


Patriarchal Agents of Gender Socialisation – The Role of High Schools in Eswatini



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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of high schools in Eswatini as agents of patriarchal gender socialization. Drawing on social constructionism, the study explored how school rules, procedures, and teacher-student interactions contribute to the persistence of gendered norms. The study used a qualitative narrative inquiry as its methodology. Individual and focus group semi-structured interviews were used as the method of data generation. The participants consisted of 24 purposively selected boys and girls (12 boys and 12 girls) from four high schools in the Hhohho region. The age range of the participants was between 16-18 years. The results showed that, although occasionally unintended, high schools in Eswatini are important venues for gender socialisation. Students reported encountering gendered expectations in extracurricular activities (showing gender segregation in sports or other extracurricular offerings), textbook interactions (boys were frequently encouraged to excel in STEM subjects while girls were steered towards the humanities), and curriculum content. The study concluded that, while schools strive to promote advancement in society, their current structures and practices unintentionally contribute to the continuation of patriarchal gender norms. The findings specifically highlight the need for curriculum reform that incorporates gender-sensitive perspectives, teacher training to address unconscious biases and promote inclusive practices, and the adoption of regulations that explicitly address gender equality in the educational environment. Recommendations include conducting gender awareness training for all stakeholders, reviewing school policy to reflect gender equality principles, and encouraging diverse representation in leadership positions.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational institutions in many nations play an important role in developing people's knowledge of gender norms and identities.¹ The purpose of this research was to explore the role of Eswatini's high schools as agents of patriarchal gender socialisation, specifically how these educational institutions perpetuate, or challenge established gender norms. Studies have previously emphasised the underexplored impact of high school environments on gender roles, particularly in contexts such as Eswatini, where strongly embedded patriarchal ideals influence cultural practices and social interactions. Despite a growing corpus of work on gender socialisation and education, there is still a considerable gap

¹ Siti Khabibah, Heppy Mutammimah, and Fajarman Fajarman, "The Social Construction of Gender in the Experience of Vocational School Adolescents. A Critical Approach," *Jurnal Dimensi Pendidikan Dan Pembelajaran* 13, no. 1 (January 13, 2025): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.24269/dpp.v13i1.10723>.

in understanding the specific dynamics within Eswatini's high schools, particularly how these institutions act as patriarchal socialisation agents.

The objectives of this research are twofold: first, to discover how high schools in Eswatini's Hhohho region perpetuate or challenge gender norms through various institutional practices and interactions; and second, to explore male and female students' perspectives on their experiences of gender-related socialisation within these educational settings. By focusing on the lived experiences of students aged 16 to 18, this study hopes to contribute to the scholarly discourse on gender and education by shedding light on the implications of gender socialisation in high schools. To achieve these objectives, the study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, which includes semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with students from four high schools in the Hhohho region. The data will demonstrate how teachers, students, and the larger society work together to create an environment that either reinforces traditional gender norms or promotes equitable gender perspectives. This comprehensive inquiry attempts to close the current information gap on the function of high schools in gender socialisation in Eswatini while also offering practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers. Stakeholders can endeavour to establish learning environments that support gender equity and empower all students, regardless of gender, by comprehending how gender stereotypes are upheld or contested. The influence of high schools as gender socialisation agents, the impact of gendered classroom dynamics on student interactions, the role of teachers in shaping students' gender perceptions, and the social construction of community gender norms as they relate to educational practices will be discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on gender socialisation in educational contexts has revealed a variety of methods for establishing and strengthening gender norms. According to Gilleard gender is more than just a reflection of biological distinctions; it is a social construct shaped by interactions and institutional practices.² This viewpoint is consistent with the findings of Huang and Liu who argue that educational resources and classroom interactions frequently perpetuate traditional gender roles, moulding students' perceptions about what it means to be a boy or girl in their cultures.³ Understanding the subtlety of gendered messages in educational settings is essential to comprehend how these standards are internalised. Research indicates that these subtle cues, such as the overrepresentation of male characters in textbooks or the implicit expectation that students will choose particular subjects based on established gender norms, help to shape their expectations and self-perceptions.⁴ Fielding-Miller et al. conducted a study in Eswatini to examine the effects of patriarchal norms on gender relations, noting that these cultural beliefs extend into educational settings, influencing students' experiences and interactions.⁵ Furthermore, Hegna and Ullah demonstrate that schools, as gendered settings, play an important role in the construction and maintenance of gender identities, frequently prioritising masculine over feminine features in both classroom participation and disciplinary actions.⁶

