

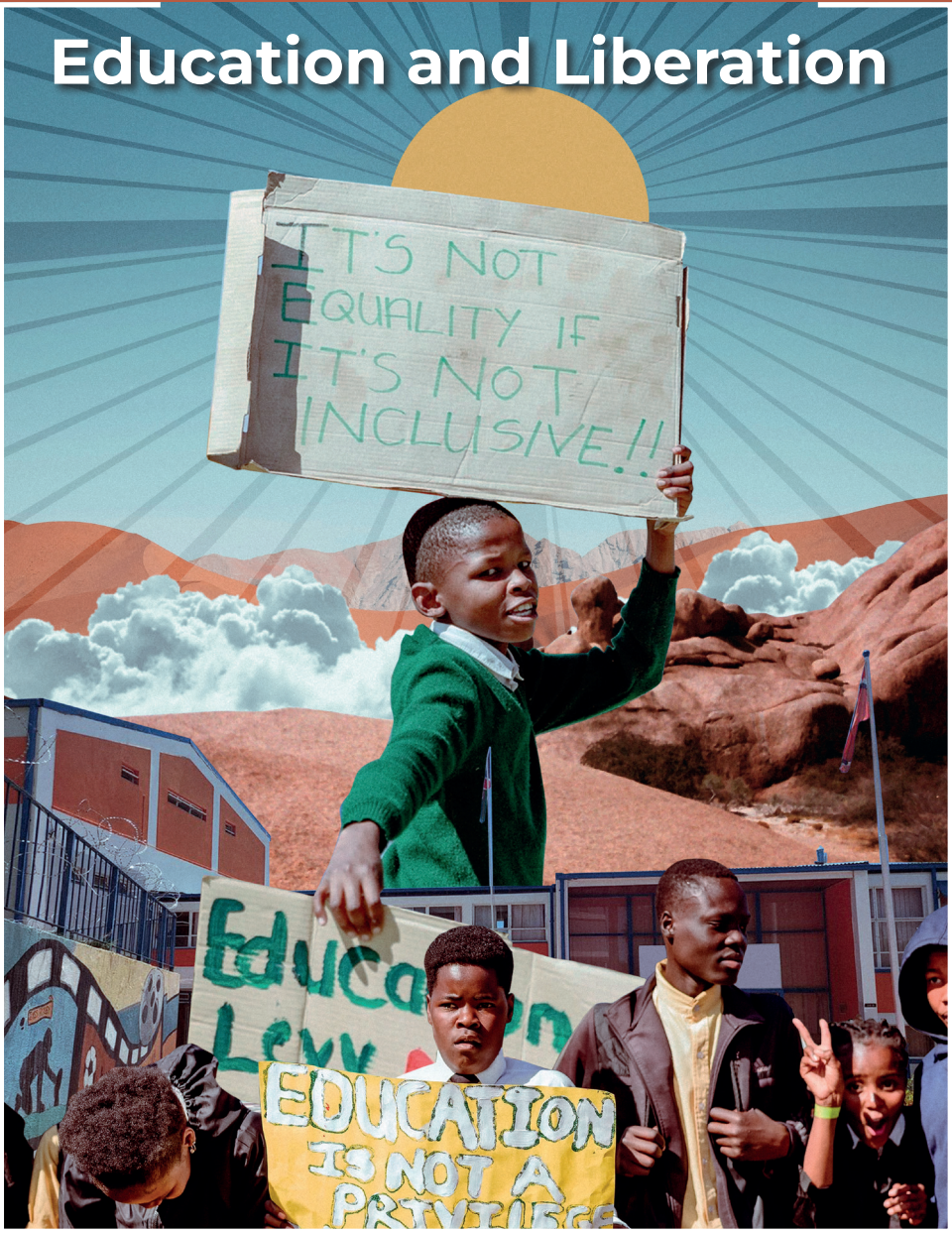
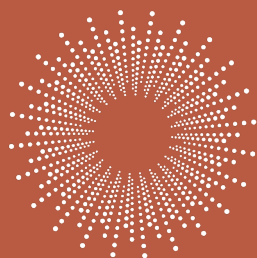


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Case Study: Bridging the Gender Gap in Education in Zambezi Region, Namibia

Phiona Nandu

Abstract:

Education remains one of the most powerful tools for promoting gender equality and social justice. In many parts of Namibia, especially Zambezi Region, girls encounter structural and cultural obstacles that impede their educational progress. This case study examines the intersection of education and gender justice through research and personal experience, highlighting the challenges, ongoing interventions, and aspirations of a generation striving to overcome inequality.

