shared, educational decisions are more likely to be equitable. The study therefore examines how these interconnected factors influence the nature and outcomes of parental decision-making in Mbarara District.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature related to gender dynamics and parental decision-making regarding children's education. The purpose of this chapter is to examine theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and scholarly debates that explain how gender norms, household power relations, and socio-economic factors influence educational decisions within families. The review draws from global, regional, and Ugandan contexts in order to situate the study within broader academic discourse while identifying gaps that justify the current research. The chapter is organized into the theoretical review, conceptual review, and empirical review, culminating in the identification of knowledge gaps that the study seeks to address.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Gender Role Theory, Social Norms Theory, and Feminist Theory, which collectively provide a solid basis for understanding how gender relations within households influence parental decision-making regarding children's education.

2.1.1 Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory posits that society assigns different roles, expectations, and responsibilities to males and females based on socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity, which are internalized through socialisation within families and communities (Eagly & Wood, 2020). These gendered expectations influence parental perceptions of sons' and daughters' educational needs. For example, boys may be perceived as future economic providers deserving greater educational investment, while girls are socialized toward domestic roles, thus receiving less prioritisation in educational decision-making. In sub-Saharan contexts, gender role expectations have been found to significantly influence schooling decisions, often limiting girls' continued educational participation (Kabir & Hassan, 2023). Mugisa (2018) found that gender roles significantly influenced pupil retention in primary schools in Wakiso District, with girls more likely to be withdrawn from school due to domestic responsibilities. The study demonstrated that deeply entrenched gender role expectations shaped parents' decisions about which children to keep in school when household resources were limited.

2.1.2 Social Norms Theory

Social Norms Theory emphasises that individual behaviour and choices are shaped by shared beliefs about what is acceptable within a community (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Parental decisions regarding education are thus influenced by community norms about gender roles, marriage expectations, and economic productivity. Where norms perpetuate beliefs that girls should focus on household labour or early marriage, parents may be more likely to deprioritise girls' schooling (UNICEF, 2023). Conversely, communities that value education for both genders can foster more equitable decision-making in households (UNESCO, 2023). Mugisa (2025) examined how social norms shape agency in East African contexts, finding that community expectations about gender roles created powerful constraints on individual decision-making, particularly for women and girls. The study highlighted that changing these norms required sustained community engagement and the involvement of respected community leaders.

2.1.3 Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory provides a critical lens for analysing power relations and structural inequalities within households. It posits that patriarchal systems often allocate decision-making authority to men, thereby limiting women's influence in decisions related to resource allocation, including education (hooks, 2021). In many rural Ugandan households, fathers or male heads hold significant control over financial decisions, while mothers' preferences, even when more supportive of girls' education, may be secondary. This unequal distribution of power can shape the differential treatment of sons and daughters in educational investment. Mugisa (2017a) applied a gender perspective to community participation in decision-making under the Collaborative Forest Management Framework, demonstrating how patriarchal power structures limited women's participation in resource-related decisions. The study found that even when policies promoted gender equality, deeply embedded cultural norms restricted women's influence in household and community decision-making. Mugisa (2017b) further explored why a gender perspective was essential in understanding community participation in decision-making, arguing that gender-blind approaches failed to capture the complex power dynamics that shaped resource allocation and access.

Together, these theories allow for a comprehensive analysis of how socially constructed gender roles, community norms, and intra-household power structures interact to shape parental

decision-making about children's education in Mbarara District. By integrating insights from these theoretical perspectives, the study moves beyond surface-level outcomes to examine the deeper gendered mechanisms that inform decisions within families. Mugisa (2026) highlighted the contested nature of gender and sexual plurality in Uganda, emphasizing that gender identities and norms are not fixed but are constantly negotiated within social, cultural, and political contexts. This perspective is valuable for understanding how gender norms in Mbarara District may be evolving in response to broader social changes.

2.2 Empirical Literature Review

2.2.1 Global Perspectives on Gender and Parental Educational Decision-Making

Globally, research demonstrates that gender norms significantly influence parental investment in children's education. Despite progress toward gender parity in enrolment, disparities persist in household-level educational decision-making. UNESCO (2023) reports that although global primary school enrolment rates are nearly equal between boys and girls, gender gaps widen at secondary levels in low-income countries due to household-level preferences and socio-cultural expectations. Studies indicate that in patriarchal contexts, boys are often perceived as long-term economic assets, leading to preferential educational investment (Eagly & Wood, 2020). Additionally, Cislighi and Heise (2020) argue that entrenched social norms continue to shape parental expectations regarding sons' and daughters' roles, influencing schooling priorities.

Empirical evidence from Asia and Latin America shows that parental education, particularly maternal education, reduces gender bias in schooling decisions (Zhong & Li, 2025). Households where mothers have higher educational attainment are more likely to support equitable educational opportunities for daughters. This suggests that parental characteristics interact with gender norms to shape decision-making outcomes. Research by Mugisa (2017b) on community participation in decision-making highlighted how education levels influenced individuals' ability to participate in and influence decisions affecting their households and communities. The study found that education, particularly for women, was associated with greater decision-making power and more equitable resource allocation within households.

2.2.2 Gender Norms and Educational Decisions in Sub-Saharan Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, gendered parental decision-making remains a significant determinant of educational access and retention. Research indicates that socio-cultural expectations regarding marriage, domestic responsibilities, and economic contribution influence how families allocate educational resources (UNICEF, 2023). In many communities, girls' education is sometimes deprioritised due to expectations of early marriage or domestic labour contributions. Mugisa (2018) found that in Wakiso District, gender norms significantly influenced pupil retention, with girls being more likely to be withdrawn from school due to domestic responsibilities and early marriage pressures. The study revealed that while both boys and girls faced barriers to education, the nature of these barriers was distinctly gendered.

A study in Ghana found that parental gender norms significantly affected girls' school continuation, even in contexts where policy frameworks promote gender equality (Nartey et al., 2025). Similarly, Kabir and Hassan (2023) found that household resource constraints often interact with gender preferences, resulting in boys being prioritised when families face financial challenges. These findings suggest that gender bias in education is not solely economic but deeply embedded in social belief systems. Mugisa (2025) explored how social norms and agency intersected in East African contexts, finding that cultural expectations about gender roles created powerful constraints on educational investment decisions. The study highlighted that these constraints were particularly pronounced in rural areas where traditional norms remained strong.

2.2.3 Household Power Dynamics and Decision-Making Authority

Household decision-making power structures also influence educational investments. Feminist-oriented empirical studies highlight that in many African households, men retain primary authority over financial decisions, including school fee payments (hooks, 2021). Where women have limited bargaining power, their preferences often more supportive of girls' schooling may not translate into final decisions. Mugisa (2017a) examined gender dynamics in community participation in decision-making under the Collaborative Forest Management Framework, finding that patriarchal power structures limited women's influence in household and community decisions. The study demonstrated that even when women had preferences for certain resource allocation decisions, their limited bargaining power constrained their ability to influence outcomes.

Research in Uganda indicates that women's limited economic autonomy constrains their influence in household decisions affecting children (Nakato & Adiga, 2024). When fathers control household income, educational decisions tend to reflect traditional gender norms. Conversely, households characterized by joint decision-making demonstrate more equitable educational investments between sons and daughters (UN Women, 2022). Mugisa (2017b) argued that understanding gender perspectives in decision-making was essential for developing effective interventions, as gender-blind approaches failed to address the underlying power dynamics that shaped resource allocation. The study emphasized the importance of empowering women economically and socially to increase their bargaining power in household decisions.

2.2.4 Socio-Economic Factors and Gendered Educational Investment

Economic vulnerability further shapes gendered educational decisions. In low-income households, financial hardship forces parents to prioritise certain children when resources are insufficient to educate all (World Bank, 2022). Evidence shows that in such situations, boys are often retained in school while girls are withdrawn, especially at secondary level (UNESCO, 2023). Mugisa (2018) found that in Wakiso District, economic constraints combined with gender preferences to create systematic disadvantages for girls' education. The study found that when household resources were limited, families often prioritized boys' education over girls', reflecting deeply embedded cultural beliefs about the value of educating sons versus daughters.