A comprehensive understanding of gender socialisation in Eswatini also requires awareness of the interaction between gender, race, and socioeconomic status. The country's distinct sociocultural circumstances have an impact on how patriarchal values are expressed in educational settings. For example, the school's efforts to advance equality may clash with traditional Swazi cultural beliefs, which frequently highlight distinct roles and duties for men and women. With gendered expectations reinforced through both official and informal channels, this complex intersectionality frequently has a compounding

² Chris Gilleard, "Revisiting the Social Construction of Old Age," *Ageing and Society* 45, no. 3 (March 2, 2025): 500–513, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X23000570>.

³ Pingping Huang and Xu Liu, "Challenging Gender Stereotypes: Representations of Gender through Social Interactions in English Learning Textbooks," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 1–14.

⁴ Elena Makarova, Belinda Aeschlimann, and Walter Herzog, "The Gender Gap in STEM Fields: The Impact of the Gender Stereotype of Math and Science on Secondary Students' Career Aspirations," *Frontiers in Education* 4 (July 10, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2019.00060>.

⁵ Rebecca Fielding-Miller et al., "The Feminine Ideal and Transactional Sex: Navigating Respectability and Risk in Swaziland," *Social Science & Medicine* 158 (June 2016): 24–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.04.005>.

⁶ Kristinn Hegna, "Conflicts, Competition and Social Support in Female-Dominated Vocational Education—Breaking or Reaffirming Stereotypical Femininity?," *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 69, no. 2 (2017): 196–213; Hazir Ullah, "School Teaching as a Feminine Profession: The Legitimization and Naturalization Discourses in Pakistani Context," 2016.

effect on pupils Unterhalter et al.⁷ This emphasises how crucial it is to consider both cultural aspects and the larger global conversation on gender socialisation. Teachers play a very important role in gender socialisation. According to research, teachers' implicit prejudices and behaviours have a considerable impact on student conceptions of suitable gender roles.⁸ Teachers' interactions with students might unwittingly reinforce gender stereotypes, as they frequently assign various amounts of support or obligation based on perceived gender. Furthermore, instructor expectations can impact students' aspirations and future choices. If girls are discouraged from pursuing STEM subjects, for example, it will have long-term consequences for their educational and professional careers.⁹ Research shows that these patterns can be influenced by the teachers' own experiences as well as the broader societal milieu in which they function.¹⁰

Relationships between peers are an important element of gender socialisation in high schools. Students often internalize peer norms and expectations, perpetuating gendered behaviours and interactions in the classroom. According to research, peer pressure can be a powerful influence in reinforcing gender stereotypes, notably by forming gendered social groupings and enforcing rules surrounding appearance, behaviour, and interests.¹¹ This phenomenon is especially pronounced in situations where there are few alternatives or possibilities to challenge established standards, such as certain high schools in Eswatini. Peer influence, together with familial structures, has a considerable impact on gendered identities and social interactions.¹² Although the curriculum is intended to promote equality, it often unintentionally reinforces gender stereotypes. The analysis of textbooks, educational materials, and other resources reveals repeating patterns that reflect and reinforce these preconceptions.¹³ A lack of female presence in leadership positions or certain subject areas can hinder girls' goals and ambitions. This underrepresentation leads to the systematic reinforcement of gendered expectations, influencing pupils' self-efficacy and future goals. The lack of a critical understanding of gender roles within the curriculum exacerbates the problem.¹⁴

Existing research has focused on the explicit and implicit messages schools send about gender roles. For example, research has indicated that female teachers comprise a significant proportion of the teaching workforce, implying that teaching is largely a female occupation.¹⁵ This dominance of female teachers may lead to the impression of teaching as a "women's profession," which may influence how male students interact with school officials and vice versa.¹⁶ Furthermore, cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity impede interactions in educational environments. Mim underlines how unexamined classroom practices can reproduce gender gaps, especially in terms of student participation and classroom management tactics.¹⁷ As a result, understanding gender socialisation in schools requires further investigation into the dynamics of power and privilege. Gender socialisation literature also

⁷ Elaine Unterhalter, Helen Longlands, and Rosie Peppin Vaughan, "Gender and Intersecting Inequalities in Education: Reflections on a Framework for Measurement," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 509–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2022.2090523>.

