Barriers to Girls' Access and Participation in Secondary Education: A Case Study of Agro-Pastoral Communities in Tarime District, Tanzania

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Abstract
This article explores the various bottlenecks that girls in agro-pastoral communities encounter in accessing and participating in secondary education. It examines gender disparities in enrolment within the sampled schools to highlight issues related to gender equity. A qualitative research approach was employed, using a case study design to allow for in-depth exploration of the contextual challenges. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 participants, comprising fourteen (14) female students, fourteen (14) teachers, and two (2) Heads of Schools. Interview, FGD and Documentary reviews were used as methods of data collection. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that girls' access to secondary education was low compared to boys. There were 257 girls (44.9%) compared to 315 boys (55.1%), showing a difference of 58 students (10.1%). As per respective schools, the enrolment stood at 170 (45.9%) girls compared to 200 (54.1%) boys in school A indicating a disparity of 30 (8.1%) students. School B had 87 girls (43.1%) and 115 (56.9%) boys indicating a disparity of 28 (13.8%) students. Furthermore, girls faced a range of challenges that hindered their participation in secondary education. These included the burden of domestic chores, long distances between home and school, early marriage and pregnancies, and entrenched cultural practices that disadvantage girls. Establishing schools within a five-kilometre radius of communities could significantly reduce travel burdens and help mitigate many of these barriers. Equally important is the implementation of structured mentorship programmes aimed at empowering girls and supporting their academic progress. In this context, actionable measures such as strategic government partnerships with NGOs and sustained policy advocacy are essential. Such initiatives can support the transformation of community attitudes, promote gender parity, and ensure equitable access to education. Future research may consider examining the effectiveness of community-based interventions in dismantling cultural barriers that restrict girls' educational opportunities.
Keywords: Bottlenecks, girls' education, secondary education, pastoral communities

Introduction

Education is one of the most powerful instruments for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the foundation for sustainable economic growth globally. It prominently features in global indicators for evaluating national development, including the components of the United Nations' Human Development Index (Agbaire, 2020). Educating girls has enormous social and economic returns and is widely recognised as a key driver of national development across all sectors. Following the relative success in the universalisation of primary education, as reflected in Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2, there is a pressing need to replicate similar commitments to ensure girls' access to and participation in secondary education. This aligns with Millennium Development Goal 3, which sought to promote gender equality and empower women. Target 3A focused on eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have replaced the MDGs and represent the current global agenda through 2030.

The SDGs aim to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, as outlined in Goals 3 and 4 (UN, 2018). Despite global and national efforts to promote gender equality in education, girls in agro-pastoral communities in Tanzania continue to encounter significant barriers to accessing and participating in secondary education. Consequently, the commendable goals of broadening access, improving retention, and enhancing participation for girls have yet to be fully realised. Feminist scholars have consistently identified the challenges in accessing secondary education as a consequence of the systemic marginalisation of girls. While numerous initiatives have been undertaken to improve girls' access and participation, a substantial gender gap persists, with girls continuing to lag behind their male counterpart (UNICEF, 2015; Somani, 2017).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that 15 million girls between the ages of 6 and 17 are not attending school (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, it has been reported that in Africa, only 76 girls are enrolled in secondary school for every 100 boys. Out of the girls who start school, only 36% successfully complete the full schooling cycle (UNICEF, 2020). Furthermore, girls continue to face severe disadvantage and exclusion in education systems throughout their lives.

Seni (2013) asserts that historically, traditional African education systems reinforced gender-based roles and inequalities. During the colonial era in Tanzania as in many other African countries boys enjoyed greater access to education and resources. Colonial education was discriminatory and

privilege-based, primarily benefiting a select few, particularly the sons of influential families. In contrast, girls were largely sidelined in the educational system; even the daughters of chiefs were frequently denied access to formal schooling. Alienation of parents' preferences for boys more than girls in educational matters persisted in the past and has continued to persist even today especially in rural areas. Additionally, it is observed that boys have wider opportunities after leaving school than girls whose courses are limited to teaching and nursing. Some are even left out. However, it is widely acknowledged that domestic responsibilities significantly hinder girls' education. In particular, older girls within families are often at a disadvantage, as they are expected to care for younger siblings and contribute to household chores. The presence of younger siblings typically increases the burden of domestic work for girls, thereby limiting their ability to attend school regularly. These responsibilities frequently lead to absenteeism, which undermines girls' full and active participation in their education The gaps in the access to education between men and women occurs in many societies. Various efforts have been made to eliminate such gaps and bring equality to both genders.

Ennaji (2018) asserts that different treaties and declarations have been introduced to reduce the existing gap. The International Bill of Human Rights has consistently advocated for gender equality through various global instruments and conferences. Notably, this includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), which calls for the eradication of gender-based discrimination and the promotion of equal rights for women and girls in all spheres, including education (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), both of which affirm the right to education and gender equality. Furthermore, the Declaration of Jomtien, the Dakar Framework for Action, and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) all reflect a shared global commitment to promoting children's welfare, improving access to education, and enhancing its quality. Both developed and developing countries have acknowledged the critical importance of girls' education. Nevertheless, societal preferences that prioritise the education of boys continue to persist, despite ongoing efforts to achieve educational equality. In previous years, a major concern in education was the underperformance of girls in mathematics and science subject. Over the years progress has been made in improving access to education It is important to emphasize that there is no inherent disadvantage in educating girls. However various cultural and economic constraints have historically limited their educational opportunities. The reports from the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) for 2017, 2018, and 2019 indicate a steady increase

in secondary school enrolment for both girls and boys in Tarime District. Table 1 illustrates the enrolment trends over the past three years.

Table 1
Students' Enrolment in Secondary Schools by Sex in Tarime

Year	Male	Female	Total
2019	7,963	6,346	14,309
2018	3,662	2,563	6,224
2017	3,138	2,190	5, 328
Total	14,762	11,099	25,861

Source: URT (2017, 2018, 2019).

From Table 1 it is noted that despite the general increase in secondary school enrolment in Tarime there remains a significant gap between the number of enrolled girls and that of enrolled boys in the district. In recent years the government has undertaken significant measures to enhance educational access by establishing schools in remote regions and renovating older institutions. Although these efforts have contributed to increased overall enrolment, the participation of girls continues to lag behind that of boys highlighting persistent gender disparities in education access. Idriss (2011) reports that the contradiction of educating girls in pastoralist society results to lower enrolment, retention, completion and achievement rates compared to boys within the communities. On the other hand, Mtey (2020); Senga (2024); and Malipula 2024 report that the major barriers to education access are rooted in cultural practices along with parents' perceptions attitudes and family academic backgrounds regarding the education of the girl child. These factors collectively contribute to the continued lag of females behind males in educational attainment.