However, emerging evidence suggests gradual shifts in some communities where increased awareness of the economic returns to girls' education has influenced parental attitudes (UNICEF, 2023). Studies indicate that families increasingly recognize that educating daughters contributes to long-term household welfare and poverty reduction. Mugisa (2026) highlighted how social changes and increased visibility of gender issues were creating contested spaces where traditional gender norms were being challenged and renegotiated. The study suggested that while progress was uneven, there was growing recognition of the value of girls' education and gender equality in many communities.

2.3 Identified Gaps in Existing Literature

Although substantial research exists on gender disparities in educational access, limited empirical studies focus specifically on intra-household gender dynamics in parental decision-making at district level in Uganda, particularly in Mbarara District. Most studies examine national-level statistics or enrolment trends rather than exploring how household negotiations, gender norms, and power relations interact to shape decisions. Mugisa's (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2025) work on gender, decision-making, and education in Uganda has provided valuable insights into how gender norms shape household and community decisions. However, the research has primarily focused on other districts (Wakiso) or other sectors (forest management), leaving a gap in understanding gender dynamics in parental decision-making on education in Mbarara District specifically.

The lack of localized, context-specific research on gender dynamics in parental decision-making in Mbarara District limits the ability to design effective interventions that address the specific cultural, economic, and social factors shaping educational decisions in this context. Furthermore, the influence of extended family members, children's own agency, and post-pandemic changes in parental attitudes toward education remain underexplored in the literature. This gap highlights the need for localized, context-specific research to better understand how gender dynamics influence parental decision-making regarding children's education in Mbarara District. As Mugisa (2025) argued, understanding the interplay between social norms and agency is essential for developing effective interventions that promote gender equality and educational equity.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology used to examine gender dynamics in parental decision-making regarding children's enrolment, retention, and progression in primary education in Mbarara District, Uganda. It outlines the research design, study area, target population, sampling procedures, data collection methods, research instruments, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. The methodological choices are guided by the study objectives and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Two.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to explore in-depth parental experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes regarding children's education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Gender dynamics within households involve complex social interactions, cultural norms, and power relations that require detailed and context-specific understanding (Bryman, 2021). The study is further informed by phenomenological principles in order to capture parents' lived experiences, particularly how gender norms and intra-household decision-making power shape educational choices (Moustakas, 2020). A cross-sectional approach is employed, with data collected at a single point in time between February and May 2026, allowing the study to capture current patterns of parental decision-making within existing socio-cultural contexts (Bryman, 2021).

3.2 Study Area

The study will be conducted in Mbarara District in south-western Uganda. The district borders Kiruhura, Sheema, Ntungamo, and Ibanda districts and comprises both Mbarara City and surrounding sub-counties such as Kakoba, Biharwe, Nyakayojo, Rubaya, and Kashari. The area includes a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural communities, with major economic activities including cattle keeping, crop farming, and trade (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2024). Mbarara District is purposively selected because it has achieved near gender parity in primary school enrolment, yet disparities persist in retention and progression, particularly among girls

(Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2025). In addition, the district reflects a combination of strong patriarchal traditions and evolving socio-economic conditions, making it a suitable context for examining how gender dynamics influence parental decision-making (Karokora, 2014).

3.3 Target Population

The target population for this study comprises parents and guardians with children of primary school-going age, typically between 6 and 12 years, residing in Mbarara District. Both fathers and mothers are included to capture gendered perspectives in household decision-making processes (Nakato & Adiga, 2024). In addition, the study targets key informants such as Local Council leaders, Community Development Officers, Parish Chiefs, and head teachers, who possess relevant knowledge on community norms, gender relations, and educational practices. These participants provide contextual and institutional insights that complement data obtained from parents (Patton, 2023).

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The sample size for this qualitative study is guided by the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until no new information emerges (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). The study will involve 30 parents, comprising 15 fathers and 15 mothers, to allow for in-depth exploration and comparison of gendered perspectives in decision-making. Additionally, 10 key informants will be selected, bringing the total sample size to 40 participants. This size is considered sufficient to generate rich and detailed data within the scope of the study (Morse, 2021).

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who meet the study criteria (Palinkas et al., 2023). Parent participants will be identified with the assistance of Local Council leaders and school administrators, who will help locate households with children of primary school-going age. Selection will be based on having children within the specified age range, residing in the area for at least three years, and ensuring representation of both male- and female-headed households. Equal representation of fathers and mothers will be maintained to capture gender differences in perspectives. Key informants will be selected based on their roles and knowledge of education and community dynamics (Patton, 2023). Snowball sampling may also be used to identify additional participants, particularly fathers who may be less accessible (Noy, 2022).

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected using in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Semi-structured in-depth interviews will be conducted with parents to explore their decision-making processes, perceptions of education, and the influence of gender norms and household power relations (Kallio et al., 2021). Fathers and mothers will be interviewed separately to ensure independent responses and minimise bias (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Key informant interviews will be conducted to obtain broader insights into community norms, institutional perspectives, and observable patterns in parental decision-making (Lokot, 2021). In addition, two focus group discussions will be conducted, one with fathers and one with mothers, to explore shared experiences and collective understandings of gender roles and educational decisions (Nyumba et al., 2020).

Secondary data will be obtained from district education records, government reports, and existing research studies. These sources will provide contextual background and support triangulation of findings (Bowen, 2022).

3.6 Research Instruments

Data will be collected using semi-structured interview guides for both parents and key informants, as well as a focus group discussion guide and a document review checklist. The interview guides will contain open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives, focusing on children's enrolment, resource allocation, gender perceptions, and decision-making processes within households (Kallio et al., 2021). The focus group discussion guide will facilitate interaction among participants and explore shared norms and experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2021). The document review checklist will be used to systematically extract relevant information from secondary data sources.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness will be ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2021). Credibility will be enhanced through triangulation of data sources and methods, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field (Denzin, 2023). Transferability will be achieved through detailed descriptions of the study context and participants (Geertz, 2022). Dependability will be ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of

all research procedures and decisions (Nowell et al., 2022). Confirmability will be strengthened through reflexivity and systematic documentation of data to minimise researcher bias (Korstjens & Moser, 2022).

3.8 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher will obtain permission from relevant authorities before commencing data collection. An introductory letter will be presented to district and sub-county officials to facilitate access to communities. Pre-testing of research instruments will be conducted in a neighbouring area to refine the tools (Majid et al., 2022). Data collection will take place over a period of twelve weeks, with interviews conducted at times and locations convenient for participants. All interviews and discussions will be conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality and will be audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes will also be taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2022).

3.9 Data Analysis

Data will be analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. The researcher will familiarise themselves with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, followed by systematic coding to identify meaningful patterns (Saldaña, 2021). Codes will be organised into themes related to gender norms, decision-making power, and educational outcomes. Both inductive and deductive approaches will be used, guided by the study objectives and theoretical framework. Qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti will be used to organise and manage the data (Silver & Lewins, 2022). The analysis process will be iterative, allowing emerging insights to inform further interpretation.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant authorities before conducting the study. Participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the study, and their voluntary consent will be obtained prior to participation (World Medical Association, 2022). Confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data (Kaiser, 2021). Interviews will be conducted in private settings to protect participants' privacy. Given the sensitivity of discussing intra-household power relations, interviews with fathers and mothers will be

conducted separately to minimise discomfort and encourage openness (Mackenzie et al., 2022). Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The researcher will also ensure respect for local customs and cultural practices throughout the research process (Resnik, 2020).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the integrated findings and discussion of the study on "Gender Norms and Household Power in Parental Decision-Making on Children's Education in Mbarara District, Uganda." The results are derived from in-depth interviews with a father (Respondent F1) and a mother (Respondent M1), a key informant interview with a head teacher (Mr. Peter Tumwesigye), a focus group discussion with six parents (P1-P6), and an observation checklist conducted in Nyakayojo Division. The findings are presented thematically, with each subsection presenting a key finding, its significance, supporting data, theoretical interpretation, links to literature, and implications.

4.1 Household Power Relations and Decision-Making Authority in Education

The study found that fathers predominantly hold final decision-making authority in educational matters, with mothers playing a supporting role in initiating discussions and providing daily practical support. This patriarchal decision-making structure positions fathers as primary gatekeepers of educational resources and choices. The dominance of fathers in educational decision-making has profound implications for children's educational outcomes, particularly for girls. When fathers' attitudes toward girls' education are negative or when they prioritize sons, mothers' advocacy for daughters is constrained by their limited decision-making power and economic dependence. This power imbalance perpetuates gender inequalities in educational access, retention, and resource allocation.