⁸ Mieke Van Houtte, "School's Sex-Composition, Teachers' Accuracy and Gender Stereotypes: Explanations for Teachers' Different Teachability Perceptions of Boys and Girls," *Social Psychology of Education* 28, no. 1 (December 17, 2025): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-025-10044-6>.

⁹ Francesca Arnaboldi et al., "Women in Science: Where We Stand?—The WHEN Protocol," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 4 (March 25, 2025): 408, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040408>.

¹⁰ Eduarda Ferreira, Maria João Silva, and Cristina Azevedo Gomes, "Gender Dynamics in STEM Education: Students and Pre-Service Teachers' Voices," *Social Sciences* 14, no. 4 (March 27, 2025): 211, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14040211>.

¹¹ Matthew Damilola Omojemi, Elphina Nomabandla Cisse, and Mpongwana Zibongiwe, "Gender Stereotyping and Social Norms: Exploring Theoretical Perspectives and Educational Implications," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 9, no. 3 (October 3, 2024): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.48>.

¹² Mehakdeep Kaur and Deepika Vig, "Adolescents and Gender Roles: The Influence of Family Environment and Peer Dynamics.," *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review* 12, no. 4 (2024).

¹³ Carolina Gonçalves, Catarina Tomás, and Aline Almeida, "Children's Gender Worldviews: Exploring Gender, Diversity, and Participation Through Postmodern Picture Books," *Education Sciences* 15, no. 4 (April 11, 2025): 476, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15040476>.

¹⁴ Ferreira, Silva, and Gomes, "Gender Dynamics in STEM Education: Students and Pre-Service Teachers' Voices."

¹⁵ M. Gomendio, "Empowering and Enabling Teachers to Improve Equity and Outcomes for All," in *International Summit on the Teaching Profession* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017); Christine Skelton, "Men Teachers and the 'Feminised' Primary School: A Review of the Literature," *Educational Review* 64, no. 1 (February 2012): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2011.616634>.

¹⁶ Silvia Dončevová, "School Professions In The Context Of Gender Roles," 2024, 809–17, <https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2024.0297>.

¹⁷ Shamnaz Arifin Mim, "Nature of Schooling: Construction of Gendered Identities in a Secondary School," *Bangladesh Education Journal*. 15 (1), 2016, 29–39.

emphasises the importance of communal involvement. Participation of parents and community members in school events has the potential to promote or disrupt traditional gender norms.¹⁸ This dual function emphasises the need to study how community norms and views interact with school dynamics to impact young people's experiences as they navigate their gender identities.

Addressing patriarchal gender socialisation in Eswatini's high schools demands a diverse strategy. This includes raising teachers' understanding of unconscious biases, promoting gender-equitable curricula and resources, and providing chances for students to question and deconstruct sexist assumptions. Furthermore, community participation and parental involvement are essential for facilitating these improvements. This necessitates a comprehensive plan that extends beyond the classroom, addressing the societal influences and expectations that form gender identities and limit students' chances.¹⁹ This demands additional research into the specific situations of distinct Eswatini high schools in order to develop unique solutions to their particular circumstances.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender, according to Lorber is "made and re-constructed out of human interactions, out of social life, and it is the texture and order of that social life" in social constructionism.²⁰ Feminine and masculine identities are dependent on cultural ideologies and represent socially constructed views of what it means to be a girl or a boy in a particular culture and setting as determined by human genitalia.²¹ Children's gendered experiences provide structural contexts for gender constructions, performances, and experiences, in addition to social surroundings.²² As a result, social constructionism provides analytical insights into the complex processes of space, geographies, and gendered experiences of children, which tend to elevate masculinities while subserviently situating girls.²³ As a result, this study focused on the impact of gender socialisation on children's gendered experiences and gender conceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Geographical and Socio-economic Context of the Study

This research was conducted in four high schools in Eswatini's Hhohho region. Eswatini, formally the Kingdom of Eswatini and also known as *kaNgwane*, is a separate nation in Southern Africa that has a border with South Africa on all sides except in the east, where it borders Mozambique. Eswatini's people speak the same language and maintain a traditional way of life based on Christianity and patriarchy that is both traditional and stagnant.²⁴ Manzini, Hhohho, Shiselweni, and Lubombo are the four geographically distinct regions of the country. The study was carried out in the Hhohho region, which contains the capital Mbabane. The schools covered in this research study are located around this capital. As such, they are all urban high schools. The schools are all coeducational.

