

**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND PROMOTION
OF GENDER SUPPORT PRACTICES IN
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Website: <http://www.kemi.ac.ke>E-mail: info@kemi.ac.ke**Abstract**

This study examines the role of school leadership in promoting gender support practices in public secondary schools in Kenya, guided by Transformational Leadership Theory and the Gender and Development Framework. Using a qualitative approach, the research analyzes secondary data and literature to assess the availability of gender support services, leadership involvement, challenges faced in implementation, strategic interventions, and the influence of leadership on gender equity outcomes. The findings reveal that while gender support services such as mentorship programs, inclusive infrastructure, gender-sensitive pedagogy, and safeguarding mechanisms are being increasingly adopted, their effectiveness is closely linked to the commitment and capacity of school leaders. Gender-responsive leadership emerges as a critical factor in fostering inclusive school

cultures, enforcing policies, and improving learning outcomes, particularly for girls. However, systemic challenges such as limited funding, inadequate training, weak monitoring, and entrenched socio-cultural norms undermine these efforts. The study highlights the strategies employed by school leaders, including transformational leadership practices like challenging cultural norms, fostering community dialogue, engaging local stakeholders, and establishing peer support structures, gender clubs, and mentorship programs to create a safe and equitable environment for girls. Schools with effective leadership reported better retention rates and academic performance among girls, alongside stronger adherence to national gender equity policies. The study concludes that equipping school leaders with gender-sensitive competencies is crucial for sustainable progress, recommending enhanced leadership training, integration of gender indicators into school assessments, and stronger policy enforcement through collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI).

1.0 Background of the Study

Gender equity in education remains a global priority and is a key focus of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure

inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Despite significant global progress, gender disparities in education persist, particularly in developing countries. These disparities manifest through unequal access to education, gender-biased curricula, socio-cultural norms, early marriages, gender-based violence, and inadequate institutional support. Such barriers continue to undermine the educational outcomes of both girls and boys, with girls often bearing the greater burden, especially in marginalized and rural contexts (UNESCO, 2025; UNDESA & UN Women, 2024).

In sub-Saharan Africa, and Kenya in particular, efforts to close the gender gap in education have been met with mixed success. According to KIPPRA (2024), Kenya has made commendable strides in achieving near-parity in primary school enrollment. However, persistent challenges remain, especially in retaining girls in secondary school and transitioning them to higher education. These challenges are exacerbated by harmful traditional practices, limited gender-responsive infrastructure, and insufficient implementation of national gender equity policies. Although frameworks such as the Gender Policy in Education (2019) and global partnerships have provided a strategic direction, practical implementation on the ground remains

inconsistent and often depends heavily on the leadership at the school level.

School leadership has emerged as a critical factor in addressing gender disparities and promoting gender equity within educational institutions. Research increasingly points to the role of school leaders in shaping inclusive school cultures, enforcing gender-responsive policies, and facilitating gender support services that contribute to equitable learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2021). Schools led by proactive and visionary leaders are more likely to foster environments that uphold gender equity, protect against discrimination, and provide equal opportunities for academic success to all learners.

Gender support services refer to a wide range of interventions and practices designed to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of learners and staff based on gender. In the context of school leadership, these services include the formulation and implementation of gender-sensitive policies, provision of safe and adequate sanitation facilities, promotion of inclusive and unbiased instructional materials, and facilitation of empowerment and mentorship programs. Additionally, they involve the creation of safe spaces for learners, training teachers in gender-responsive pedagogy, and establishing clear reporting and redress

mechanisms for cases of gender-based discrimination or violence.

School leaders are strategically positioned to champion these gender support services. Their leadership decisions influence institutional policies, resource allocation, community engagement, and the overall school climate. Effective school leaders actively promote gender equity by sensitizing staff, encouraging student participation, addressing gender stereotypes, and collaborating with parents and community stakeholders to dismantle harmful socio-cultural norms. As emphasized by the African Centre for School Leadership (2024), the success of gender-responsive reforms is closely tied to the capacity of school leadership to understand and address gender issues in a deliberate and structured manner.

Moreover, school leaders play a vital role in ensuring that gender-focused government policies are translated into actionable practices. The inconsistent implementation of national policies—such as those promoting gender-sensitive curricula and the protection of learners from gender-based violence—can often be traced back to leadership gaps at the institutional level. Studies such as that by Omar and Chui (2024) in Wajir East Sub-County demonstrate that when school leadership embraces gender-supportive strategies, there is a marked improvement in female student participation, retention, and performance.