The issue of gender inequality is historical and has persisted before, during, and after the colonial period. In an effort to ensure that girls are afforded the opportunity to access education, the World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, emphasised the adoption of complementary and supplementary programmes for marginalised groups who were unable to access education through the traditional system (UN, 1990). The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, adopted in 1977 and subsequently amended, recognises the right to education. According to Article 11, every person has the right to access education, and every citizen shall be free to pursue education in a field suited to their merit and ability (URT, 1977). The Ministry of Education, through the Education Act of 1978 as well as the Education and Training Policies (ETP) of 1995 and 2014, outlines the vision, mission, and objectives of education, including directives

on key educational matters such as the "compulsory enrolment and attendance" of both girls and boys. However, if the barriers to secondary education for girls within pastoralist communities persist, this may lead to adverse outcomes, including the continued marginalisation of girls in education and an imbalance in present and future sociocultural livelihoods. Notably, while most existing research has concentrated on nomadic pastoral communities, this study fills an important gap by focusing specifically on agro-pastoral communities, which present unique socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing girls' education.

The study, therefore aims to address the issue of girls' access to secondary education within agro-pastoral communities by focusing on three key objectives. Firstly, it seeks to examine the enrolment status of girls in secondary schools, with attention to current trends, disparities, and patterns. Secondly, it aims to identify the barriers that hinder girls' access to and participation in secondary education, including sociocultural, economic, and institutional challenges. Thirdly, the study intends to propose practical and context-specific recommendations to address these challenges and enhance educational opportunities for girls.

The findings of this study are expected to benefit a range of stakeholders, including teachers, policymakers, parents, and students. For teachers, the study offers insights into how to effectively address gender issues within the educational context, equipping them with strategies to promote gender equity in the classroom. For parents, the findings serve to deepen their understanding of the importance of educating girls, while also reinforcing the principle that all children regardless of gender have an equal right to education. Policymakers will gain a clearer picture of the specific challenges girls face in accessing education within pastoral societies, which can inform the development of more inclusive and responsive educational policies. Furthermore, the research contributes to the broader body of literature on girls' access to education, particularly within agro-pastoral contexts, helping to fill existing knowledge gaps and guide future studies.

Theoretical Framework
This study was guided by sociocultural theory developed by Lev Vygotsky in 1896-1934. Sociocultural theory explores the influence of society on individual development, emphasising the role of social interaction, collective problem-solving, social structures, divisions, and cultural traditions in shaping human behaviour and cognition. Based on the theory, it is believed that parents, caregivers and the culture of a given society play an important role in developing an individual (Lukuwi & Seni, 2022; Kamanzi & Seni, 2024). The sociocultural theory not only focuses on how adults and peers

influence individual learning, but also on how cultural beliefs and attitudes affect instruction and learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), children are born with basic biological constraints in their minds that is adaptive to the culture in which they live. This means that every culture offers the child the tools that help them structure their fundamental cognitive skills to the environment. For Vygotsky, the environment and society in which a child grows up has a major influence on what and how they think and perceive matters.

The sociocultural theory is founded on two main principles. First, is the concept of the more knowledgeable other (MKO) an individual who possesses a greater understanding or higher level of skill than the learner. In the context of society, this MKO may be a teacher, parent, or any adult figure. The second principle is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with appropriate support and guidance. This concept underscores the importance of guided learning and the potential for development through social interaction. Sociocultural theory places strong emphasis on how social and cultural factors shape individual development, highlighting that cognitive growth is influenced not only by personal capabilities but also by the social environment and cultural context. Although originally developed with young children in mind, the theory remains highly relevant to secondary school students, particularly in relation to cultural practices and their influence on education. In agro-pastoral communities, for instance, students are often surrounded by adults who uphold strong cultural traditions, which can significantly affect learners' educational experiences and outcomes by shaping their attitudes, expectations, and engagement with schooling.

Accordingly, this study analysed how community practices regarding girls' access to schooling and their participation in educational processes are shaped by cultural norms, values, and social relations involving the girl child, through the lens of sociocultural theory. Since one of the major assumptions of the theory is the connection and influence that culture plays on an individual, the relationship of these principles is pertinent in understanding how the society encourages or discourages girls from accessing and participating in secondary education with a view to propose actionable policy and practice recommendations. This theoretical framework informed the formulation of the research questions and guided the selection of appropriate data collection methods aimed at generating evidence to address those questions. It also informed the subsequent analysis and discussion of the findings through highlighting the major tenets of the theory.

It should be noted that, the right to education for all is enshrined in several international frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education for all, while SDG 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Moreover, access to quality education plays a critical role in advancing several other SDGs. Specifically, education enhances employment opportunities (SDG 8), helps to break the cycle of poverty (SDG 1), contributes to reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and supports improvements in health (SDG 3) and nutrition (SDG 2). Thus, promoting girls' access to education is not only a matter of equity but also a strategic investment in sustainable development.

State Parties to these Conventions have an obligation to guarantee the realisation of the right to education for all, and to ensure that boys and girls are treated equally in accessing this right. As a result of sustained global efforts, significant progress has been made in narrowing the gender gap in education during this century. Gender equality and universal education have been identified as key priorities within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), recognising their critical role in promoting equity in education. However, female students are still constrained with societal reasons; hence making them fail to progress in education in several sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries (UNICEF, 2020). One of the primary contributors to educational inequality in these countries is the gender-based division of family roles.

 In many developing contexts, domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, washing, child-rearing, and fetching water are typically assigned to women and girls. These expectations place a disproportionate burden on girls, often limiting their time and opportunities to attend school or engage fully in learning activities (Dhital *et al*., 2021). The widespread practice of assigning household chores to girls in pastoral communities, including those in Tanzania, reinforces the findings of Dhital *et al*. (2021) who highlight the impact of domestic responsibilities on girls' access to and participation in education. In Tanzania, the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania in particular Article 13 contains a comprehensive non-discrimination clause. Also, the Law of the Child Act of 2009, particularly Article 5 prohibits discrimination against children. Similarly, the Law of the Child Act prohibits female genital mutilation and Act No.4 of Sexual Offence (Special Provision) Act of 1998 is also contrary to FGM. Despite all these legal and policy commitments that have been emphasised overtime, challenges in girls' access

to and participation in education persist, underscoring the ongoing prevalence of gender disparities in secondary schools—including among agro-pastoral communities.