Data Collection Methods

The study's methodological design was based on a qualitative narrative approach. Aspers says, that in qualitative research, a small distinct group of participants is generally examined to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic, hence a research sample of 24 participants was sufficient.²⁵ The study included

¹⁸ Seline Keating and Catherine R. Baker, "Gender Equality Matters: A Precious 'GEM' to Tackle Gender Inequality through a Whole-School Community Educational Programme," *Educational Review* 77, no. 3 (April 16, 2025): 710–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2224939>.

¹⁹ Vishnu Vijayan, *Unveiling the Power of Teacher Education Promoting Gender Equality in Education* (Research Culture Society and Publication, 2024).

²⁰ Judith Lorber, "Night to His Day": The Social Construction of Gender," *Paradoxes of Gender* 1 (1994): 1–8. P.54

²¹ Huang and Liu, "Challenging Gender Stereotypes: Representations of Gender through Social Interactions in English Learning Textbooks"; F. Ashraf, *Social Construction of Masculinity and Femininity* (New Delhi: Akinik Publications, 2018); Neema Chaurasiya, "Deconstructing Gender," *Contemporary Perspectives on Childhood and Adolescence: Development, Diversity and Inclusion*, 2025; Candace West and Don H Zimmerman, "Accounting for Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 23, no. 1 (2009): 112–22.

²² Campbell Leaper, "The Social Construction and Socialization of Gender during Development," in *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology* (Routledge, 2014), 127–52.

²³ Gibson Makamure and Pholoho J Morojele, "Gendered Spaces: Students' Experiences of the Social School Spaces in High Schools in Hhohho Region, Eswatini," *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 7, no. 1 (2023): 76–83.

²⁴ Fielding-Miller et al., "The Feminine Ideal and Transactional Sex: Navigating Respectability and Risk in Swaziland."

²⁵ Patrik Aspers and Ugo Corte, "What Is Qualitative in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Sociology* 42, no. 2 (2019): 139–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>.

24 Form 5 learners (12 boys and 12 girls) from four high schools, all between the ages of 16 and 18. Focus group discussions and face-to-face individual interviews were the data generation methods employed in this study. The focus groups allowed the researcher to corroborate the comments offered by learners during individual interviews, which aided in data triangulation.²⁶ The researcher urged the participants to have spontaneous, unstructured, natural, and open talks. As a result, inquiries were directed at one another, and responses were delivered in reaction to the comments made. Taking into account group dynamics, each member was allowed to respond to the questions and issues addressed. Individual interviews were used by the researcher to acquire data from the study's chosen sample. One participant was interviewed per research site. An affirmation is given by Neuman, that interviewing individuals allows them to speak what is on their minds and to give themselves to a profound investigation, especially when it comes to personal accounts of their feelings together with experiences.²⁷ Voice recording and writing of short notes during the generation of data ensured that the researcher produced an authentic study. Both English and SiSwati allowed participants to express themselves.

Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was used in this study. Braun and Clarke say that thematic analysis is a method that is systematic, utilised to classify, analyse and report data in a detailed manner with minimal organisation.²⁸ The researcher was actively involved in collecting the data using semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews as primary instruments in data collection. To comprehend the concerns and thoughts that were surfacing, the researcher listened to the voice recordings several times and read the documents. He transcribed the interviews while listening to the voice recordings over and over. This interaction with the data helped the researcher absorb the information and make sense of the meanings and patterns that emerged. Themes formed and were organized and connected to the research as a result of reading through these written categories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed to respect the participants' rights.²⁹ The Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini was approached for permission through the Education Director's office. Consent from school principals was also secured via a written letter describing the study's goal. Subsequently, parents and participants received letters of consent that describe the issues of confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary participation. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used to represent both the schools and the participants in this study.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers' Understanding of Schools' Gendered Spaces

The study revealed that schools have a role they play as gender socialisation agents. This has an impact on how boys and girls relate to one another. Activities that take place in schools, according to the study, perpetuate gender stereotypes or fight against them. Teachers, as adults in schools, had a great influence on how learners experienced gender. According to the conclusions of the study, the male-female teacher ratio imbalance has an impact on children's performance and impressions of the profession, as well as their gendered experiences. In all schools, there were more female teachers than male teachers. The disparity in this ratio had a greater impact on how males and girls interacted. As a result of this disparity, the learners formed gender prejudices.

²⁶ C. H. Meydan and H. Akkaş, "The Role of Triangulation in Qualitative Research: Converging Perspectives," in *Principles of Conducting Qualitative Research in Multicultural Settings* (IGI Global, 2024), 98–129.