Ultimately, the ability of school leaders to embed gender support services within the routine functioning of schools determines the extent to which gender equity is achieved in Kenya's public education system. Leadership that is intentional, inclusive, and well-equipped can transform schools into safe, equitable, and empowering spaces for all learners. Therefore, examining the role of school leadership in promoting gender support practices is not only timely but also essential for informing national strategies aimed at achieving SDG 4 and ensuring that every child, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to learn, thrive, and succeed.

2.0 Statement of the Problem

Despite Kenya's progress toward gender parity in primary education, significant gender disparities remain in public secondary schools, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. While national policies like the Gender Policy in Education (2019) and global commitments under SDG 4 exist, their implementation at the school level is inconsistent. Girls continue to face systemic challenges such as early marriage, gender-based violence, cultural norms, and inadequate gender-responsive support, all of which hinder their education and signal institutional gaps. School leadership is vital in translating gender policies into practice by fostering inclusive environments and promoting

services like safe infrastructure, mentorship, and staff training. However, many leaders lack the resources, training, and monitoring capacity to effectively champion these efforts. Although research acknowledges the role of leadership in gender equity, there is limited empirical evidence on how Kenyan school leaders influence the delivery and sustainability of gender support practices. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the role of school leadership in promoting gender-responsive services in public schools.

3.0 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were:

- i. To identify the types of gender support services currently available in public secondary schools in Kenya.
- ii. To assess the extent to which school leadership promotes and integrates gender support services within school operations and culture.
- iii. To examine the challenges school leaders, face in implementing gender support services effectively.
- iv. To explore the strategies employed by school leadership to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of gender support services.
- v. To evaluate the influence of school leadership on the outcomes of gender support services, particularly in improving gender equity in enrollment, participation, and academic performance.

4.0 Research Questions

This study sought to explore how school leadership influences the promotion and implementation of gender support services in public secondary schools in Kenya. The following research questions guide the investigation into the availability, application, challenges and outcomes of these services.

- i. What types of gender support services are currently available in public secondary schools in Kenya?
- ii. To what extent do school leaders promote and integrate gender support services in their institutions?
- iii. What challenges do school leaders face in the implementation of gender support services?
- iv. What strategies are employed by school leadership to strengthen the delivery and sustainability of gender support services?

- v. What is the influence of school leadership on the outcomes of gender support services, particularly in improving gender equity in enrollment, participation, and academic performance?

5.0 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: **Transformational Leadership Theory** and the **Gender and Development (GAD) Framework**. Each offers a distinct yet interconnected lens through which to examine the role of school leadership in promoting gender support services in public secondary schools in Kenya.

5.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

This theory developed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard Bass (1985), provides a foundation for understanding how leadership can act as a catalyst for institutional change. The theory posits that transformational leaders motivate and inspire followers by articulating a compelling vision, fostering a shared sense of purpose, and attending to the individual needs of team members. They challenge existing norms, stimulate innovation, and model the values they expect others to embrace. In the context of school leadership, this theory is especially relevant because it highlights the critical

role of visionary and proactive leadership in shaping inclusive school environments. A transformational school leader does more than administer policies; they actively champion gender-responsive practices, motivate staff to adopt inclusive teaching methods, and ensure that students—regardless of gender—feel valued and supported. These leaders are more likely to implement gender support services such as safe and inclusive infrastructure, mentorship and empowerment programs for girls, and professional development for teachers on gender sensitivity. As such, the theory directly supports the study's focus on how leadership behavior influences the presence and success of gender support interventions in schools.

5.2 Gender and Development (GAD) Framework

This theory offers a structural and socio-political perspective on gender equity. Originating in the late 1980s, the GAD approach moves beyond the limited scope of the Women in Development (WID) model by emphasizing the need to address the root causes of gender inequality—namely, the social, economic, cultural, and institutional structures that perpetuate power imbalances between men and women. The framework advocates for a holistic and gender-mainstreamed approach, where gender considerations are integrated into all policies, programs, and institutional practices. In relation to

this study, the GAD framework enables a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges that hinder the realization of gender equity in education. It emphasizes the importance of transforming school systems to become more responsive to gendered needs—whether through policy reform, improved infrastructure, inclusive curricula, or mechanisms for reporting and redress. This framework also highlights how gender support services must not only target learners but also address institutional norms, teacher attitudes, and community engagement. Through the GAD lens, school leadership is viewed not just as an administrative role but as a key driver of structural change that can challenge harmful gender norms, allocate resources equitably, and institutionalize inclusive practices.