The father respondent articulated this power dynamic clearly: "In our home, we usually discuss together as husband and wife, but as the father I normally have the final say, especially when money is involved." The mother respondent confirmed this pattern, while highlighting her role as the initiator: "In our household, we usually talk about it together, but my husband normally has the final say because he is considered the head of the family. I am the one who first notices that the child is ready for school because I spend more time with the children." The key informant head teacher observed: "In many households, fathers make the major education decisions, especially decisions involving money. The father is usually seen as the head of the

family and the main provider. He decides whether school fees will be paid, which school the child will attend, and whether the child can continue to the next level." FGD participant P2 Grace noted the gendered division of decision-making: "Mothers usually notice first that the child is ready for school because they stay more with the children. But in many homes, the father has to agree because he is expected to provide the money." The observation checklist further documented this power dynamic spatially, with girls visible around domestic spaces and boys around livelihood areas, reflecting the gendered organization of household life.

These findings align with Kabeer's (1999) framework on household bargaining power, which posits that decision-making authority is shaped by individuals' control over resources and their perceived contribution to household welfare. Fathers' control over financial resources derived from farming, cattle keeping, and trading positions them as primary decision-makers. However, Kabeer's framework also highlights the importance of "perceived contribution," suggesting that mothers' non-monetary contributions (childcare, domestic work, and daily educational support) should theoretically grant them greater bargaining power than observed. The persistence of patriarchal norms limits the translation of mothers' contributions into decision-making authority, reflecting what Sen (1990) described as the "cooperative conflict" in households where one party's interests are systematically prioritized. The findings also resonate with Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "symbolic violence," where patriarchal authority is maintained not through overt coercion but through the internalization of gender norms that position men as natural household heads. Both mothers and fathers expressed these norms as normal and expected, indicating the deep cultural embeddedness of patriarchal decision-making.

The finding that fathers hold final decision-making authority in education aligns with research across Sub-Saharan Africa. Njuki et al. (2011) found that in rural Uganda, men's control over income translated into greater decision-making power in agricultural households. Similarly, Oduro et al. (2014) documented patriarchal decision-making structures in Ghanaian households, where women's bargaining power was limited by cultural norms and economic dependence. The "father as household head" narrative is reinforced by patrilineal kinship systems common in many Ugandan communities, where lineage and property inheritance are traced through the male line (Tamale, 2011). Mugisa (2017a) found similar patterns in community decision-making under the Collaborative Forest Management Framework, where patriarchal power structures limited women's participation and influence in decisions affecting household and community resources. The mother's role as the "first to notice" children's readiness reflects what Agarwal (1997) terms "gender-differentiated knowledge," where

women's daily contact with children generates valuable information that is often undervalued in household decision-making. This finding is consistent with research by Mwangi and Ndirangu (2012) in Kenya, which found that mothers were more attuned to children's educational needs but lacked the authority to act on this knowledge. Mugisa (2017b) argued that understanding these gender perspectives in decision-making was essential for developing effective interventions, as gender-blind approaches failed to address the underlying power dynamics that shaped resource allocation.

These findings have significant practical implications. Interventions aimed at promoting educational equity must engage both fathers and mothers in decision-making processes. Father-targeted sensitization is essential, as fathers' attitudes toward girls' education directly influence resource allocation. Schools should actively encourage fathers' participation in meetings and school activities. Economic empowerment programs for mothers could increase their bargaining power in household decisions, enabling them to advocate more effectively for their children's education.

4.2 Cultural Beliefs and Gender Norms Shaping Educational Decisions

Cultural beliefs position boys as future household heads requiring education, while girls are perceived as temporary family members destined for marriage, leading to differential investment in children's education. Gendered domestic responsibilities and safety concerns further constrain girls' educational participation. These cultural norms represent the primary mechanism through which gender inequality is perpetuated in education. The perception that boys' education yields greater returns to the family because sons "remain in the family" and "carry the family name" leads to sons being prioritized when resources are limited. Girls, seen as "marrying and going to another family," are subject to lower investment. This cultural logic is reinforced by gendered division of domestic labour, where girls' responsibilities reduce study time and school attendance, and by safety concerns that restrict girls' mobility.

The father respondent acknowledged these cultural beliefs while distancing himself from them: "Some people still say a boy must be educated because he remains in the family and will support the home later. For girls, some people say she may get married and benefit another family. Personally, I do not fully agree with that, but I know it is still a common belief." The

mother respondent similarly noted: "In this community, people still believe that a boy is the future head of the family and should be prepared to own property and provide. A girl is sometimes seen as someone who will marry and go to another family. Because of that, some parents fear investing much in girls." The key informant head teacher observed: "One common belief is that a boy carries the family name and should therefore be supported to go far in school. Some parents still believe that if a boy studies, he will come back and support the family, inherit property, and take care of parents in old age. For girls, some parents still think that a girl will eventually marry and join another family." FGD participant P1 John confirmed: "The common belief is that a boy is the future head of the family. Parents say a boy should study so that he can get work and support the family."

On gendered domestic responsibilities, the father respondent noted: "Household work affects girls more than boys. Girls are expected to cook, fetch water, wash utensils, and help younger children. Boys may graze animals or dig, but girls' work is more daily and can reduce their time for homework." FGD participant P4 Mary added: "Household work affects children, especially girls. A girl may wake up early to wash utensils, sweep, fetch water, or help with younger children before going to school. By the time she reaches school, she is already tired."

These findings can be understood through the lens of human capital theory (Becker, 1964), which suggests that parents invest in children expected to yield the highest returns. In patrilineal societies, sons are expected to provide old-age support, making their education a "better investment" from parents' perspective. However, this rational choice perspective must be tempered by recognition that these calculations are shaped by cultural norms that may not reflect reality, as educated daughters often provide substantial support to their families, as many respondents acknowledged. The gendered division of domestic labour reflects what Connell (1987) terms the "gender order," the socially constructed pattern of power relations between men and women that structures everyday life. Girls' domestic responsibilities are not merely practical arrangements but are part of the socialization process that prepares them for their future roles as wives and mothers, while boys are prepared for public roles as providers and household heads. This differential socialization reinforces the very gender inequalities that limit girls' educational opportunities. Mugisa (2025) found that social norms about gender roles in East African contexts created powerful constraints on individual agency, with individuals often conforming to community expectations even when they held different personal beliefs. Mugisa (2018) similarly found that gender norms significantly influenced pupil retention in

primary schools in Wakiso District, with cultural beliefs about girls' domestic roles leading to higher dropout rates for girls.

The safety concerns expressed by parents, particularly fear of pregnancy and "spoiling," reflect what Cornwall (2005) describes as the "sexualization" of girls' education, where girls' bodies become sites of moral concern. This creates a paradox where girls are simultaneously seen as requiring protection from the risks of education while being denied the opportunities education provides. This is a manifestation of what Nussbaum (2000) identifies as the "capabilities approach" failure, where girls' capabilities are limited not by lack of potential but by social arrangements that restrict their opportunities. Mugisa (2026) highlighted how gender and sexual plurality are contested terrains in Uganda, with traditional norms often restricting women's and girls' autonomy and opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

The "son preference" phenomenon observed in this study is well-documented across Sub-Saharan Africa. Lloyd et al. (2000) found that in many African societies, boys' education is prioritized because sons are expected to carry on the family name and provide old-age support. Bantebya et al. (2014) documented the "double burden" faced by girls in rural Uganda, where domestic responsibilities combine with school attendance to reduce academic performance and increase dropout rates. Research by Muhanguzi et al. (2013) in Uganda found that gendered expectations around domestic work were a primary reason for girls' lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates. Similarly, Jones et al. (2017) found that safety concerns and pregnancy fears were significant barriers to girls' education in rural Uganda, with parents withdrawing girls from school to protect them from perceived risks. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b) demonstrated how gender norms shaped participation in community decision-making, finding that women's participation was often constrained by cultural expectations about their roles and responsibilities.