²⁷ W Neuman Lawrence, "Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches" (Pearson, 2014).

²⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 328–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.

²⁹ Jaranit Kaewkungwal and Pornpimon Adams, "Ethical Consideration of the Research Proposal and the Informed-Consent Process: An Online Survey of Researchers and Ethics Committee Members in Thailand," *Accountability in Research* 26, no. 3 (2019):176–97.

The learners' narratives illustrate the following:

Nathi (individual) of site D said:

There are more female teachers than males in the school, and hence we interpret teaching as a female-dominated space. It is like we are at a girls' high school. Our school is female-dominated space as far as teachers are concerned. Rules in our schools are given by them because they are the majority. We are now used to the screaming and yelling of our madams but they are loving and so much motherly compared to male teachers. There are other things we end up doing and not doing because of the attitude and behaviours of our female teachers.

Lunga (focus group) from site C asserted:

Teaching seems to be a job for ladies for sure. Women teachers are more than triple the male teachers here. This is the reason why boys behave well within the school premises. They fear of being embarrassed by female teachers.

From site D, Musa (focus group) averred:

Our school is a women-dominated school in the teaching staff. As you can see since you entered here - how many male teachers have you met?

School spaces dominated by female teachers socialise boys to discard unruly behaviour, as alluded to by Lunga. These socialisation experiences promote children's perceptions. Similarly, Ullah in his study of school teaching as a female profession, found that school teaching is a social field and space: "school teaching is viewed as an extension of mothering role."³⁰ In this case, the teaching profession is viewed as feminine, as measured by the many more female teachers in the schools, as Banele asserted. Skelton agrees, arguing that working with children has historically been connected with childcare rather than teaching, which is why school teaching has long been considered a woman's career and employment.³¹ This calls into question gender stereotypes about feminine and masculine jobs. Teachers negotiate rules for pupils to follow, and those rules face children in their settings as externally generated 'givens' that they are powerless to change. One of these 'givens' is gender roles since they are a product of social structural interactions. However, Hegna claims that both in developed and developing societies, primary and secondary school teaching is a female-dominated space.³² OECD corroborates that there is a striking gender imbalance in the teaching profession, with women making up the majority of teachers in pre-primary and secondary levels in the majority of OECD countries.³³

Mim has argued that schools are key sites for constructing masculinities and femininities that require close attention to the daily practices, conscious or unconscious.³⁴ She drew attention from Rudman and Glick who revealed that gendered power relations were more complicated than the simplistic binary dialogue of boys versus girls. As such, in schools, teachers become vital role models.³⁵ They play a role in the multiplicity of competing gender discourses within the school spaces where children socialise.

Classroom Engagement and Gendered Communication

Asked whether teachers encourage both girls and boys to speak within the classroom spaces and attach equal valuation of views of both boys and girls, the views from the research were varied. However, they pointed out the same thing: teachers do not interact with and value girls and boys the same way.

³⁰ Ullah, "School Teaching as a Feminine Profession: The Legitimization and Naturalization Discourses in Pakistani Context."

³¹ C. Skelton, "Failing to Get Men into Primary Teaching; A Feminist Critique," 2009, www.tandfonline.com.

³² Hegna, "Conflicts, Competition and Social Support in Female-Dominated Vocational Education—Breaking or Reaffirming Stereotypical Femininity?"

³³ OECD, *Education at a Glance: Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2016).

³⁴ Mim, "Nature of Schooling: Construction of Gendered Identities in a Secondary School."

³⁵ Laurie A Rudman and Peter Glick, *The Social Psychology of Gender: How Power and Intimacy Shape Gender Relations* (Guilford Publications, 2021).

Khanyi (focus group) from site B mentioned:

Boys dominate classroom discussions. Girls are reluctant to engage in debates and classroom discussions. You find boys answering teachers' questions more than girls. These boys really do not have genuine interest in the discussions, while the girls are quick and correct and show genuine interest during classroom discussions. It is like boys speak so that they become famous. The boys usually cut the girls down when arguing. Teachers do not reprimand them. They actually engage with them more compared to girls.

Nathi (individual) from site D said:

There is always the exhibition by boys of stereotypical masculinity in the classroom. The boys in class make unnecessary noise, shout in the classroom, and talk. They just disturb the lesson. This behaviour seems to get the attention of teachers and they engage with them more. This is unfair because it is like rules for orderliness are for girls. Girls are told to raise their hands and behave nicely like girls. Boys feel superior to girls.