In summary, both Transformational Leadership Theory and the Gender and Development Framework offer critical insights into the phenomenon under study. While the former emphasizes the agency and influence of school leaders in shaping values, motivating staff, and driving innovation, the latter draws attention to the institutional and societal structures that must be transformed to achieve sustainable gender equity. Together, these theories frame school leadership as both a behavioral and structural force capable of advancing gender support services and fostering inclusive educational environments.

6.0 Empirical Review

This section presents a critical review of empirical studies relevant to the role of school leadership in promoting gender support services in public schools. The review highlights patterns, gaps, and emerging insights from existing research thus providing foundation for understanding the practical dynamics of leadership in advancing gender equity in education and situates the study within the broader discourse on inclusive school leadership and gender-responsive education systems.

6.1 Gender Support Services Available in Public Secondary Schools

Empirical studies reviewed consistently highlight a range of gender support services available across schools. According to UNESCO (2022), inclusive schools globally provide gender-sensitive infrastructure, mentorship programs, gender-responsive pedagogy, and safeguarding mechanisms to protect students from gender-based violence. KIPPRA (2024) reported that public schools implementing structured gender-responsive leadership strategies were more likely to adopt such services, including school-level gender policies, girls' mentorship programs, and gender-balanced participation in academic and extracurricular activities. Omar and Chui (2024) further support this, noting that schools in Wajir East that applied gender-

responsive pedagogy and mentorship recorded improved girls' retention and academic performance. These findings affirm the presence of diverse gender support services in Kenyan schools, though their availability and quality often vary depending on school leadership and community context.

6.2 Promotion and Integration of Gender Support Services by School Leadership

Leadership commitment emerges as a central determinant in the promotion and institutionalization of gender support services. UNESCO (2021) and Stromquist (2019) emphasize that proactive school leadership is linked to the integration of gender-sensitive curricula, establishment of safe school spaces, and inclusive classroom practices. The empirical review reveals that where school leaders take ownership of gender equity goals, they effectively embed them into daily routines and institutional culture. The African Centre for School Leadership (2024) found that schools with trained gender-sensitive leaders demonstrated stronger enforcement of gender policies and increased awareness among staff and learners. In the Kenyan setting, the KIPPRA (2024) report shows that schools with visionary leaders were more likely to translate national gender policies into actionable school-level practices. This highlights the integral role of leadership in ensuring gender support services are not

only introduced but meaningfully implemented and sustained.

8.3 Challenges in Implementing Gender Support Services

Despite increasing awareness, significant challenges hinder the effective implementation of gender support services. According to the World Bank (2021), key obstacles include inadequate funding, limited teacher training, weak enforcement of gender policies, and lack of gender-disaggregated data to inform decisions. In Kenya, these challenges are compounded by socio-cultural norms that devalue girls' education and promote practices like early marriage. Omar and Chui (2024) noted that even when policies exist, uptake can be superficial due to lack of leadership capacity and stakeholder engagement. Similarly, UNICEF (2020) observed that in schools without strong administrative support, gender support services remained poorly executed or fragmented. These findings suggest that while awareness of gender equity has grown, institutional and systemic barriers—particularly at the leadership level—continue to obstruct the effective roll-out of gender-supportive practices.

8.4 Strategies Used by School Leaders to Enhance Gender Support Services

Effective school leaders apply a variety of strategies to enhance the accessibility and impact of gender support services. Aikman and Unterhalter (2022) emphasize the

value of transformational leadership in challenging cultural norms, promoting community dialogue, and supporting inclusive school reforms. Empirical evidence shows that Kenyan school leaders who engaged local stakeholders including parents and religious leaders were more successful in addressing socio-cultural barriers to girls' education. The African Centre for School Leadership (2024) documents that trained leaders established peer support structures, gender clubs, and mentorship initiatives to promote a safe and equitable environment. Omar and Chui (2024) also report that localized strategies that align with community values helped reduce dropout rates and improve girls' participation. Collectively, these studies illustrate that responsive, context-sensitive strategies led by committed leaders are essential for the effective delivery of gender support services.

6.3 Influence of School Leadership on Gender Equity Outcomes

Empirical literature strongly supports the conclusion that school leadership has a direct and measurable impact on gender equity outcomes. Leal and Unterhalter (2023) argue that data-driven leadership significantly improves the targeting and evaluation of gender support initiatives. In Kenya, KIPPRA (2024) found that schools with gender-responsive leadership recorded higher enrollment and retention of girls, better academic achievement, and

more equitable participation in school governance. Similarly, UNICEF (2020) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) reinforce that leadership focused on inclusion leads to better school climate, reduced dropout rates, and improved learning outcomes for girls. However, the World Bank (2021) cautions that without sustained leadership development and support, progress remains limited. These findings collectively confirm that school leadership is a powerful lever for promoting gender equity, with its influence extending from policy interpretation to student-level outcomes.