The finding that attitudes are gradually changing aligns with UNESCO's (2020) Global Education Monitoring Report, which noted increasing educational aspirations for girls across Sub-Saharan Africa. The father respondent's statement that "education is important for both boys and girls" and that "a girl who is educated can help herself, help her parents, and also make better decisions in marriage" reflects this shift. However, the persistence of cultural beliefs in practice, even when attitudes have changed, highlights the gap between cognitive acceptance and behavioral change. Mugisa (2026) argued that while there is increasing visibility and contestation of traditional gender norms in Uganda, deeply embedded cultural

beliefs continue to shape behavior in practice, creating a contested terrain where progress is uneven.

Addressing cultural norms requires multifaceted interventions. Community-based sensitization should engage religious and traditional leaders, who hold significant influence in rural communities. Schools should implement gender-responsive teaching practices that challenge stereotypes and encourage girls' participation. Parents should be educated about the benefits of girls' education, including economic returns and social benefits. Boys should be involved in programs that challenge traditional masculinity norms and promote shared domestic responsibilities.

4.3 Educational Resource Allocation and Gender Disparities

Educational resources are allocated unequally between boys and girls, with boys prioritized when household resources are limited. Fathers control major education spending, while mothers manage hidden costs. Girls' specific needs, particularly sanitary materials and personal items, are frequently overlooked in male-controlled household budgets. The gendered allocation of educational resources represents the most direct mechanism through which gender norms translate into educational disadvantage for girls. When households face financial constraints, the decision of which child to prioritize becomes critical. The cultural logic that boys' education brings greater returns leads to girls being "waited" or sent to cheaper schools, while boys continue. This creates cumulative disadvantage, where girls' educational trajectories are repeatedly disrupted, reducing their chances of progression and completion. The control of major educational spending by fathers means that girls' specific needs which mothers are more likely to recognize are often not addressed. This creates a gap between what girls need to remain in school (sanitary materials, uniforms, personal items) and what is provided. The result is absenteeism, lost confidence, and eventual dropout.

The father respondent admitted: "In the past, I would have thought first about the boy because of the belief that he must finish school and support the family. But now I try to look at need and performance, not gender. Still, I know many fathers in the village first support boys when money is not enough." He also acknowledged the hidden costs of girls' education: "There are also extra needs for girls, especially as they grow older, such as sanitary pads and personal care. Some fathers do not consider those things, and that can affect girls' attendance." The mother respondent confirmed that gender influences prioritization: "When money is limited, we first

look at which child is likely to be sent home first or who is in candidate class... But sometimes gender comes in indirectly. My husband may say the boy should not miss school because he must perform well. I usually insist that girls should also not miss school because when girls miss school, they may fall behind or become discouraged." The key informant head teacher observed: "Some fathers also prioritize sons when resources are limited. They may say the boy must continue because he will support the family in future... Girls may be shifted to cheaper schools, sent home to wait, or asked to help at home until money is available." FGD participant P5 Joseph noted: "When money is enough, parents can enroll both. But when money is limited, many parents will first think of the boy because of the belief that boys support the family later."

On mothers' contribution, the father respondent noted: "I contribute most, but my wife also contributes. For example, I may pay school fees, while she buys books, pens, or food for the children. Sometimes she sells produce or saves from small work and helps when I delay. I cannot say she does nothing. The father may be seen as the main provider, but mothers carry many hidden costs that people do not count."

These findings reflect the concept of "intra-household resource allocation" as theorized by Agarwal (1997). In this framework, household resources are not pooled and distributed equally but are allocated through bargaining processes shaped by power relations. Fathers' greater economic power through control of agricultural income, cattle, and other productive assets gives them greater bargaining power in decisions about resource allocation. Mothers' contributions, though significant, are in the form of "hidden costs" (books, food, uniform maintenance, labour) that are not recognized as economic contributions in the same way as fathers' school fee payments. The prioritization of boys when resources are limited reflects the "investment logic" (Becker, 1964), where parents allocate resources to children expected to yield the highest returns. However, this logic is flawed in two respects. First, it ignores the growing evidence that girls' education yields significant economic and social returns (World Bank, 2018). Second, it assumes that all education investment is fungible, when in fact the costs of girls' education (sanitary materials, safety measures, etc.) are qualitatively different from those of boys. Mugisa (2017b) argued that understanding gender perspectives in resource allocation was essential for developing effective interventions, as gender-blind approaches failed to address the underlying power dynamics that shaped resource allocation decisions.

The gap between fathers' acknowledgment of girls' needs and their failure to address them reflects what Sen (1990) terms "perception failure," the inability of men to recognize women's

needs as equally important. This cognitive gap is maintained by the social construction of gender, where women's needs are seen as secondary or private matters. Mugisa (2018) found similar patterns in Wakiso District, where parents acknowledged the importance of education for both boys and girls but still prioritized boys when resources were limited, reflecting the persistence of deeply embedded gender biases despite changing attitudes. The finding that boys are prioritized when resources are limited is consistent with research by Nampungu and Nsubuga (2015) in Uganda, which found that households with limited resources were more likely to invest in boys' education. Similarly, Assaad et al. (2010) found that in Egypt, household economic shocks led to girls being withdrawn from school more frequently than boys. The recognition of mothers' "hidden costs" in education aligns with research by Oduro et al. (2014) on "unpaid care work" in Ghana, which found that women's contributions to children's education through domestic work, school preparation, and feeding were systematically undervalued in household decision-making. Similarly, Doss (2013) found that women's assets and income had a greater positive impact on children's education and health than men's assets, highlighting the importance of women's economic empowerment. The finding that girls' specific needs, particularly sanitary materials, are often overlooked is consistent with Crofts (2012) research on menstrual hygiene management in Sub-Saharan Africa. Crofts found that inadequate access to sanitary materials was a primary reason for girls' school absenteeism and dropout, yet this issue was often not prioritized in household budgets. Mugisa (2017a) found similar patterns in community decision-making, where women's specific needs were often overlooked in resource allocation decisions due to patriarchal power structures.

These findings highlight the need for interventions that address both poverty and gender norms. Economic support programs such as scholarships, school feeding programs, and fee waivers can reduce the financial pressure that leads to gendered prioritization. However, these programs must be combined with gender-sensitization that challenges the cultural logic of "boys' education as investment." Mothers' economic empowerment through access to credit, skills training, and income-generating activities can increase their bargaining power in household decisions, enabling them to advocate for all children's education. Programs should also specifically address the "hidden costs" of girls' education by providing sanitary materials, uniforms, and other needs. Schools should include fathers in sensitization about girls' needs, as fathers may not recognize these needs without education.

4.4 Enrolment Patterns: Equal Access Versus Unequal Support

While enrolment appears equal at primary level, gender disparities emerge in retention, progression, and the quality of support provided to boys and girls. Equal access to schooling does not translate into equal educational opportunities. The finding that "access is almost equal but support is not" is critical for understanding gender inequality in education. At enrolment, parents may bring both boys and girls to school because they know education is expected. However, the quality of support provided to children once enrolled differs by gender. Boys may receive more attention in terms of fees payment, school choice, encouragement, and progression, while girls face domestic work burdens, lack of sanitary support, and lower expectations. This creates a "pipeline" problem where girls are more likely to drop out or underperform as they progress through schooling. Mugisa (2018) found similar patterns in Wakiso District, where gender differences in retention emerged not at enrolment but as children progressed through primary school, with girls more likely to be withdrawn due to domestic responsibilities and cultural expectations.

The key informant head teacher articulated this distinction clearly: "At primary enrolment level, I can say access is almost equal because most parents bring both boys and girls to school. But equal access is not the same as equal support. Boys and girls may both be enrolled, but girls may not receive the same attention, study time, sanitary support, or protection from domestic burdens... On paper, access may look equal, but in practice the experience of boys and girls is different." FGD participant P3 Peter noted: "At the beginning, especially primary level, many parents enroll both boys and girls. You can see many girls in lower classes. But as they grow older, the difference starts showing." FGD participant P4 Mary added: "In lower primary, girls are many. But later, some girls start missing school because of home responsibilities, lack of sanitary pads, or pregnancy. So enrolment may look equal at first, but retention is not always equal." The father respondent acknowledged the gendered differences in expectations: "Before, I used to think boys should go further because they carry the family name. But now I expect both boys and girls to study and become independent... The difference is that society still puts more pressure on boys to provide and more pressure on girls to behave well and prepare for marriage."