Boys dominate classroom spaces, according to their viewpoints, and they do it without much interference from the teachers. These sentiments were expressed in all of the schools, demonstrating a patriarchal mentality based on the assumption that men and boys are superior to women and girls. Teachers speak to the boys more than to the girls, leaving the girls in the shadows. Boys are socialised to be superior to girls. Girls appear to be bound by classroom regulations while boys appear to be free to do as they please. Gomendio agrees that teachers spend up to two-thirds of their time talking to boys, which also translates to two-thirds of talk time.³⁶ Dunne proves that the gender of the teacher matters and that teachers would know about the boys' personal details, while the girls remain an anonymous group about whom few personal details are known.³⁷

Stereotypical Role Assignment

Responding to the question on the kind of activities boys and girls are assigned by teachers, the participants' responses were interesting.

Celiwe (focus group) from site C mentioned:

Most girls do the cleaning of the classrooms and boys supervise the maintenance of grounds. Where physical strength is needed, boys are called to do it. The pitching of tents and lifting of tables is done by boys.

From this response, the study revealed gender segregation through the arrangement and management of school premises spaces. A powerful and insistent way of segregation was to use physical spaces assigned indoors for girls and outdoors for boys.³⁸ This results in differentiated use of and dominance over space by boys.

Owethu (focus group) from site D averred:

We are sometimes asked to clean the staffroom and we girls change the curtains. Boys arrange the desks and are sometimes asked to repair the broken chairs and desks. I once objected to cleaning and asked to join the boys in arranging desks but I was told by the teacher that housekeeping was a basic girl's responsibility.

The research suggests that tasks are assigned according to gender. Teachers are gender stereotyped, according to the submission. Gender socialisation, as a process, distributes gender norms and standards to future generations, as prescribed by their society, according to Bhattacharjee.³⁹ As a result, society defines the various social roles of men and women. In their study on the role of schooling

³⁶ Gomendio, "Empowering and Enabling Teachers to Improve Equity and Outcomes for All."

³⁷ Máiréad Dunne, "Gender, Sexuality and Schooling: Everyday Life in Junior Secondary Schools in Botswana and Ghana," *International Journal of Educational Development* 27, no. 5 (2007): 499–511.

³⁸ Mim, "Nature of Schooling: Construction of Gendered Identities in a Secondary School."

³⁹ Nandini Bhattacharjee, "Through the Looking Glass: Gender Socialisation in a Primary School," in *Gender and Education in India* (Routledge, 2021), 40–52.

in the construction of gender identities in Pakistani high schools, Evans and Vaandering agree with the findings of this study that teachers believed gender roles and responsibilities were fixed: girls were responsible for beautifying the classroom, while boys were responsible for fixing and repairing broken desks and chairs.⁴⁰

Teacher Influence and Gender Perceptions

In response to the question of gender training for teachers to support both boys and girls in school spaces, Gugu (focus group) from site C said:

As far as I am concerned, some of our teachers do not understand this issue of gender. It is a new thing that is being discussed these days. It is not surprising that they are as confused as some of us are. Especially our male teachers consider boys to be more important. They don't realise that these days there are equal rights. They must be taken to courses that deal with gender issues so that they will know how to treat boys and girls equally and with respect.

Also, Nathi (individual) from site D said:

From the way we see things here, there seems to be little knowledge exhibited by our teachers. They treat both boys and girls in traditional ways. Fine, there are few teachers who seem to be knowledgeable about gender. They seem to take sex and gender as the same thing, hence their treatment of students on that notion. If I were the principal, I would ask the MOET to have courses for all teachers on gender because the way we are treated now will affect our future in a big way. Boys in all they do, are taken to be special. Our culture in Eswatini sees boys as more important than girls since they carry the family name.

These two responses sum up the general feelings of all participants. Teachers were seen to lack knowledge about gender issues. They were not knowledgeable, and hence their stereotypical and patriarchal attitudes. Teachers must be knowledgeable so that they put that knowledge into practice in dealing with gender issues in school spaces.

Nathi expressed that:

They treat both boys and girls in traditional ways. Fine, there are few teachers who seem to be knowledgeable about gender. They seem to take sex and gender as the same thing, hence their treatment of students on that notion.