Background

Located in the north-eastern corner of Namibia, Zambezi Region is a lush, fertile area bordered by Angola, Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. While rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, the region faces high rates of poverty, teenage pregnancy, and gender-based violence, factors that significantly impede access to education, particularly for girls.

According to the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), Zambezi Region has



Gender justice in education remains a challenge. Source: Emmanuel Abiodun, Pexels

one of the highest school dropout rates in the country, with girls more likely to drop out between Grades 8 to 10 than boys (NSA, 2021). Girls drop out of school at a higher rate than boys due to specific gender-related factors. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage are the primary causes of school dropout among girls, with 147 cases of teenage pregnancy reported in the first term of 2024 alone (Koooper, 2024). Additionally, 24% of girls in the region are married before the age of 18 (compared with a national average of 7% for girls, and 1% for boys) (Girls Not Brides, 2024). Although 430 boys and 162 girls dropped out of school in 2022, data show that the female dropout rate is driven by pregnancy and marriage, whereas the male dropout rate is largely due to behavioural issues (Heinrich, 2022).

Growing up as a girl in Zambezi (a personal reflection)

Growing up in an informal settlement called Choto, a compound in the town of Katima Mulilo, I attended a primary school with limited infrastructure, few female teachers and little privacy. I remember vividly how girls were often the last to speak in class, if they spoke at all, and how male learners dominated both academic and recreational spaces.

One of my closest friends, Kahundu, was known for her sharp mind and quiet

confidence. She dreamed of becoming a teacher. But at 15, she became pregnant and dropped out of school. Although the government has a readmission policy for teenage mothers (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MEAC], 2018), the stigma and lack of support made it nearly impossible for her to return. She now helps her aunt at the local market, and while still smart and driven, she is held back by circumstances beyond her control.

These experiences were not unique. In nearly every grade I passed through, particularly in high school, at least one or two girls disappeared from the classroom each term, some due to pregnancy, others to marriage, and some simply because their parents couldn't afford uniforms or school supplies.

Key Challenges in Achieving Gender Justice in Education

Cultural norms and gender roles

In many Zambezi communities, deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions view girls as future wives and mothers, rather than learners or professionals. Educating a girl is often considered “wasteful” if she marries early (Legal Assistance Centre, 2017). These beliefs are reinforced by bride price (lobola) practices, which can encourage families

to marry off daughters for economic gain.

While Namibia's constitution guarantees gender equality, cultural practices often override legal protections, especially in rural areas.

Teenage pregnancy and lack of support: The MEAC's (2022) report indicated that 16% of girls aged 13 to 18 in Zambezi have experienced pregnancy while in school. Although the policy allows girls to return after giving birth, the psychological toll, lack of childcare, and community shaming result in many abandoning education altogether. From my experience, even when girls returned after giving birth, they were often isolated and given little academic or emotional support.

Poor infrastructure and sanitary facilities: Many schools in the region lack functional toilets, clean water, and private spaces for menstrual hygiene management (UNICEF Namibia, 2021). I remember girls skipping school during their periods because of embarrassment or fear of leaks. Without access to sanitary pads and safe spaces, education becomes a monthly battle for dignity.

Safety and gender-based violence: Gender-based violence is a persistent issue in Zambezi Region's education system. Reports of verbal harassment, inappropriate behaviour by teachers,

and physical abuse by peers remain prevalent (UNFPA Namibia, 2020). In many cases, victims have no safe channels to report abuse without risking retaliation. This hostile environment leads to high dropout rates and significantly affects academic performance. During my secondary school years, there were always rumours about male teachers dating learners. No investigations followed, and some of the girls eventually left school due to "shame", while the teachers remained employed.