One of the major question this study asks is, why focus on girls' education among agro- pastoral communities? The argument is that, pastoral communities which are divided into the nomadic, semi-nomadic, or sedentary communities are marginalised minority. The nomadic pastoralists in Tanzania are Maasai tribe who occupy the Ngorongoro, Monduli, Simanjiro, Arumeru, Arusha and Longido districts. They also occupy parts of Tanga region (Mkomazi) and Coast region in Bagamoyo district (Chalinze). Currently, some Maasai are also found in Morogoro, Mbeya and Iringa regions (Olekambainei, 2013). The Kurya are sedentary pastoralists residing in the Tarime District and are best characterised as agro-pastoralists, as they engage in both farming and livestock rearing. In contrast, the groups typically considered to be "pure" pastoral communities in Tanzania include the Maasai, the Ilparakuyo (also known as the Baraguyu), the Wakwavi (or Kwavi), and the Datoga of whom the Barbaig represent the largest subgroup. Notably, the Kurya, along with the Maasai, Baraguyu, Sandawe, Wakwavi, and Datoga, are all male-dominated societies where men are the primary decision-makers, a dynamic that significantly influences gender roles and access to resources, including education (Mtey, 2020; Senga, 2024 and Malipula, 2024). On the other hand, women in these societies have limited or no voice in decision-making processes, do not typically own assets, and consequently have minimal influence over key family decisions such as whether or not to send their daughters to school (Senga, 2024). The implication of having male dominance in the agro-pastoral communities and pastorals at large, is important in understanding the root cause of boys' preferences at the expense of girls on education among the Kurya in particular.

Agro-pastorals have been regarded as one of the powerless and marginal segments of society, the need to manage overgrazing and overstocking by controlling pastoral activities through education (Mtey, 2020; Senga, 2024 and Malipula, 2024). Similarly, their direct contribution to food production call for a need to educate them so that they can produce more. To this effect, the lack of education among agro-pastoral remains to be a concern to all nations, developed or underdeveloped (Mfum-Mensah, 2023). This paper builds on the understanding that the agro-pastoral societies such as the Kurya are one of the communities which require intervention as far as girls' education is concerned. The paper however, differs from others as it concerns an agro pastoral rather than purely pastoral communities (Mtey, 2020; Senga, 2024 & Malipula, 2024).

Girls in agro-pastoral communities are subject to a more puzzling situation than boys due to marginalisation on gender grounds and as members of pastoralist communities. As a result, they have limited opportunity to undertake formal education, thus resulting in high rates of illiteracy and low rates of enrolment. They also have low retention and completion rates at all levels of education compared with boys. Investing on their education may capacitate them to realise their fullest potential. While the rationales for educating children and girls among the agro-pastoral communities are vivid, there remains a contradiction in pronouncements and what is on the ground. Girls in these societies continue to face denial of their right to enrol and survive in secondary education in the names of culture, long distance and so forth.

Common barriers to girls' secondary education access entail early marriage, early childbearing, distance to school, security concerns (school related gender-based violence), cultural values, schooling costs, opportunity costs, negative experience of schooling, menstrual hygiene management and labour market participation (UNICEF, 2014). Boru (2020) conducted a study on Education for Borena Pastoralist Community Children in Ethiopia with a focus to Practices and Challenges. Boru (2020) found out that not all children in the households of Agro-pastoralists were sent to school. Furthermore, herding, culture, and respecting elders were the core contents of informal family education and every child was expected to embrace. It appears that the Agro- pastoral communities have deep rooted culture, as a fundamental aspect and so tough to break or transform.

Glick and Sahn (2016) carried out a study on schooling of girls and boys in West Africa with a focus on the effects of parental education, income and household structure. The study found that there was gender bias or pro-male bias in case of parental investment in children. Parents' preference for sons was found to encourage more of them to invest in their sons' education and other entitlements with a hope of taking care of parents in the future. In fact, parental gender bias investment occurs particularly when parents have limited or lower income and resource, thus making girls to leave school earlier than boys. This is to say that, there is a correlation between a family's financial strength and the likelihood of the daughter's dropout of school.

Furthermore, in Northern Nigeria, Williams (2016) revealed religious misinterpretation, cultural practice, poverty, early marriage, illiteracy, and inadequate school infrastructure as some of the factors militating against girl-child education. Likewise, majority of the parents pointed out that girl-child education was less important because no matter what level of education the girl attained, their hope was to see the girl-child get married. The gender or

pro-male bias on parental investment in children's education is critical in shedding light on the explanation of the existence of impediments in the access to secondary education pointed out in this paper. However, the focus on parental education, income and household structure are not akin to the focus of this paper is to holistically look at the bottlenecks to accessibility of secondary education among girls.

Coleman (2017) conducted research on gender and education in Guinea with a focus to accessibility and maintaining girls in school. She found that culture norms influence parents to keep their female children home from school. Issues such as teen marriage, gender-based violence, funding, and infrastructure were highlighted as impediments to girls' access to education (Coleman, 2017). Despite the fact that the findings by Coleman focused on girls in Guinea generally, they provide a foundation for enquiry on the bottlenecks to girls' education among the agro-pastoral Kurya of Tarime who embrace their culture like other agro-pastoral societies in Africa.

Similarly, Somani (2017) in a study on the importance of educating girls for the overall development of society, identified several global factors contributing to limited awareness about the value of girls' education. These included illiteracy and ignorance, sociocultural beliefs and gender stereotypes, conservative mindsets, misinterpretations of religion, lack of political will and effective advocacy, poverty, limited internet access, absence of female role models and leaders, and the lack of relevant, quality education. Moreover, Somani's findings emphasise the role of culture as a critical factor influencing children's education, particularly that of girls, thereby reinforcing the significance of addressing cultural barriers in efforts to improve educational access.