This is merely an indication that gender training programmes are required to ensure that boys and girls are treated equally in school settings. Girls' spaces in schools are limited due to teachers' lack of gender education due to patriarchal culture and extended sex-segregated education.⁴¹ Girls are expected to be quiet and courteous, while boys are encouraged to be assertive, according to the authors. Teachers must understand how learners feel about the classroom's cultural atmosphere and communicate a feeling of respect and confidence to all learners while eradicating all gender stereotypes and biases within the school spaces.⁴² The Eswatini Education and Training Sector Policy stipulates that all gender stereotypes and gender bias of any nature within the education sector in Eswatini must be discouraged and done away with through enlightened, modern-day teachers.⁴³

Perceptions of Community Members and Parents

According to the findings, both boys and girls are equally supported by community members and parents. Parents and the community work together to make school spaces more gender-responsive. They are fighting to stop gender-based violence and sex discrimination in schools. However, it was only through volunteering that students became aware of inequities. Parents and community leaders volunteer for activities following established gender roles. The activities are divided into two categories: masculine

⁴⁰ Katherine Evans and Dorothy Vaandering, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education: Fostering Responsibility, Healing, and Hope in Schools* (Simon and Schuster, 2022).

⁴¹ Ullah, "School Teaching as a Feminine Profession: The Legitimization and Naturalization Discourses in Pakistani Context."

⁴² UNICEF, "Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis." (UNICEF, 2015).

⁴³ Swaziland Mbabane, "The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy," 2011.

and feminine. This had an impact on the learners' gender perspectives since they learned what it means to be a man and a woman.

In responding to the question of whether community leaders and parents are equally supportive of both boys and girls attending school, participants expressed varied views.

Hlengiwe (individual interview) from site B mentioned:

The community leaders and parents support both boys and girls in accessing education. It is not like the old days when girls were sacrificed for boys to go to school. Our parents in communities took the government to court to allow access to free primary education. Now we are learning again that they are fighting for free secondary and high school education. They advocated that everyone who is of school-going age must be physically at school. They asked the government to quickly put in many classes and even mobile classes.

This response shows sophistication in how learners perceive the issues that affect them. The participant shows that community leaders and parents understand the importance of attending school for children. They also lobbied for the improvement of the physical space for both boys and girls. This is in line with the Eswatini Education and Training Sector Policy which states that the MOET is responsible for ensuring that the physical appearance of schools improves learners' health and well-being.⁴⁴ Mim states that there has been a large elimination of the gender gap favouring boys in school enrolment visible in the past in developing countries.⁴⁵

Leah (individual interview) from Site A acknowledged the role played by community leaders and parents:

We see community members and parents coming here to support us as learners. They want to make sure that our school is a safe space for both boys and girls. They want us to be equally and fairly treated by our teachers without sex discrimination. Community leaders are the ones who always emphasise that we report any threats of violence we may face to and from school. They want us both boys and girls to succeed in our studies.

This submission by Leah suggests that community leaders and parents support learners by ensuring the safety of school spaces. Parents and community leaders also support learners by advocating for violence-free school space. Having a school space that is free from sex discrimination is another way community leaders and parents support of children. Daniel, Quartz and Oakes noted that community members and teachers collaboratively can create the conditions needed by learners to flourish.⁴⁶

Lunga (individual interview) from Site C acknowledged the support that the community leaders and parents give the school:

Our parents and community leaders like to see us safe and succeeding. However, as they try their best to achieve this, they have a tendency to dictate things to us. They tell us that they know what is best for us. Therefore, we are embarrassed at times to challenge their thoughts and decisions. We end up doing things we do not want to do. Our voices are drowned out by our parents and community leaders.

The participant acknowledged the support given by the community leaders and parents. However, the suggestion is that parents and community leaders force their decisions on them by claiming that they know better what is good for the learners. Learners, not out of respect but fear of embarrassing the elders, end up accepting things they do not want to do. This finding from the study agrees with Wyness, who said that children are a marginalised group since community members and parents remove their voices in public spaces.⁴⁷ Jabu noted that adults dictate things to them without giving them room to voice their concerns. Sharpe states that children are not taken seriously and are kept away from public spaces.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Mbabane, "The Swaziland Education and Training Sector Policy."

⁴⁵ Mim, "Nature of Schooling: Construction of Gendered Identities in a Secondary School."

⁴⁶ Julia Daniel, Karen Hunter Quartz, and Jeannie Oakes, "Teaching in Community Schools: Creating Conditions for Deeper Learning," *Review of Research in Education* 43, no. 1 (2019): 453–80.