Namibian Government Initiatives

The 2009 policy on the re-admission of pregnant learners encourages teenage mothers to return to school after childbirth (MEAC, 2018). While progressive, it lacks the resources (for example, childcare facilities and psychological counselling) to be effective on the ground. Free primary education ensures access to basic education, but doesn't take hidden costs, such as uniforms, books, or boarding fees, into account (MEAC, 2022). The Life Skills curriculum tackles topics like gender equality, HIV, and relationships, though the implementation varies depending on teacher training and resources.

NGO and civil society efforts

UNFPA and UNICEF have supported reproductive health and

gender education in rural schools (UNFPA Namibia, 2020; UNICEF Namibia, 2021).

Forum for African Women Educationalists in Namibia (FAWENA) provides bursaries, mentorship, and advocacy to keep girls in school (FAWENA, 2019).

Local **radio campaigns and youth clubs** have begun shifting community attitudes, with some success stories in villages like Kasheshe and Linyanti, where early marriage rates have declined slightly.

Local champions

One outstanding example is Miriam, a girl from Lisikili village, who lost both her parents to illness and was raised by her grandmother. With the support of a bursary, she managed to stay in school despite intense pressure to marry early (FAWENA, 2019). Today, she's a third-year student at the University of Namibia, Katima Mulilo campus, studying Education. She returns home each school break to run study sessions for local girls and talk to parents about the importance of education. Her story is a testament to what's possible when support, resilience, and opportunity come together.

In Oshana and Khomas regions, gender parity in education is significantly

better due to various factors that set them apart, such as access to better urban infrastructure, like transportation, electricity, and internet connectivity, which improves the learning environment. While urban regions still face gender issues, the lack of infrastructure and services compounds barriers in remote areas like Zambezi Region.

In regions with higher levels of parental education, more parents are literate, resulting in the value of girls' education being better understood, and more female teachers creating safer and more relatable spaces for girls (UNESCO, 2020).

Recommendations for a Gender-Just Education System in Zambezi Region

General

Improve menstrual health management: Provide free sanitary pads and safe disposal bins in schools; build private, clean, and functional toilets for girls (UNICEF Namibia, 2021).

Strengthen implementation of re-admission policy: Offer daycare services or partnerships for young mothers; create peer support and mentorship programmes for returning learners (MEAC, 2018).

Community sensitisation: Engage traditional leaders and parents through

culturally sensitive workshops (Legal Assistance Centre, 2017); use radio, drama and storytelling to challenge harmful gender norms.

Educational and emotional support: Support girls academically and emotionally and provide scholarships for girls in financial need (FAWENA, 2019).

Protection from gender-based violence
Mandatory reporting and school protocols:

All schools should be legally required to report suspected cases of sexual violence or relationships between minors and adults. This can be enforced through MEAC audits and penalties for non-compliance.

Community watchdog committees: Establish and train community-based monitoring groups made up of trusted local figures to track, report, and follow up on cases of sexual exploitation and underage relationships.

Fast-track courts for sexual offences: Introduce mobile or circuit courts in Zambezi that prioritise gender-based violence cases, minimising delays that often deter victims from seeking justice.

Training: Train teachers on gender sensitivity and child protection (UNFPA Namibia, 2020).

Reporting: Establish clear reporting channels with protection for victims.

Civic education campaigns: Use local languages to run targeted awareness campaigns on the Combating of Rape Act (8 of 2000), children's rights, and legal consequences for offenders.

Conclusion: A Call for Transformation

Zambezi Region holds the potential to lead Namibia in gender-responsive education if its unique challenges are met with targeted, inclusive solutions. For every girl like Miriam, there are dozens like Kahundu, whose potential is lost, not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of opportunity and justice.

Having grown up in this region, I've seen the pain and promise firsthand. This issue is not abstract, it is personal. But it is also hopeful, because every empowered girl becomes a voice, a teacher, a leader, and a change-maker. Let us invest in that future.

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