These findings can be understood through the framework of "substantive equality" (Sen, 1992), which distinguishes between formal equality (equal enrolment) and substantive equality (equal opportunities to benefit from education). Formal equality, equal numbers of boys and girls in

school, does not ensure that children have equal opportunities to learn, progress, and succeed. Substantive equality requires addressing the systemic barriers that prevent girls from fully participating and benefiting from education. The concept of the "education pipeline" (UNESCO, 2020) is useful here. This framework shows that while gender gaps at enrolment have narrowed, disparities remain at later stages of education. The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, where girls are more likely to drop out at each stage of education, reflects the cumulative effect of gendered barriers that increase as children age. Mugisa (2025) found that social norms about gender roles in East African contexts created powerful constraints on girls' educational progression, with community expectations about marriage and domestic responsibilities leading to higher dropout rates for girls as they approached adolescence.

The finding of equal enrolment but unequal support is consistent with global education trends. UNESCO (2020) reported that while primary enrolment has achieved gender parity in many countries, gender disparities persist in retention, progression, and learning outcomes. The "enrolment parity but retention inequality" pattern is particularly pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where gender gaps at secondary school are wider than at primary level. Research by Mensch et al. (2006) found that in many African countries, girls' school attendance and performance were negatively affected by domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and pregnancy, while boys were more likely to drop out due to economic pressures and peer influence. Similarly, Psaki (2016) found that while enrolment gaps have narrowed, gender inequalities in educational outcomes persist due to systemic barriers that affect girls' ability to attend and benefit from schooling. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b) argued that addressing these systemic barriers required understanding the gendered power dynamics that shaped resource allocation and decision-making in households and communities.

These findings suggest that interventions must go beyond increasing enrolment to address the quality of support provided to children once enrolled. Schools should monitor not only enrolment but also attendance, performance, and progression by gender. Targeted support should be provided to girls who face domestic work burdens, lack of sanitary materials, or other barriers. Parents should be sensitized about the importance of continued support and encouragement for girls, not just enrolment. Gender-responsive teaching practices should be implemented in schools.

4.5 Retention, Progression, and Dropout: Gendered Pathways

Poverty is the primary driver of dropout, but its effects are gendered. Girls face additional barriers including pregnancy, early marriage, domestic work, and lack of sanitary support. Boys are more affected by peer pressure, casual labour, and indiscipline. Parents hold different expectations for sons and daughters, with societal pressure on boys to provide and girls to marry. The gendered pathways to dropout reflect the different social positions and expectations of boys and girls. While poverty affects all children, the specific mechanisms through which it leads to dropout differ by gender. For girls, poverty combines with cultural norms and gender-specific barriers (pregnancy, early marriage, domestic work, lack of sanitary support) to create a set of challenges that are qualitatively different from those faced by boys. For boys, poverty combines with economic pressures (casual labour, boda boda work) and peer influence to create a different pathway to dropout. Mugisa (2018) found similar gendered pathways to dropout in Wakiso District, with girls more likely to drop out due to pregnancy, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities, while boys were more likely to drop out due to engagement in casual labour and peer pressure.

The fact that parents hold different expectations for sons and daughters, with boys expected to "provide" and girls expected to "marry," has profound implications for how children see themselves and their educational futures. When girls internalize the expectation that their future is marriage and domestic work, they may not invest in education as seriously as boys who are told they must become successful providers. This differential socialization reinforces gender inequality across generations. Mugisa (2026) argued that the contested nature of gender and sexual plurality in Uganda created a complex terrain where traditional expectations about gender roles often clashed with emerging opportunities for girls and women, creating tensions that affected educational outcomes.

The father respondent noted: "No child has completely dropped out, but there was a time one child missed almost a full term because of fees... In some homes, when fees are not enough, a girl may be told to stay home first while the boy continues. That is because people believe the boy's education brings more returns to the family." He also recognized the different challenges facing boys and girls: "I have seen other families where girls drop out because of pregnancy, early marriage, or lack of support. Boys may drop out to work, ride boda boda, or do casual labour, but girls are more affected by domestic issues and pregnancy." The mother respondent noted: "If a child performs well, parents feel encouraged to continue paying. But if money is

limited, some parents may say a girl should stop and learn work or prepare for marriage. For boys, parents often try harder to push them forward." The key informant head teacher observed: "The common reasons include poverty, school fees, lack of scholastic materials, poor performance, family instability, child labour, early pregnancy, early marriage, and peer influence. For girls, pregnancy, early marriage, domestic work, and lack of sanitary support are common issues. For boys, peer groups, casual labour, boda boda work, and indiscipline are common." FGD participant P1 John noted: "Boys also have challenges. Some boys start following boda boda riders or going to trading centres. They see quick money and begin thinking school is wasting time." FGD participant P4 Mary added: "For girls, pregnancy, early marriage, too much housework, and lack of sanitary pads are common."

The gendered pathways to dropout reflect the different opportunities and constraints facing boys and girls in this context. For girls, the constraints are primarily social and cultural, including restrictions on mobility, domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and pregnancy combined with poverty. For boys, the constraints are primarily economic, including the pressure to contribute to household income, the attraction of casual labour, and the influence of peers who prioritize money over education. This pattern can be understood through the lens of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989), where gender intersects with poverty and other social positions to create distinct experiences of disadvantage. Girls in poor households face a "triple burden" of poverty, gendered domestic responsibilities, and cultural expectations around marriage and reproduction. This intersectional disadvantage is not simply additive but creates qualitatively different experiences of educational exclusion. The differential expectations for sons and daughters reflect what Bourdieu (1977) termed "habitus," the deeply internalized dispositions that shape individuals' understanding of their place in the world. Girls are socialized to see their future as domestic and marital, while boys are socialized to see their future as public and productive. This differential socialization shapes children's educational aspirations and investment, reproducing gender inequality across generations. Mugisa (2025) found that social norms about gender roles in East African contexts created powerful constraints on agency, with individuals often internalizing and reproducing gendered expectations even when they conflicted with their personal aspirations.

The finding that girls are more affected by pregnancy, early marriage, and domestic work is consistent with research across Sub-Saharan Africa. Jones et al. (2017) found that pregnancy and early marriage were among the leading causes of girls' dropout in Uganda, while Lloyd et al. (2000) found that domestic responsibilities significantly affected girls' school attendance

and performance. The finding that boys are more affected by peer influence and casual labour aligns with research by Bequele and Boyden (1988) on child labour in Africa, which found that boys were more likely to engage in paid work while girls were more likely to engage in unpaid domestic work. The "boda boda" phenomenon, motorcycle taxis that attract young men seeking income, has been identified as a growing threat to boys' education in Uganda (Tumwebaze, 2019). Research by Bantebya et al. (2014) on gender socialization in Uganda found that parents held different expectations for sons and daughters, with boys encouraged to be providers and girls to be homemakers. These expectations influenced children's educational aspirations and investment in schooling. Similarly, Murphy-Graham and Cohen (2017) found that gendered expectations around marriage and work significantly affected girls' educational outcomes across Latin America and Africa. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b) found that similar gendered patterns shaped participation in community decision-making, with women's involvement constrained by cultural expectations about their roles and responsibilities.

These findings suggest that retention and progression require gender-specific interventions. For girls, interventions should address pregnancy prevention, support for pregnant girls to return to school, measures to reduce domestic work burdens, provision of sanitary materials, and safety measures for travel to school. For boys, interventions should address economic pressures through school feeding programs, vocational skills training, and peer support programs that promote positive masculinity. Schools should implement comprehensive guidance and counselling programs that address the specific challenges facing boys and girls. Parents should be sensitized about the importance of equal expectations and support for sons and daughters. Community leaders should speak out against early marriage and child labour. Government should implement and enforce policies that protect children's right to education and support vulnerable families.

4.6 Extended Family and Community Dynamics

Extended family members play a dual role in educational decisions, either supporting or undermining children's education depending on their attitudes. Community norms reinforce gender roles through social pressure and expectations, affecting household decisions. The extended family's influence extends household decision-making beyond the nuclear family, incorporating grandparents, uncles, aunties, and clan members. This influence can be positive when relatives encourage education and provide financial support, but it can be negative when

they reinforce harmful gender norms or push for early marriage. Understanding the extended family's role is critical for designing interventions that address the full range of social influences on educational decisions. Community norms exert powerful pressure on households, shaping what is considered acceptable behavior. The observation that "visitors will complain if a boy is washing plates while a girl is seated reading" illustrates the social enforcement of gendered roles. This community-level pressure constrains parents' ability to adopt more equitable practices, even when they desire to do so. Mugisa (2025) found that social norms in East African contexts were maintained through community enforcement, with individuals who deviated from expected gender roles facing social sanctions. Mugisa (2026) similarly found that gender norms in Uganda were contested and negotiated within communities, with traditional expectations often reinforced through community pressure and social sanctions.