7.0 Methodology

This study adopted a **qualitative research approach** to explore the role of school leadership in promoting gender support services in public secondary schools in Kenya. The research was grounded in the analysis of **secondary data sources**, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the intersection between leadership practices and gender equity within the education sector. This approach enabled the researcher to synthesize existing knowledge, draw comparisons, and identify recurring patterns and insights across diverse educational contexts.

Data were obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, institutional reports, and

publications from reputable international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA). Emphasis was placed on sources that addressed gender equity in education, school leadership effectiveness, and the implementation of gender-responsive policies and programs in both global and Kenyan contexts.

The study focused on five key thematic areas aligned with the research objectives: the availability of gender support services in schools, the extent of leadership engagement in gender equity efforts, challenges faced by school leaders, strategies used to enhance gender-responsive practices, and the overall impact of leadership on gender equity outcomes. **Thematic analysis** was employed to organize and interpret the data, enabling the researcher to identify trends, gaps, and best practices related to gender support services within public secondary schools.

By relying on established literature and documented case studies, this methodology provided a strong foundation for evaluating how school leadership influences the promotion and implementation of gender support services. While the study did not involve primary data collection, the use of diverse and credible secondary sources ensured a broad and contextually relevant understanding of the subject. This

approach also allowed for the triangulation of findings across multiple data points, strengthening the validity and applicability of the conclusions drawn.

8.0 Findings and Discussion

The study found that gender support services are increasingly present in Kenyan public secondary schools, but their scope, quality, and accessibility vary significantly depending on the region, leadership approach, and available resources. Key services identified include gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g., separate and secure toilets for girls), mentorship and empowerment programs, gender-responsive pedagogy, and mechanisms to address gender-based violence. These services are particularly critical for supporting girls' continued participation in education, especially in marginalized and rural areas where traditional gender norms often hinder school attendance and retention (UNESCO, 2022; KIPPRA, 2024).

For instance, Omar and Chui (2024) observed that schools in Wajir East Sub-County that implemented girls' mentorship programs and applied gender-sensitive teaching methods recorded higher retention and improved academic outcomes among female students. Additionally, KIPPRA (2024) reported that public schools with leadership that embraced gender-responsive strategies were more likely to have operational

school-level gender policies and to promote balanced participation in both academic and extracurricular activities. However, many schools lacked consistency in the delivery of these services, often due to resource limitations or leadership gaps.

8.1 Role of School Leadership in Promoting Gender Support Services

The findings underscore that school leadership is a critical factor in the promotion and institutionalization of gender support services. Effective school leaders act as catalysts for change by shaping inclusive school cultures, modeling gender-sensitive attitudes, and influencing both staff and community norms. UNESCO (2021) emphasized that schools with proactive leaders tend to have better integration of gender-sensitive curricula, safe school environments, and inclusive classroom practices.

The African Centre for School Leadership (2024) found that institutions led by trained and gender-aware principals demonstrated greater compliance with gender policies and a heightened sense of gender equity among staff and students. These leaders champion initiatives such as gender clubs, peer mentoring, and inclusion of female students in decision-making structures. Moreover, Stromquist (2019) noted that such leaders embed gender equity in school improvement plans and routinely monitor its implementation. This finding aligns with

transformational leadership principles, which position leaders as visionaries who not only implement policy but actively shape institutional values and behavior (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2020).

8.2 Barriers to Effective Implementation of Gender Support Practices

Despite growing awareness of gender equity, several barriers persist that limit the effective implementation of gender support services. Chief among these is the issue of inadequate funding, which affects infrastructure upgrades, training programs, and supply of gender-responsive teaching materials. The World Bank (2021) highlighted that financial constraints are among the primary obstacles faced by schools attempting to establish gender-friendly environments.

Additionally, the study found a general lack of training for teachers and leaders on gender-responsive pedagogy. This is compounded by insufficient monitoring systems and the unavailability of gender-disaggregated data that would inform targeted interventions (UNICEF, 2020). Socio-cultural norms also emerged as a significant barrier, particularly in communities where early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and male preference in education persist. Omar and Chui (2024) noted that even in schools with clear gender equity policies, implementation was often superficial unless supported by capable and

committed leadership. These findings suggest that addressing leadership capacity and community engagement is critical for sustained change.