Despite steady progress being made towards universal access, transition and completion of education for all children in Tanzania at pre and primary levels, there remain considerable inequalities in the participation of girls, particularly at secondary education. Gender roles in the society are socially constructed and the girl child is expected to help in the household work more than the boy child. This limits her time to do school work leading to poor performance. Irresponsible sexual behaviour and harassment of the girls have been reported by a large body of literature to influence girl-child access to education. Researched on girl's education and behaviour in Tanzania reveal that Parental level of education influence academic performance of girls, parents with little or no education are always against education and do not enrol them in secondary schools and that teenagers on the streets, in schools, and those whose parents consent to early marriages are prone to indulge in

risky sexual behaviours that could expose them to sexual harassment and abuse (Benedictom *et al.*, 2020; Millanzi *et al.*, 2023).

Family size is also noted as another determinant of girl child access to education. Girls who live with their biological parents are disciplined and have better chances of schooling compared to those who are orphans or living with one parent (Benedictom *et al.*, 2020). Extended families are regarded as a symbol of prestige among the pastorals leading to existence of incapacity to meet all school requirements to all children causing preference of sending boys to school and segregating girls (Senga *et al.*, 2024; Mumin *et al.*, 2023). The argument that girls who get pregnant are expelled from school and the pregnancy is considered to be the girl's fault is inconsistent to appreciation that girls endure a hurdle amidst deep rooted culture of preference for dowry and the long distance from home to school. It also demonstrates a lack of acknowledgement of re-entry programmes to girls who happen to be pregnant. Again, domestic duties for teachers at school and at home, such as fetching water, reinforce gender stereotypes and consume a substantial portion of their time for studying. Literature on girls' education seem to look at challenges impeding girls from accessing and participating in education (Gyawali & Maharjan, 2022; Benedictom *et al.*, 2020) generally, with less particular focus on girls from the agro pastoral communities as focused in this paper.

Cultural Barriers
Ndibalema (2022) used a documentary review to research on a paradox in the accessibility of basic education among minority pastoralist communities in Tanzania. His findings indicated that inappropriate cultural values among parents in pastoralist communities, long distance to school and inappropriate learning environments were some of the inhibitive factors influencing inequalities in accessing basic education in pastoralist communities in the country. Despite the fact that this study looked at girls' education among pastoral communities, the study by Ndibalema had less focus on agro-pastoral communities, in particular the Kurya of Tarime district.

Akweso (2020) researched on factors hindering the Barbaig girls in completion of secondary education focusing Hanang' District as a case. The study particularly examined stakeholders' perceptions concerning girls' education. It also explored the level of girls' participation in secondary education amongst Barbaig community and the challenges facing public efforts towards promotion of girls' education among pastoral communities. Akweso (2020) found that there were mixed perceptions among pastoral community members regarding girls' education. The study revealed also that

girls' participation in pastoral communities was still low although there were indications of slight increase in their number.

The presence of mixed perceptions regarding girls' access to secondary education, suggest a pertinent need for an awareness creation regarding the benefits of sending a girl child to school as it is the case for their counterpart boys. Using quantitative and a cross-sectional research design, Senga *et al.* (2024) researched on girls' access to secondary school education in the Barbaig pastoral community in Hanang District, Manyara Region of Tanzania. Their study revealed that shortage of girls' facilities and services in schools, families' low socioeconomic status, and harmful gender norms, traditions, and practices; were among the challenges facing girls in accessing education. However, the Barbaig as it is for the Maasai pastoral communities, are nomads who could move with their cattle in search of pasture. On the contrary, the Kurya are rather agro-pastoralists who live mainly in Tarime district. Fundamentally, these groups of pastoral communities although they have aspects in common but they vary significantly too. All in all, it seems culture takes a lion share in explaining the denial of schooling among girls in these societies requiring more attention by educational stakeholders.

Olekambainei (2013) researched on Maasai Girls's access to secondary education in Ngorongoro District in Tanzania. Using mixed method, the study revealed that poverty, culture, initiation of rites, early marriage, and long distances to school, and harsh environment as the hindrances that were impeding Masai girls in accessing secondary education. Employing an interpretivist qualitative approach; Pesambili (2020) explored the responses to and perspectives on formal education among the Maasai pastoralists in Monduli, Tanzania. Pesambili (2020) found positive, negative and complementary (coexistence of both) responses regarding formal education of Maasai girls. Negative response to formal education was echoed by preference to a traditional education as it was viewed as capable of equipping them with the knowledge and skills essential for their survival within the pastoral economy. Raymond (2021) used ethnographic approach to study girls' participation in formal education with a focus on Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania and found that there were positive and negative views with regard to girls' schooling. It was revealed that Maasai girls loved schooling but they were hampered by the home and school environments including long distance from home to school and back home. Again, one could establish a trend with culture and long distance from home to school emerging as more pronounced stumbling blocks towards realization of universalising education in the context of agro-pastoral communities.

Mtey (2020) researched on the contribution of power dynamics and women's perceptions to girls' education among pastoral communities in Tanzania with a focus on Maasai as a case. The study by Mtey adopted qualitative research approach and a case study design. The findings revealed that there was a huge difference between men and women among Maasai community members on issues relating to power, decision making, ownership of property and identity all of which affected girls' education. Women could not decide to send their girl children to school due to deported imbalance in power despite the fact that women had positive attitudes and perceptions towards educating girls. The contribution of power dynamics on child learning aligns to the SCT which puts emphasis on the importance and power of adults, knowledgeable and more capable. In contrast, the SCT, takes the power of an adult and teacher as positively important in guiding learners. All, in all, if these powers are not there, or are used negatively, they are likely to impair the learning of students. Unlike studies by Akweso (2020) and Senga *et al.* (2024) who focused on the Barbaig pastoral community, Olekambainei (2013), Pesambili (2020) and Mtey (2020) who focused on the Maasai; On the contrary, the Kurya are rather agro-pastoralists who live mainly in Tarime district. Fundamentally, these groups of pastoral communities have aspects in common, but they vary significantly. With this perspective in mind, this study examined the enrolment status and impediments to the accessibility of secondary education among girls in agro-pastoral communities with a focus on Kurya of Tarime District.

Studies have focused on the girl-child education generally, girls' academic performance, pastoralists' communities and their effect on quality education, gender gap reduction, education and resolving conflicts in pastoralists, pastoral communities and girls' education, difference between girls' and boys' academic culture and importance of educating girls in mobile pastoralists such as the Maasai and the Datoga. However, little is known about the access to secondary education among girls in the Kurya agro-pastoral community, who are mainly stationed in one district, Tarime. Therefore, this study focused on filling the gap by researching the Kurya Agro-pastoral society on the hindrances in accessing secondary education among girls in Tanzania.