FGD participant P1 John noted: "Extended family can help by paying fees or advising parents. Some uncles and aunties support children when parents fail. But they can also bring negative ideas. A grandparent may say, 'Why are you wasting money on a girl?' Such words influence parents." FGD participant P4 Mary added: "Some relatives also push for early marriage when a girl becomes pregnant or when the family is poor. Instead of helping the girl return to school, they say she should marry." The key informant head teacher observed: "Grandparents, uncles, aunties, and clan members may advise parents on whether a child should continue schooling. Sometimes they help positively by paying fees or encouraging education. But sometimes they reinforce traditional beliefs." On community norms, the father respondent noted: "Sometimes even visitors will complain if a boy is washing plates while a girl is seated reading. That shows how community norms affect children's education." The mother respondent confirmed: "Even when I want to share work equally, some relatives may complain and say I am spoiling the boy if I tell him to wash plates or cook." The observation checklist found "no visible posters or public messages on gender equality or girls' education," indicating gaps in community-level sensitization.

The extended family's influence can be understood through the lens of "social capital" (Bourdieu, 1986), which refers to the resources available through social networks. Extended family networks can provide social capital in the form of financial support, educational encouragement, and practical help. However, these networks can also transmit "negative social capital" in the form of harmful gender norms and expectations that constrain women's and girls' opportunities. The community norms observed in this study reflect what Connell (1987) terms the "gender regime," the institutionalized pattern of gender relations that structures social life.

In the Mbarara context, the gender regime assigns different roles, responsibilities, and expectations to men and women, boys and girls. This regime is maintained not only through individual attitudes but through social enforcement, the expectation that others will conform and the social sanctions that follow deviation. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b) found similar patterns in community decision-making, where gender regimes shaped who could participate in decisions and what influence they could have. Mugisa (2025) argued that challenging these regimes required community-level interventions that addressed both individual attitudes and the social structures that reinforced gender inequality.

The finding that extended family members can both support and undermine education is consistent with research on kinship and education in Africa. Bledsoe (1990) found that in many African societies, kinship networks play a central role in children's lives, providing both opportunities and constraints. The "fosterage" system, where children are sent to live with relatives for educational purposes, is common in many parts of Africa (Goody, 1982), but these arrangements can be exploitative when relatives prioritize their own children's education over foster children's. The influence of community norms on household decisions aligns with research by Quisumbing and Maluccio (2003) on "social norms" and "collective action" in rural communities. They found that community-level norms about gender significantly affected household decisions about resource allocation and investment in children.

These findings suggest that interventions must extend beyond the household to address extended family and community dynamics. Extended family members should be included in sensitization programs, particularly grandparents and clan leaders who hold significant influence. Community-level campaigns should challenge harmful gender norms and promote positive messages about girls' education. Religious and traditional leaders should be engaged as allies in promoting educational equity. Schools should work with community leaders to identify and support children at risk of dropping out due to family or community pressure. NGOs and government should implement community-based interventions that address the social determinants of educational inequality.

4.7 Changing Attitudes: Progress and Persistent Gaps

Attitudes toward girls' education have improved, with parents recognizing the value of educating daughters. However, practice often lags behind expressed attitudes, particularly when resources are limited, revealing the gap between cognitive acceptance of gender equality

and behavioral change. The finding that attitudes are changing but practice lags behind is critical for designing effective interventions. It suggests that knowledge alone is insufficient to change behavior, as structural constraints (poverty, household power relations, community norms) and deeply internalized gender norms may persist even when cognitive attitudes have shifted. Interventions must address both the cognitive and structural dimensions of gender inequality in education. Mugisa (2025) found similar patterns in East African contexts, where individuals often held more egalitarian attitudes but continued to conform to traditional practices due to social pressure and structural constraints. Mugisa (2018) found that in Wakiso District, parents expressed support for girls' education but continued to prioritize boys when resources were limited, reflecting the gap between cognitive attitudes and behavioral practice.

The father's admission that "some fathers say they support girls' education, but when money becomes limited, their real thinking comes out" suggests that expressed attitudes may not reflect deeply held beliefs or may be overwhelmed by structural constraints. This gap between attitudes and behavior is known as the "attitude-behavior gap" (Ajzen, 1991) and is a common phenomenon in social change. Mugisa (2026) argued that the contested nature of gender norms in Uganda meant that individuals often navigated multiple, sometimes contradictory, sets of expectations, leading to gaps between their expressed beliefs and their actual behavior.

The father respondent reflected on changing attitudes: "Education is important for both boys and girls. These days, even girls can support their parents if they study and get work. In the past, people used to think that educating a boy is more important because he carries the family name. But now things have changed. A girl who is educated can help herself, help her parents, and also make better decisions in marriage." However, he also admitted the gap between attitudes and behavior: "What I can add is that change is coming, but slowly. Many parents now know that girls can succeed, but cultural beliefs are still strong. Some fathers say they support girls' education, but when money becomes limited, their real thinking comes out." The mother respondent noted: "He supports education for all children, but sometimes he still thinks the boy should be pushed more because he will carry the family name. I keep telling him that daughters can also make the family proud." The key informant head teacher observed: "Attitudes have changed compared to the past. Many parents now know that girls can succeed in education, get jobs, and support their families. We have women teachers, nurses, businesswomen, and leaders who act as examples... However, change is not complete. Some parents still support girls only up to a certain level. Others support girls when money is available but withdraw support when resources reduce." FGD participant P6 Sarah noted: "As

a mother, I do not agree with that. Girls can also support parents. Sometimes daughters even help more than sons when they become successful."

The gap between changing attitudes and persistent behavior can be understood through the lens of the "theory of planned behavior" (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that behavior is determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. While attitudes may have shifted (parents know girls' education is important), subjective norms (community pressure) and perceived behavioral control (limited resources) may prevent behavior change. Alternatively, the "habitual behavior" theory (Verplanken, 2006) suggests that behavior is often driven by habits and routines rather than conscious attitudes. Even when parents know that girls' education is important, they may fall back on habitual patterns of behavior (prioritizing boys) when under stress or when resources are limited. The father's statement that "when money becomes limited, their real thinking comes out" suggests that expressed attitudes may be "token" or "lip service" rather than deeply held beliefs. This phenomenon, known as "social desirability bias," occurs when respondents express socially acceptable attitudes to avoid criticism, even when their underlying beliefs differ (Van de Mortel, 2008). Mugisa (2025) found that social desirability bias was common in research on gender norms in East Africa, with respondents often expressing more egalitarian views than their practices reflected.

The finding of changing attitudes toward girls' education aligns with global trends documented by UNESCO (2020), which showed increasing educational aspirations for girls across Sub-Saharan Africa. The "female role models" identified by the head teacher, including women teachers, nurses, and businesswomen, reflect the influence of "positive role models" in changing gender attitudes (Bandura, 1977). The gap between attitudes and behavior is consistent with research on gender attitude change. Kabeer (2000) found that while development interventions could change expressed attitudes, changing deeply held beliefs and behavioral patterns required sustained, multi-level interventions. Similarly, Cornwall and Rivas (2015) documented the persistence of gender inequality even when women's rights were recognized, due to the "sticky" nature of gender norms. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b) argued that changing these deeply embedded norms required interventions that addressed both individual attitudes and the structural and institutional arrangements that reinforced gender inequality. Mugisa (2018) found that in Wakiso District, interventions that combined economic empowerment with gender sensitization were more effective in changing both attitudes and behavior than those that focused on awareness-raising alone.

The findings highlight the need for interventions that go beyond awareness-raising to address the structural and psychological barriers to behavior change. Poverty reduction programs can reduce the economic constraints that lead to gendered prioritization. Household-level interventions that engage both parents in decision-making can challenge habitual patterns of behavior. Community-level interventions can change subjective norms by creating new social expectations. Interventions should be sustained over time, as attitude change and behavior change are gradual processes. Fathers should be specifically targeted, as they control household resources and have the power to change patterns of resource allocation. Mothers' economic empowerment can increase their bargaining power in household decisions. Mugisa (2025) argued that sustainable change required addressing the complex interplay between individual agency and social norms, with interventions that empowered individuals to challenge and change normative expectations.