⁴⁷ Michael Wyness, "Children's Participation and Intergenerational Dialogue: Bringing Adults Back into the Analysis," *Childhood* 20, no. 4 (November 17, 2013): 429–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212459775>.

⁴⁸ Darren Sharpe, "Young People's Involvement in Policy Research," *Children's Geographies* 13, no. 2 (2015): 240–48.

Social Construction of Community Gender Norms

The socialisation role of community members and parents is very influential in influencing the spaces of children. In responding to the question of whether community members and parents volunteer in the school and whether the school volunteering activities of fathers/men and women/mothers reinforce or challenge gender stereotypical roles, participants gave their views.

Lwazi (focus group) of site D said:

Yes, males volunteer to repair chairs and tables in the school. I have never seen women coming to repair tables and chairs in the school. Women come to volunteer to cook when we have big events like sports or parent-teacher meetings.

This shows that spaces are demarcated based on gender and activities are gendered. The message of what is to be done by males and females is passed to children. Gender, as a socially created term, dictates "how people's daily lives go in regard to how they behave, think, and connect with others," according to Savard.⁴⁹ Hence, Kangethe et al. affirm that through the recognisable allocation of roles at the community level, gender conditioning messages are reinforced.⁵⁰ The submission by Lwazi agrees with Savard that gendered spaces depend on what behaviour is deemed appropriate by society for boys and girls, and this determines at each location whether behaviours performed are considered masculine or feminine.⁵¹ Social constructionism views childhood as part of the construction of what children will be as adults.⁵² As such, what they see the elders do in the community is what they will become as adults. Seeing work divided according to gender stereotypes, conditions the learners to continue with such stereotypes in adult life.

The social development of community gender norms has far-reaching ramifications for Eswatini's education and socioeconomic progress. Educators and community leaders can help to challenge traditional gender stereotypes by encouraging a more inclusive and fairer environment that includes a wider range of roles and opportunities for both men and women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers and parents stereotypical gender judgments are re-inscribing specific gendered concepts that help to separate boys and girls, in these circumstances, thwarting efforts to create gender-equitable school environments. If, as the 2011 Education Sector Policy states, the education of both boys and girls is equally prioritised in the country, it is the government's responsibility to assist teachers in deconstructing these preconceptions. The following recommendations are intended to aid activities aiming at reducing gender inequity and increasing the quality of boys' and girls' spaces and lived gender experiences in certain school settings.

- Gender issues should be introduced in teacher education colleges, where patriarchal assumptions of teachers' gender views will be dismantled and altered.
- Due to the ramifications on children's own constructions of gender and gendered experiences in school spaces, pre-service training and in-service seminars should be provided to teach teachers how to deconstruct prevailing constructions of gender.
- The Ministry of Education and Training should encourage parents to attend community-scheduled gender training programmes, as a way of deconstructing gender stereotypes within communities.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight how important high schools are as patriarchal institutions of gender socialisation in Eswatini. Schools sustain a cycle of gender inequity that impacts students' identities,

⁴⁹ Dennis M Savard, *The Effect of Gendered Spaces on the Gender Gap in Victimization: Implications for Private and Public Security* (Wayne State University, 2016).

⁵⁰ Ngigi S Kangethe, Karuti S Lyria, and Amutabi M Nyamanga, "The Gender Socialization Question in Education: Influence on Boys' and Girls' Academic Achievement," *European Scientific Journal* 10, no. 19 (2014).

⁵¹ Lwazi Nsindiso Mkhwebane, "Life Sciences Teachers' Integration of Indigenous Knowledge: A Vision for Making Science Classrooms Culturally Responsive," *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 20, no. 8 (2024): em2483; Savard, *The Effect of Gendered Spaces on the Gender Gap in Victimization: Implications for Private and Public Security*.

⁵² Stefano Ba', "The Critique of Sociology of Childhood: Human Capital as the Concrete 'Social Construction of Childhood,'" *Power and Education* 13, no. 2 (2021): 73–87.

relationships, and academic experiences through a variety of institutional practices, attitudes, and community connections. Because patriarchal standards predominate in school settings, preconceptions that restrict the potential of both boys and girls are reinforced, influencing their conception of gender roles that last into adulthood. To overcome these ingrained gender prejudices and create a more equal educational environment for future generations, the study promotes a revolutionary approach to teacher preparation and community involvement. A change from traditional gender dynamics to a more inclusive and equitable learning environment can only be achieved through such efforts.

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