Methodology
This study used a qualitative research approach embedded with a case study design. The rationale for using the case study design was the need to capture in-depth information about the setbacks facing girls in access to secondary education in Tarime District in Mara region in Tanzania. Moreover, the case study allowed the researcher to investigate the issue in a natural setting (Creswell, 2018 & Creswell, 2012) as a qualitative approach enables the

researcher to collect information from the participants in their natural settings (Yin, 2009). This approach allowed a profound understanding of the challenges experienced by girls in enrolling and attending secondary education. The study was conducted in Tarime District, which, according to the reports from the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (PO-RALG) for the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, had the lowest enrolment for girls in the three consecutive years. Tarime district consists of agro-pastoral communities that rely on agriculture and livestock as their economic activities. The cattle provide food, and most importantly, they are used for paying dowry. A total of 30 participants were sampled as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2
Distribution of the participants by gender and FGD/Interview groups, and Sessions

S/N	Participants Category	Involved Secondary school(s)	FGD /Interview & Participants		Gender		FDG/ Interview session Label
			FGD Number	Number of participants	Female	Male	
1	Student Girls	2	Group 1	7	14	0	A
			Group 2	7			B
2	Teachers	2	Group 3	7	8	6	C
			Group 4	7			D
3	Heads of Schools	2	Interview1	1	0	1	A
			Interview2	1	0	1	B
	Total			**30**	**22**	**8**	

Source: Field Data, (2023)
Key: FGD = Focus Group Discussion

Sampling procedure: The study employed a non-probability sampling approach, involving non-random selection based on convenience and the diversity of wards. This method facilitated the effective collection of data relevant to the study's objectives. In addition, purposive sampling was used to identify key informants. Girls were selected as the primary participants; given that they were the main focus of the research. Head teachers and teachers were also included, as their sustained interactions with students particularly girls positioned them to offer valuable insights into enrolment patterns and the effectiveness of girls' participation in school. The final sample size of 30 participants was determined upon reaching data saturation.

Data collection methods: Data collection methods included interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentary reviews. The researcher conducted a total of four FGDs across two secondary schools, with each school hosting two FGDs. This arrangement allowed the researcher sufficient

time to facilitate the discussions effectively and to gather comprehensive and reliable information. The use of multiple FGDs also supported the triangulation of data, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings. Ary, Jacobs, Irvine and Walker (2018) regard focus group discussions as a way of collecting data through interviewing a group in interactive way. This type of data collection is useful because it allows the respondents to share ideas on how girls access education freely through interacting with one another in the group discussion. The FGDs for students and teachers comprised of questions regarding the challenges encountered by students in attending and surviving within secondary education. Interviews with Heads of Schools focused on questions related to changes in enrolment status and proposed recommendations, with much of the data being corroborated through document analysis.

Unstructured interviews were employed to allow for in-depth exploration, given their flexibility in probing and capacity to generate rich, voluminous data. These interviews were conducted face-to-face with Heads of Schools and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants selected their own offices as the preferred venues, ensuring a comfortable and private environment. The interview guides were initially prepared in English and later translated into Kiswahili the lingua franca by two Kiswahili language experts who were lecturers in the Department of Kiswahili at a Tanzanian university. All interviews were conducted in Kiswahili to eliminate language barriers and reduce the risk of data distortion. The sessions were audio recorded using a voice recorder to ensure accurate capture of responses, and supplementary notes were taken to support the verbatim transcripts.

Additionally, documentary review was employed as a data collection method, focusing specifically on admission books and attendance registers. This method was used to triangulate data and reinforce the credibility and consistency of findings. To guide the document analysis, the researchers developed a documentary review checklist. Attendance registers were examined to identify trends in girls' school attendance, while admission books were reviewed to assess enrolment patterns. These documents were accessed through the Heads of Schools.

Trustworthiness, credibility and reliability of data collection were highly considered, in which the researchers conducted peer debriefing, member checking, sustained involvement, and triangulation of data collection methods. These are important characteristics in making sure that qualitative instruments are valid and reliable (Taherdoost, 2016). Data from multiple tools and in-depth information offered means to cultivate strong conclusions on the issues under investigation and strengthen the rigour of the paper.

Data analysis: Data analysis involved an iterative process of consolidating, reducing, interpreting, and abstracting the information provided by participants, with the aim of answering the research questions (Merriam, 2009). In this study, thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis, selected for its flexibility and suitability within qualitative research (Babbie, 2013). The process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. Initial codes were identified using a word-based technique, whereby frequently occurring or repeated words were listed and imported into NVivo software. These words were then categorised based on shared meanings to form preliminary themes. Theme validation involved reviewing, refining, and developing these themes to ensure their relevance and alignment with the study's objectives and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The researchers carefully examined written transcripts and audio recordings to identify key content pertinent to the study.

Ethical considerations: Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the research process. Ethics, as defined by Grady (2010), refer to standards of conduct that distinguish between right and wrong. Prior to data collection, the researchers secured ethical clearance from the University of Dodoma and obtained research permits from the Tarime District Council. These permit letters were essential for formally introducing the researchers in the field and facilitating their work without disruptions. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, in line with the guidance of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), who stress that participants' names should not be revealed. To achieve this, positions such as "student" or "head of school" were used to protect identities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were provided with detailed explanations of the study's purpose and their rights. Consent forms were signed, and participants were assured of their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence.

Results and Discussion

This section provides findings of the study as per respective study objectives. The study findings exhibit an interplay of challenges surrounding girls in the agro-pastoral communities. The deep-rooted cultural practices such as FGM are linked with teachings for girls as preparation of becoming future mothers. Such teachings often consume a lot of time and lead to educational challenges, including truancy, dropouts, early marriages and teenage pregnancies as they tend to instigate adult feelings before its due time. Similarly, research findings indicated that, boy child preference and deep-

rooted cultural value for dowry have rendered girls prone to failure of enrolling or completing school if at all enrolled.

Enrolment Status across Gender

The study sought to examine the enrolment status in the sampled secondary schools with a view to highlighting the equity issues. Documents review on admission books and attendance registers shed light on the issues under investigation as can be seen in the Table 3.