8.3 Strategic Interventions by School Leaders to Strengthen Gender Support Services

The study revealed that school leaders employ a range of strategies to overcome barriers and strengthen the delivery and sustainability of gender support services. One key strategy involves engaging local communities—particularly parents, religious leaders, and local administration—in sensitization campaigns to change attitudes toward girls' education. Aikman and Unterhalter (2022) stress the importance of community dialogue and local ownership in transforming entrenched cultural beliefs.

Other strategies include the establishment of gender clubs, empowerment programs, and peer mentorship systems within schools. These initiatives provide safe spaces for girls to share experiences, build confidence, and receive academic and psychosocial support. The African Centre for School Leadership (2024) documented that gender-sensitive leaders often create school-based child protection committees and establish clear referral mechanisms for addressing cases of gender-based violence. Omar and Chui (2024) further observed that in some regions, culturally

sensitive approaches—such as integrating gender equity messages into religious teachings—helped to reduce resistance and increase program uptake.

Moreover, strategic partnerships with NGOs and education stakeholders have proven effective in mobilizing resources and capacity-building support. Leaders who adopt a data-informed approach also reported improved targeting of interventions and better accountability mechanisms (Leal & Unterhalter, 2023).

8.4 Impact of School Leadership on Gender Equity Outcomes

The study found that school leadership has a substantial and measurable impact on gender equity outcomes. Where leadership was intentional and inclusive, there were notable improvements in girls' school enrollment, retention, and academic achievement. KIPPRA (2024) reported that schools with strong leadership recorded more equitable participation of girls in school governance structures and extracurricular activities, which are vital for empowerment and confidence-building.

UNICEF (2020) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2021) support this finding, noting that inclusive school leadership contributes to reduced dropout rates and improved learning environments for both girls and boys. Furthermore, schools that adopted data-driven approaches and embedded equity indicators into their

performance frameworks were more likely to maintain long-term gains (Leal & Unterhalter, 2023). However, the World Bank (2021) cautions that these outcomes are only sustainable if there is continuous professional development, institutional support, and systemic policy enforcement to back school leaders' efforts.

9.0 Conclusion and recommendations

The study concludes that effective school leadership is a crucial factor in promoting gender equity within Kenyan public secondary schools. The success of gender support services such as gender-sensitive infrastructure, mentorship programs, and safeguarding mechanisms—depends heavily on the vision, capacity, and commitment of school leaders. When leadership is proactive, inclusive, and well-trained, it significantly enhances the likelihood of fostering a supportive and equitable environment for all learners. However, despite the presence of national frameworks such as the Gender Policy in Education (2019) and international commitments under SDG 4, the implementation of these policies at the school level remains inconsistent. This is particularly evident in marginalized and rural areas where schools face systemic barriers such as insufficient resources and deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms that hinder the full realization of gender equity.

The study also highlights a critical gap in the gender-sensitive competencies of school leaders. Many leaders lack the necessary training to effectively interpret gender policies and implement inclusive practices within their schools. This deficiency has been a significant barrier to the effective rollout of gender support services and the realization of gender equity goals. Additionally, systemic obstacles, such as limited funding, inadequate teacher training, weak policy enforcement, and resistance from entrenched cultural norms, continue to hinder the successful implementation of gender-responsive initiatives, particularly in marginalized regions.

In light of these findings, several recommendations have been made to improve the promotion of gender equity in schools. First, there is an urgent need for institutionalizing gender-sensitive leadership training as a core component of professional development for school heads and senior educators. This training should equip them with the skills and knowledge required to interpret gender policies, implement inclusive practices, and create learning environments that are supportive and respectful of all genders. Second, gender equity indicators should be integrated into national school evaluation and quality assurance frameworks. This would ensure that progress in delivering gender support services is systematically tracked, using gender-disaggregated data

to inform planning and enhance accountability.

Furthermore, policy enforcement and monitoring mechanisms need to be strengthened. The Ministry of Education should establish regular reporting structures and conduct periodic audits to ensure that gender policies are not only disseminated but are fully operationalized in schools. School leaders should also be encouraged to form collaborative partnerships with local communities, parents, civil society organizations, and development agencies. These partnerships would help address local gender barriers, mobilize resources, and promote shared ownership of gender equity initiatives. Lastly, targeted funding should be prioritized to support the physical and programmatic aspects of gender equity, such as developing gender-sensitive infrastructure and providing inclusive teaching materials.

By implementing these recommendations, Kenya can make significant strides toward achieving inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all learners.

Ultimately, the success of gender support services in public secondary schools' hinges on the quality of school leadership. Leaders who are empowered, gender-sensitive, and committed to inclusive education are the cornerstone of sustainable progress toward gender equity in education.

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