4.8 Conclusion

The study found that household power relations in Mbarara District are predominantly patriarchal, with fathers holding final decision-making authority in educational matters. Mothers play a crucial role in initiating educational discussions and providing daily support but lack final authority. Cultural norms position boys as future household heads and girls as temporary family members, leading to differential investment in education. Gendered domestic responsibilities and safety concerns further constrain girls' educational participation. Educational resources are allocated unequally, with boys prioritized when resources are limited. Fathers control major education spending; mothers manage hidden costs. Girls' specific needs, particularly sanitary materials, are often overlooked. While enrolment appears equal at primary level, disparities emerge in retention and progression. Poverty drives dropout, but its effects are gendered. Extended family members play a dual role, either supporting or undermining education. Attitudes toward girls' education are changing, but practice often lags behind.

This study contributes to understanding the intersection of gender norms, household power, and education in rural Uganda. It demonstrates the persistence of patriarchal decision-making structures despite changing attitudes, the gendered nature of poverty's effects on education, and the importance of addressing household-level dynamics rather than only school-level factors. The findings support and extend existing theoretical frameworks on household bargaining, human capital investment, and gender socialization, while highlighting the need for

intersectional approaches that address multiple, interacting forms of disadvantage. The findings provide evidence for interventions that engage fathers in education, economically empower mothers, challenge cultural norms, address poverty, and support girls' specific needs. They highlight the importance of community-level action that engages extended family members and community leaders, not only parents. The gap between changing attitudes and persistent behavior underscores the need for sustained, multi-level interventions that address both cognitive and structural barriers to educational equity. The study reveals complex, multi-layered processes through which gender norms and household power relations shape educational decisions in Mbarara District. Patriarchal decision-making, cultural beliefs, gendered domestic responsibilities, and poverty combine to create systematic disadvantages for girls' education. However, changing attitudes offer hope for progress. Interventions must address household power dynamics, challenge harmful gender norms, provide economic support, and engage communities in promoting educational equity. As the father respondent concluded, "Change is coming, but slowly." Accelerating this change requires sustained, coordinated action at household, community, and policy levels. Mugisa (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2025, 2026) consistently emphasized that addressing gender inequality required understanding the complex interplay of power, social norms, and structural constraints, and that effective interventions must address multiple levels simultaneously.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from the study findings and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and further research. The conclusions are organized around the study objectives: household power relations, gender norms and cultural beliefs, educational resource allocation, enrolment and retention patterns, and the role of extended family and community dynamics.

5.1 Conclusions

The study concludes that household decision-making in Mbarara District remains predominantly patriarchal, with fathers holding final authority in educational matters. While mothers are involved in daily support and initiating educational discussions, their lack of final decision-making power limits their ability to advocate effectively for their children, particularly girls. This power imbalance perpetuates gender inequalities in educational outcomes, as fathers' attitudes toward girls' education directly influence resource allocation and children's educational trajectories. The observation that mothers know children's daily needs but lack the authority to act on this knowledge highlights the structural constraints facing women in patriarchal households. Interventions that seek to promote educational equity must therefore address these power imbalances by engaging both parents in decision-making processes and empowering mothers economically to increase their bargaining power.

Cultural beliefs and gender norms systematically disadvantage girls' education. The perception of boys as future household heads and girls as temporary family members creates differential investment in children's education. Gendered domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and fear of pregnancy create multiple barriers to girls' enrolment, retention, and progression. The study found that girls are expected to perform more domestic work than boys, which reduces their study time and leads to fatigue and late school attendance. Safety concerns, particularly fear of pregnancy and harassment, restrict girls' mobility and educational opportunities. Although attitudes are slowly changing, cultural norms remain powerful determinants of household educational decisions. The gap between expressed support for girls' education and

actual practice, particularly when resources are limited, reveals the persistence of deeply embedded gender biases that require sustained, multi-level interventions to address.

Educational resource allocation is gendered, with boys often prioritized when household resources are limited. While parents acknowledge the importance of girls' education, practice often diverges from expressed attitudes. Girls' specific needs, particularly sanitary materials and personal items, are frequently overlooked in male-controlled household budgets, leading to school absenteeism and dropout. The study found that fathers control major education spending while mothers manage hidden costs such as books, uniforms, and food. Mothers' contributions to education through these hidden costs and daily support are systematically undervalued in household decision-making. This undervaluation reflects the broader social construction of gender, where women's work is seen as less important than men's financial contributions. Addressing this requires both economic empowerment of mothers and sensitization of fathers to the full range of costs involved in children's education.

Poverty emerges as a primary driver of educational inequality, but its effects are gendered. Economic constraints force households to make difficult choices, and cultural norms guide these decisions toward prioritizing boys' education. The study found that when resources are limited, parents may say "let the boy continue this term, the girl will wait," reflecting the cultural logic that boys' education brings greater returns to the family. However, this logic is flawed, as educated daughters can also provide substantial support to their families. Addressing poverty alone without addressing gender norms is insufficient to achieve educational equity. The gendered pathways to dropout reflect different social positions and expectations, with girls facing pregnancy, early marriage, and domestic work burdens, while boys face peer pressure and economic pressures. This intersectional disadvantage creates qualitatively different experiences of educational exclusion that require gender-specific interventions.

Despite persistent challenges, the study finds evidence of positive attitudinal change toward girls' education. Parents increasingly recognize that educated daughters can support their families and achieve independence. Female role models in the community, including women teachers, nurses, and businesswomen, are influencing changing attitudes. The father respondent's statement that "education is important for both boys and girls" and that "a girl who is educated can help herself, help her parents, and also make better decisions in marriage" reflects this shift. However, the gap between attitudes and behavior underscores the need for sustained, multi-level interventions that address both cognitive and structural barriers to

educational equity. The finding that "change is coming, but slowly" suggests that while progress is being made, accelerating this change requires coordinated action at household, community, and policy levels.

Extended family members play a dual role in educational decisions, either supporting or undermining children's education depending on their attitudes. The study found that relatives can provide financial support and encouragement, but they can also reinforce harmful gender norms and push for early marriage. A grandparent may say "why are you wasting money on a girl?" while an educated relative may encourage parents to support girls' education. This dual influence highlights the need to engage extended family members in sensitization programs, particularly grandparents and clan leaders who hold significant influence in rural communities. Community norms exert powerful pressure on households, shaping what is considered acceptable behavior. The observation that visitors will complain if a boy is washing plates while a girl is seated reading illustrates the social enforcement of gendered roles. This community-level pressure constrains parents' ability to adopt more equitable practices, even when they desire to do so.

5.2 Recommendations

5.2.1 Recommendations for Policy and Government

Government should strengthen gender-sensitive education policies that explicitly address household power dynamics and gender norms affecting girls' education. Policies should include provisions for sanitary materials, safety measures for girls traveling to school, and support for pregnant girls' return to school. The study found that girls' specific needs are often overlooked, and policy interventions must address these practical barriers to education. Government should also reduce hidden education costs such as development fees, examination fees, and other charges that create barriers for poor households. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy should be fully funded to cover all school requirements, including uniforms, books, and lunch. When education costs are reduced, parents are less likely to be forced to choose between boys and girls.

Government and development partners should implement programs that economically empower mothers through access to credit, skills training, and income-generating activities. Economic empowerment increases mothers' bargaining power in household decisions and their ability to support children's education. The study found that mothers contribute significantly to

children's education through hidden costs, but their contributions are undervalued. Empowering mothers economically would enable them to advocate more effectively for their children and reduce their dependence on fathers' decisions. Government should also invest in safe, accessible schools, particularly secondary schools for girls. This includes adequate sanitation facilities, safe transportation options, and protection against harassment and violence. Safety concerns were identified as a significant barrier to girls' education, particularly as they progress to higher levels.

5.2.2 Recommendations for Schools and Education Officials

Schools should actively encourage fathers' participation in Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, school events, and child monitoring. The study found that mothers attend school meetings more often than fathers, yet fathers control household resources and final decisions. Schools should involve both fathers and mothers in meetings, not only mothers, to ensure that fathers are engaged in their children's education. Schools should also strengthen guidance and counselling programs that address gender-related challenges, including menstrual hygiene management, pregnancy prevention, and support for vulnerable children. Senior women teachers should be equipped to mentor girls and address their specific needs.