Table 3
Students' Enrolment across Gender as Per School Admission Books

S/N	Involved Secondary school(s)	Gender		Total
		Girls	Boys	
1	A	170	200	370
2	B	87	115	202
Total	A&B	257	315	572

Source: Field Data (2023)

Similarly, student enrolment in the sampled schools is presented in Figure 1, which visually supports and illustrates the key points discussed in this article.

Figure 1: Students' Enrolment as per Gender
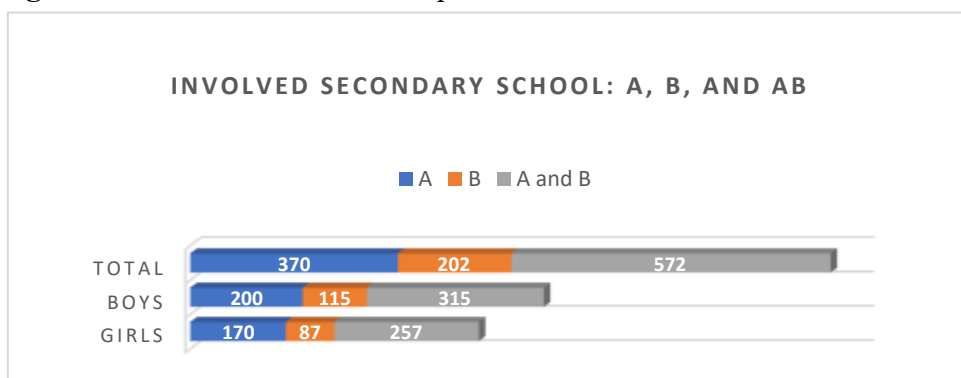
Source: Field Data (2023)

The findings from the reviewed school admission books revealed a consistent gender disparity in enrolment across all sampled schools. Out of a total of 572 students, girls accounted for 257 (44.9%), while boys numbered 315 (55.1%). In School A, there were 170 (45.9%) girls and 200 (54.1%) boys, reflecting a gender gap of 30 students (8.1%). Similarly, School B had 87 (43.1%) girls compared to 115 (56.9%) boys, indicating a disparity of 28 students (13.8%). These findings demonstrate that gender parity in secondary school enrolment remains a challenge, with girls consistently lagging behind.

Similar patterns of educational inequality in pastoralist communities have been documented in various studies, including those by Olekambainei (2013), Coleman (2017), Akweso (2020), Gyawali and Maharjan (2022), Benedictom *et al*. (2020), Pesambili (2020), Mtey (2020), and Ndibalema (2022). While gender disparity has been reported in both nomadic and agro-pastoral communities, the findings of this study highlight variation based on educational level and the specific type of pastoral community examined.

Additionally, a review of attendance registers was conducted to assess girls' participation in school following enrolment. The analysis revealed issues of truancy among girls, with some having dropped out entirely. These findings underscore the persistent barriers affecting girls' sustained engagement with education. Detailed results from the documentary review of attendance registers are presented in Table 4.

Table 4:
Students' Attendance across Gender as Per Attendance Registers

S/N	Sampled Secondary school(s)	Registered Students		
		Girls	Boys	Total
1	A	150	196	342
2	B	72	112	184
Total	A&B	222	308	526

Source: Field Data (2023)

In the same scenario, the data on students' attendance are illustrated in Figure 2 subsequently to portray a more vivid presentation for readers to follow the key issues raised in the paper.

Figure 2: Students' Attendance in the sampled schools
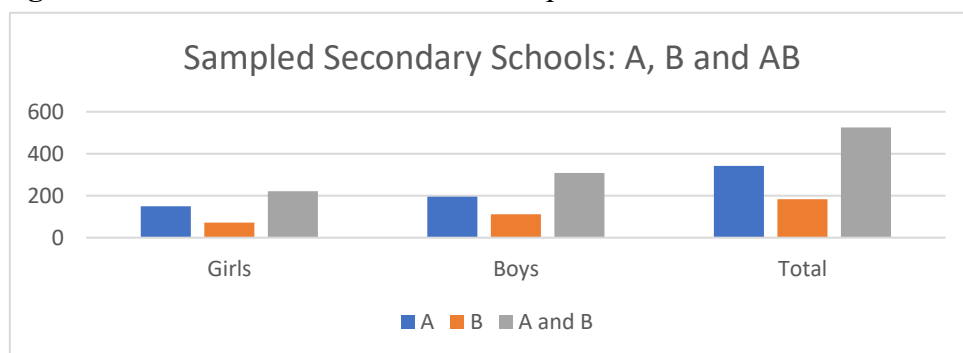
Source: Field Data, (2023)

The findings from the reviewed school attendance registers revealed a persistent gender disparity in school attendance across the sampled schools.

In total, girls accounted for 222 (42%) of the students, compared to 308 (58%) boys. In School A, 150 (43%) girls were recorded in attendance, as opposed to 196 (57%) boys reflecting a gender gap of 46 students (13.4%). Similarly, in School B, there were 72 (39.1%) girls and 112 (60.9%) boys, indicating a disparity of 40 students (21.7%). These attendance patterns confirm the trends identified in the admission books, which also indicated that girls were underrepresented in enrolment.

The low level of access to secondary education among agro-pastoral girls aligns with findings by Akweso (2020), who reported similarly low levels of participation in education among girls in pastoral communities. Moreover, these findings are consistent with those of Boru (2020), who highlighted significant barriers to school access among children from the Borena pastoralist community in Ethiopia, with girls particularly disadvantaged in terms of enrolment and attendance.

The Bottlenecks that Girls in Agro-Pastoral Communities Face in Access to Education Domestic cores

During the focus group discussions (FGDs) with girls in the sampled schools, it emerged that they were burdened with numerous domestic chores, including washing clothes, cooking, and performing other household responsibilities traditionally assigned to girls within their communities.

Commenting in relation to domestic chores, one of the participant students had these to say:

> In the community that surrounds us, girls lead by having a lot of domestic chores. I do not mean to say that boys do not work. They have some works to do but the nature of their activities does not interfere with their schooling. Sometimes when I go to school my mind might not be attentive enough. This makes some of us opt for dropping out of school to get married or stay at home and look for another alternative (Student A in FGD).

On the other hand, one of the participant teachers had the following to say during FGD session:

> While we were growing up, we were raised to believe that as a girl, one has to do domestic chores and FGM to enter into woman hood. We embraced this though currently it is not something to be proud of it. Girls require sufficient study time as it is for boys (FGD with teachers in School B).

These results are in harmony to those by Yara and Otieno (2010) who emphasised that learners from low socioeconomic status families tend to value domestic activities more than schooling. Girls are always burdened with household chores and looking after their siblings. The significant

amount of time student girls spends on domestic chores, often at the expense of their studies, raises important questions about the roles of other family members such as mothers or older sisters who are not in school and why they do not share these responsibilities to allow girls more time for academic engagement. This observation is not to suggest that girls should be exempt from domestic duties altogether, but rather that the extent of their involvement should be balanced in a way that does not compromise their educational opportunities and study time.

It also appears that some respondents in the study location even the knowledgeable ones like teachers were appreciating the fact that the cherishing of domestic chores and deep-rooted cultural practices such as FGM have a long history in the study location and thus it was hard to break. Moreover, there is unawareness that currently, one should not be proud of those practices as they are not consistent with various efforts to bring about equality to all, including girls' accessibility to secondary education. It could thus be said that, though majority of the study participants agree on the existence of deep-rooted cultural practices such as those of overburdening girls with domestic chores, there are variations on how they perceived the practices as some were looking at it as a preparation of girls for future responsible motherhood. Others, however, were looking at it as a deprivation of girls' time for study as opposed to their counterpart boys. While nomadic pastoralists differ slightly from agro-pastoralists in terms of economic activities and mobility patterns, both groups share notable commonalities—particularly in their adherence to gendered domestic roles, where girls are often overwhelmed with household responsibilities. The FGM is also universal in all the categories of pastoral communities.

Distance to school

Long distances between homes and schools were also identified as a significant barrier to girls' access to secondary education in agro-pastoral communities. Interviews with head teachers revealed that the geographical spread and remote location of settlements posed a major challenge for girls' school attendance. It was reported that some students were required to walk considerable distances to and from school each day, which not only led to fatigue but also exposed them to safety risks, thereby discouraging consistent attendance and contributing to dropout rates. In connection to this, during interview, one of the heads of school had these to say:

> On their way to and from school, girls face a lot of temptations, some point it is very risky to let a girl walk for a long distance. In fact, it reduces her concentration on the classroom and it even reduces her passion to learn because she is forced to walk a long way just to get to school. Now, this is where the motorcycle drivers come in with their ride which leads to pregnancies and diseases (Interview with the head of school A).

With the same view, during interview, one of the heads of school said:

> Given the nature of our environment some students walk a long distance up to five kilometres to school and other five kilometres back home. This makes a total of ten kilometres every day. Keep in mind that there is no breakfast or lunch at school, and studies go all the way to evening hours. There are a couple of girls facing such challenges every day (Interview with the head of school B).

The study's findings on distance as a barrier to girls' access and participation in secondary education align with those of UNESCO (2012) and Olekambainei (2013), which highlight that an increase of just half a kilometre in the distance to school can reduce a girl's likelihood of enrolment by 20 percent. The absence of a nearby secondary school often diminishes both parental and student motivation to pursue further education. Additionally, many poor households are unable to afford the cost of transport or boarding school, further limiting access. Longer distances also exacerbate concerns around safety and security, which in some contexts heighten the risk of early marriage, thereby preventing girls from continuing beyond primary school (UNESCO, 2012). While the issue of distance has been well-documented in studies on nomadic pastoralist communities, its impact appears even more severe among these groups. The mobility of nomadic families in search of pasture often results in girls living in remote areas with no nearby schools, further dispersing educational opportunities and limiting consistent attendance.

Early marriage and pregnancy

Early marriage and pregnancy were also identified as major challenges hindering girls' access to secondary education. Interviews with Heads of Schools revealed that early pregnancies remain a persistent issue, often resulting in girls dropping out before completing their education. However, those responsible for impregnating schoolgirls are rarely held accountable, largely due to corruption and a general lack of awareness regarding the value of girls' education. This situation not only reinforces impunity but also undermines efforts to promote gender equity in education. Furthermore, the presence of cultural practices was revealed as another challenge that was facing girls in accessing secondary education. The results from interview indicate that, culturally, a girl is seen as a source of wealth. That is, once a particular girl undergoes Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) she is seen as a ready stock. Even the parent knows that it is time to receive dowry mostly in the form of cows.

In this regard, one of the participants remarked, "Parents feel that letting us study means they are delaying their chances of receiving cows and becoming wealthy." (FGD with student in school A). This statement reflects the deep-

rooted cultural perception in some agro-pastoral communities, where girls' education is seen as a hindrance to the economic benefits associated with early marriage and bride price. Such views contribute to the low prioritisation of girls' education and reinforce gender-based inequalities in access and participation.

Cultural practices

The study found that certain cultural practices impede girls' access to and participation in secondary education. Similar findings were reported by Borena (2020), who observed that in Ethiopia, children from pastoralist households were often kept out of school due to the cultural emphasis on herding and traditional norms. Interestingly, since respecting elders was the core content of informal family education and every child was expected to embrace, children especially girls from these minority families could not argue or request to be sent to school in the name of culture and respect for elders. It is notable that, despite legal frameworks such as the Law of the Child Act and the Sexual Offences (Special Provisions) Act No. 4 of 1998 which explicitly prohibit and criminalise female genital mutilation (FGM) girls in this agro-pastoral community continue to endure this harmful practice. The physical and psychological pain associated with FGM often disrupts their education, compromising both their school attendance and academic performance.

These hindrances are arguably interconnected, creating a complex web of barriers that collectively limit girls' access to education. The preference for boys over girls often results in the denial of school fees for girls, reinforced by strong cultural norms that prioritise boys' education. Additional challenges include inadequate sanitation facilities in schools, exposure to violence and exploitation within home environments, early marriages, and the lack of female teachers to serve as role models. Together, these factors perpetuate a vicious cycle of gender inequality in education that remains difficult to break. Ndibalema (2022) also found that inappropriate cultural values in pastoralist communities impeded access to education. These findings align with those reported by the Girl Child Network (2004) and Senga *et al*. (2024), which identified culture and traditional practices, particularly Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages, as key barriers affecting girls' participation in secondary education. The prevalence of such sociocultural practices has had a profound impact on girls, significantly limiting their ability to remain and thrive in school. In many cases, these conditions ultimately lead to the withdrawal of girls from school altogether.