Schools should adopt gender-sensitive teaching practices that challenge stereotypes, encourage girls' participation in all subjects, and promote both boys' and girls' academic aspirations. The study found that girls may keep quiet about their dreams unless encouraged, highlighting the need for teachers to actively engage girls in discussions about their educational futures. Schools should also establish systems to identify and support children at risk of dropout, with particular attention to girls facing domestic work burdens, lack of sanitary materials, or family instability. Early identification of at-risk children can prevent dropout before it occurs. Schools should also engage community leaders in identifying and supporting vulnerable families.

5.2.3 Recommendations for Community and Religious Leaders

Community and religious leaders should actively challenge cultural beliefs that devalue girls' education. The study found that leaders have significant influence in rural communities and can change community norms through their messages. Leaders should use village meetings to tell parents that girls and boys have equal value and that educating daughters benefits the entire community. They should speak out against early marriage and child labour, using their influence to change community norms. Leaders should follow up on cases where children are

withdrawn from school and work with schools to identify families where girls are at risk of dropping out.

Leaders should promote the sharing of domestic responsibilities between boys and girls, challenging the belief that domestic work is exclusively for girls. The study found that girls' domestic responsibilities reduce their study time and school attendance. By promoting shared responsibilities, leaders can allow girls more time for study and rest. Leaders should also serve as role models by practicing gender-equitable behaviors in their own families and communities, demonstrating that both boys and girls can succeed academically. When leaders model equitable practices, community members are more likely to adopt similar behaviors.

5.2.4 Recommendations for Parents and Families

Parents should commit to valuing boys' and girls' education equally, challenging the belief that boys' education is a better investment. The study found that when resources are limited, boys are often prioritized because parents believe their education brings greater returns. However, educated daughters can also support their families. Parents should support children according to their needs and ability, not their gender. Parents should also distribute household work more equitably among children, allowing girls time for study and reducing their domestic burdens. Both fathers and mothers should model this sharing, challenging the community norms that assign domestic work exclusively to girls.

Parents should ensure that girls have access to sanitary materials, uniforms, and other necessities that affect school attendance and confidence. The study found that girls' specific needs are often overlooked in male-controlled household budgets. Fathers, in particular, should be sensitized to these needs, as they control major household resources. Both parents should actively engage in their children's education by attending meetings, checking homework, and monitoring attendance. The study found that parental involvement is crucial for retention and success, but mothers often carry the burden of this involvement while fathers focus on financial contributions. Parents should plan ahead for education costs, including fees and school requirements, rather than waiting until the term begins. This can reduce the likelihood of children missing school due to financial constraints.

5.2.5 Recommendations for NGOs and Development Partners

Programmes should address household power dynamics, not only girls' individual capabilities. The study found that household power relations significantly affect children's educational opportunities, with fathers holding final authority. Interventions should engage both parents, particularly fathers, in discussions about educational decision-making and the value of girls' education. Programmes should provide sanitary materials and menstrual hygiene education in schools, reducing absenteeism related to menstruation. The study found that lack of sanitary materials is a significant barrier to girls' school attendance, yet this need is often overlooked in education interventions.

Economic empowerment programmes for mothers should be integrated with education initiatives, enabling mothers to contribute to their children's education. When mothers have income, they can support children's education and advocate for their needs. Sensitization campaigns should be community-led and culturally sensitive, using respected community and religious leaders to challenge harmful norms. The study found that community norms exert powerful pressure on households, and changing these norms requires community engagement. Interventions should also address the specific needs of boys, including peer pressure and economic pressures that lead to dropout.

5.3 Recommendations for Further Research

Further research should use longitudinal designs to track children's educational trajectories over time, examining how household power dynamics and gender norms influence progression and outcomes. Cross-sectional studies cannot capture changes over time or the cumulative effects of gendered barriers. In-depth research should specifically explore fathers' perspectives on girls' education, understanding how their attitudes are formed and how they can be effectively engaged in promoting educational equity. The study found that fathers control household resources and final decisions, yet their perspectives are often not explored in research on girls' education.

Research should assess the impact of mothers' economic empowerment on children's educational outcomes, including the mechanisms through which women's income translates into educational investment. This would provide evidence for interventions that economically empower mothers. Further research should examine the impact of menstrual hygiene management interventions on girls' school attendance, performance, and retention in Ugandan

contexts. While the need for sanitary materials is recognized, evidence on effective interventions is limited. Research should explore effective strategies for changing community norms around girls' education, including the role of religious and cultural leaders in promoting gender-equitable attitudes. Understanding what works in changing norms is critical for designing effective interventions. Research should also examine boys' educational challenges, particularly the impact of peer pressure, casual labour, and engagement in boda boda activities, to develop gender-responsive interventions for all children. The study found that boys face distinct challenges that require targeted interventions.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to understanding the intersection of gender norms, household power relations, and educational decision-making in rural Uganda. The findings highlight the persistence of patriarchal decision-making structures, the influence of cultural beliefs on resource allocation, and the gendered nature of barriers to education. By providing rich qualitative data from multiple sources including parents, a head teacher, focus group discussions, and observation, the study offers nuanced insights into how household dynamics shape children's educational opportunities. The triangulation of data from multiple sources strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a comprehensive picture of educational decision-making in the community.

The study contributes to the literature on the enrolment-retention gap, showing that gender disparities emerge not primarily at enrolment but in retention, progression, and resource allocation within households. While enrolment appears equal at primary level, disparities emerge as children progress. This finding has important policy implications, suggesting that interventions must address household-level dynamics, not only school-level factors. Interventions that focus only on increasing enrolment may not address the underlying barriers that prevent girls from completing their education. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the importance of mothers' economic empowerment and involvement in educational decisions, while also highlighting the need to engage fathers in promoting girls' education. The finding that mothers know children's daily needs but lack the authority to act on this knowledge highlights the structural constraints facing women. The finding that attitudes are changing but practice lags behind has implications for designing interventions that address both cognitive

and structural barriers to educational equity. Interventions must go beyond awareness-raising to address the structural constraints that prevent behavior change.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to Mbarara District and may not be representative of other regions in Uganda. Different regions may have different cultural norms and household dynamics that affect educational decision-making. The study relied on a small number of respondents, limiting generalizability. However, the qualitative depth provides valuable insights into household dynamics that would not be captured by quantitative methods. The small sample size allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena. Interview data may be subject to social desirability bias, with respondents presenting more gender-equitable views than their actual practices. Respondents may have expressed socially acceptable attitudes to avoid criticism, even when their underlying beliefs differ. The study did not include children's perspectives on educational decision-making and their aspirations, which would provide a fuller picture of educational dynamics. Children's voices are often excluded from research on educational decision-making, yet they are the primary stakeholders in education. The cross-sectional design cannot capture changes in attitudes and practices over time. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how household dynamics and gender norms evolve.

5.6 Summary

This study examined gender norms and household power in parental decision-making on children's education in Mbarara District, Uganda. The findings reveal persistent patriarchal decision-making structures, with fathers holding final authority in educational matters. Cultural norms systematically disadvantage girls' education, with beliefs about boys as future providers and girls as temporary family members influencing resource allocation. Poverty exacerbates gender inequality, forcing households to prioritize boys when resources are limited. Despite these challenges, the study finds evidence of positive attitudinal change, with parents increasingly recognizing girls' educational potential. Recommendations focus on engaging fathers, empowering mothers economically, challenging harmful gender norms, reducing education costs, and strengthening school support systems. The study concludes that achieving educational equity requires addressing household power dynamics and cultural norms, not only school-level factors. Interventions must go beyond increasing enrolment to address the quality

of support provided to children once enrolled and the household-level dynamics that affect educational decisions. The study contributes to understanding the complex interplay of gender, household power, and education in rural Uganda, offering insights for policy, practice, and further research. As the father respondent concluded, "Change is coming, but slowly." Accelerating this change requires sustained, coordinated action at household, community, and policy levels, working collectively to ensure that every child, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to learn and thrive. The findings highlight the need for multi-level interventions that address both cognitive and structural barriers to educational equity, engaging all stakeholders in promoting equal educational opportunities for boys and girls.

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