The research findings suggest that it remains challenging for pastoral communities in the study area to abandon deeply rooted cultural norms, many of which are designed to exert control over the girl child. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), for example, is commonly performed at an age when girls should be attending secondary school. As a result, the persistence of such practices significantly reduces the likelihood of girls accessing and successfully participating in education. The reality that girls in the investigated agro-pastoral communities face a multitude of societal barriers to both educational access and participation strongly aligns with the core tenets of Socio-Cultural Theory, which underscores the profound influence of social and cultural contexts on individual development and learning outcomes. However, the findings of this study stand in stark contrast to national and international commitments to educational equity, including the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania, the Child Development Policy of 2009, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These frameworks explicitly advocate for the promotion of equal access to education for all children, regardless of gender.

The study's findings suggest that girls' education is not regarded as a priority in the studied communities. Instead, cultural practices such as early marriage and the pursuit of dowries often in the form of cattle appear to overshadow the potential benefits of educating girls. Even when girls are enrolled in secondary school, their participation is undermined by numerous obstacles. These include long distances from home to school, excessive domestic responsibilities, early marriage and pregnancy, and entrenched cultural beliefs that place greater value on dowries than on a girl's educational aspirations.

It is also correct to infer that the Education and Training Policy of 2014 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2014) and the Fee Free Education Policy outlined in the government Circulars of 2015 and 2016 (URT, 2015a; URT, 2015b; URT, 2016) all with emphasis of widening access to basic and secondary education by removing school fees at primary and secondary education are yet to yield a 100% attainment. This study argues that, unless we guarantee education to vulnerable sections of the society such as a the agro-Pastorals, our quest to see all children are in school will remain a day dream.

The findings of this study reveal a strong interplay among the various challenges facing girls in agro-pastoral communities, where cultural practices such as preference for boys and the high value placed on dowries—intensify the burden of domestic chores and ultimately hinder girls' schooling. These

factors often lead to school dropout and early marriage. Similarly, deeply entrenched practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) pose significant health risks and consume valuable learning time through teachings that prepare girls for traditional maternal roles. These teachings, delivered during FGM rituals, arguably accelerate premature adult thinking and divert girls' focus from their studies, resulting in truancy, dropout, and reduced academic concentration.

Educational stakeholders, including the Tanzanian government, NGOs, and faith-based organisations, can draw on these findings to design targeted interventions. These may include awareness campaigns on the value of girls' education, anti-FGM initiatives through school-based clubs to empower girls to reject harmful cultural practices, and school–parent partnerships aimed at educating parents on the detrimental effects of such traditions. Such multi-stakeholder approaches can help foster supportive environments that enable girls to realise their full educational potential.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Fostering sustainable development requires the education of women and girls, as their empowerment is widely acknowledged as key to driving both national and community development. Equally important is the need to understand and address the barriers that prevent girls from accessing educational opportunities, particularly in disadvantaged contexts such as the pastoralist communities in Tarime District.

Following the findings and discussions, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, secondary education remains largely inaccessible for many girls in agro-pastoral communities. These students face numerous challenges related to enrolment, participation, completion, and the attainment of quality secondary education. Secondly, the lack of educational opportunities for girls in these settings contradicts international, continental, and national commitments to education for all. This discrepancy undermines the aims of global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as national policies like the Education and Training Policy (2014, revised 2023) and the Fee-Free Education Policy, both of which advocate for improved enrolment and attendance but have yet to yield tangible outcomes in these marginalised areas. While many community members remain strongly influenced by cultural norms and practices, their willingness to send children to school suggests a growing appreciation for the value of education. Nevertheless, the desire to acquire wealth through bride price continues to outweigh the perceived benefits of educating girls.

Based on the study's findings, several actionable recommendations are made. Family members, particularly mothers and extended relatives, should play a more active role in supporting girls by assuming a greater share of household chores. This would alleviate girls' fatigue and enable them to devote more time to their studies. The government should prioritise the construction of secondary schools within a five-kilometre radius of agro-pastoral communities to reduce travel distances and encourage higher enrolment and retention rates. Additionally, emphasis should be placed on establishing boarding schools, as distance alone does not eliminate the burden of domestic responsibilities that girls face upon returning home. Boarding facilities can provide a more conducive learning environment and shield girls from such constraints.

Community sensitisation campaigns are needed to challenge harmful cultural practices, including gender bias, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and the prioritisation of dowry in the form of cattle. These efforts are essential to enhance girls' access to and participation in education. Furthermore, girls should be empowered through comprehensive sexuality education and mentorship programmes aimed at discouraging early sexual activity and pregnancies. Female role models particularly teachers and successful women in public and private sectors should be actively engaged to inspire girls and promote the pursuit of education. Lastly, mentorship and empowerment initiatives should be supported through strategic partnerships between the government and non-governmental organisations. These collaborations are vital for providing the advocacy and logistical support necessary to advance girls' education in agro-pastoral communities

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Effect of Digital Media on Spelling Skills Among Lower Primary Pupils of Dodoma City in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of digital media, particularly video clips, on enhancing sound-spelling skills among lower primary school pupils (grades one and two) in Dodoma City, Tanzania. The objective was to evaluate how digital media can support early literacy development. An experimental design was employed, involving 160 pupils from two public schools, 80 in the experimental group and 80 in the control group. Stratified sampling was used to select pupils who had received F grades in previous writing assessments. A standardised test was used to collect data before and after the intervention. The study was based on the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, highlighting the value of integrating visual and auditory content into the learning process. Data were analysed using correlation and the Univariate General Linear Model. Findings showed that pupils who engaged with video clips significantly improved their spelling skills more than those who did not. The analysis also revealed a strong positive relationship between digital media use and spelling performance. The study concludes that incorporating video-based digital media into classroom instruction can effectively enhance spelling skills among early-grade learners. It recommends that education stakeholders, including policymakers and curriculum developers, consider integrating such tools into early literacy programs.

Keywords: Digital media, Enhancing, Writing skills, Lower Primary Pupils.

Introduction

Writing skills are a fundamental component of effective communication, enabling individuals to express their thoughts clearly and coherently (Schmoker, 2018). These skills encompass grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and sound spelling, all contributing to successful written expression (Alimi, 2020). Proficiency in writing is widely recognized as a hallmark of an educated individual. It remains one of the most highly valued skills in the workforce (Schmoker, 2018). Within the classroom and beyond, writing is a vital tool for learners to articulate their ideas and experiences (Casey, 2023). However, persistent spelling challenges are common among students and professionals, often hindering the quality of written communication (Coronado, 2024).