

**CULTURAL NORMS AND PRACTICES AFFECTING GIRLS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RWANDA: A CASE STUDY OF NYANZA DISTRICT**

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**Abstract**

*Since 2002, effective progress has been made to booster girls' enrolment in schools. However, a big number of girls worldwide remains out of school due to cultural norms and practices. This paper examined the influence of cultural norms and practices on girls' academic performance in Rwandan secondary schools specifically in Nyanza district. In order to achieve the expected objectives, the current paper gathered data using interview guides, questionnaires and documentation. A descriptive research design has been used. Quantitative data was presented, analyzed and interpreted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative data was presented and analyzed in form of extracts, explanations and interpretations. In addition this study was guided by the cultural deficit theory. Although previous studies revealed that girl's education plays a great role in the country's development, the findings of the current paper evidenced that early marriage, gender disparity, domestic duties, girls' pregnancies, child labor and hawking are cultural norms and practices affecting girl's education and cause them to perform poorly in Rwandan secondary schools. Finally, this paper recommended that all stakeholders of the education sector work hand in hand to overcome cultural norms and practices affecting girls' education.*

**Keywords:** *culture, cultural norms and practices, academic performance, Rwanda, nyanza*

Education has an important significance in the development of an individual. Education facilitates the economic growth by reducing the poverty. Ibuka (2011) states that education is the drive of the development that provides the citizens with the shape and the structure.

Education is also the highest block for development building and it is the first investment that all societies are advised to foster.

Secondary education for both boys and girls is considered as an important step in the education sector as it is the key to the higher education and it open the path which is channeled toward the labor market opportunities.

Even though education is the powerful weapon to combat the poverty, the secondary education is still a dilemma in sub-Saharan countries including Rwanda because of the extreme poverty as well as the cultural norms and practices which hinder girls at the extreme extent to pursuit and perform well in the secondary schools. Kofi (2001) said "To educate a girl is to reduce the poverty". Even if it is necessary for any country which wants to develop to educate its girls and women, the cultural norms and

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practices create the inequality in terms of the access to education and differences in secondary education performance.

Girls' education has been left behind all over the world. Education has been considered as the product of boys restricted for girls due to different causes. DFID (2005) reports that 58 million girls are not at school and those few who are at school are not performing well because of gender disparity resulted in their cultural beliefs. Some African families favor boys' education over girls' education because of their beliefs that the inferior role of a girl and women within the community does not require much education, furthermore, other families think that once a girl is educated, the benefits of her education will be benefited by the parents of the son-in-law once she is married (Johnson, 2011).

In many societies girls have been given the second position to their brothers. Education has been considered as it is not important for girls. The cultural norms and practices play the role in the inequality between boys and girls, these practices influence many families to favor boys over girls for the entrance to the secondary school especially when the education is not free. Girls are denied the chance to enter secondary schools because of the cultural beliefs that education of a boy is more important because the boy will be the future leader of the community and the nation as well as the head of the family (David, 1993).

Therefore, girls' education has been the most discussed subject for the past decades in developed countries and in many developing countries many of which are situated in sub Saharan Africa.

Firstly, Gitonga (2009) conducted a study in Nyahururu Division in Laikipia District in Kenya to identify factors hindering girls' participation within secondary education. The findings indicated that family, cultural factors and school related factors hinder girls from performing well in secondary education. Secondly, Uwimana, (2012) conducted a research whose title is Socio- Cultural and Economic Factors on Access to Higher Education among Females in Rwanda, a Case Study of Rwanda, Nyagatare Campus. She found that lack of parental supports, early marriage and cultural responsibilities attributed to girls affect their education. Thirdly, Nyarusu (2013) examined negative effects affecting the academic performance of girls in Tanzania, precisely in Mbeya City. The findings indicated that the socio- cultural norms and practices are the big effects affecting girls' academic performance. Moreover, Simatwa and Atieno (2014) analyzed the effects of cultural norms and practices on girls' academic performance within secondary schools of Kisumu District of Kenya. They realized that cultural norms and practices affect girl students' academic performance in secondary schools of Kenya. Lastly, Mohamed et. al. (2017) conducted a study intended to identify the influence of socio-cultural norms and practices on girl child participation in secondary schools in Gorowe Puntland. They found that girls are not performing

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well in secondary schools because of the excessive absenteeism caused by being forced by their parents to marry early so that they can gain the dowries.

Since 2002, effective process has been made to booster girls' enrolment in schools. However, UNESCO (2022) reports that estimated 129 million girls worldwide remain out of the school due to cultural norms and practices. The results of secondary examinations of 2017 indicate that girls' academic performance has increased because they performed at 51.9% and boys performed at 48.1%. Even if girls have the high performance, boys are still dominating girls on the list of best performers in all sections of secondary education (Athan, 2020). The national examination result of 2018 also indicates that girls outperformed their brothers with 52.14%. Like it was in 2017, the result of 2018 highlighted that even if girls have outnumbered their brothers, still the boys have a big number among the best performers because among of them the was no girls (Athan, 2020). The situation like this one indicates that there are still challenges that affects girls' academic performance that need to be researched on.

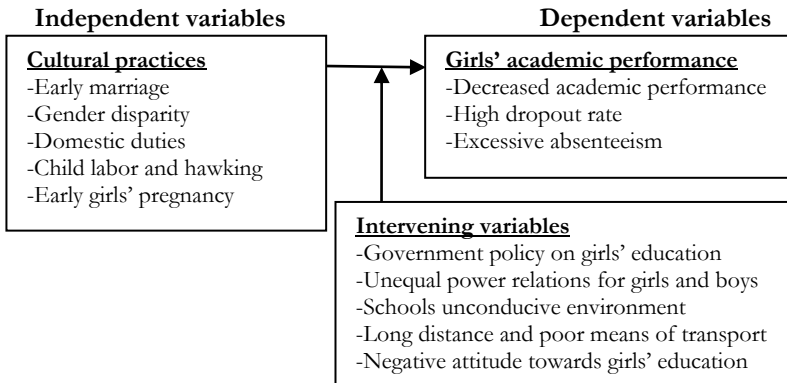
The previous studies indicates that girls' academic performance is affected by cultural norms and practices. However, the previous studies contain different gaps that must be bridged by the current research activity. On the first hand, the methodological data collection strategies, the sample size, designs as well as the study approaches used are not totally accurate. Secondary, the settings in which those researches were conducted was not like the setting in which the current study was conducted; even the time setting of the previous studies is not comfortable with the 2023 situation. Thirdly, in Rwanda there is no enough researches about cultural norms and practices affecting girls' academic performance. Because of this situation it is not easy to find the literature about cultural norms and practices affecting girls' academic performance in secondary schools. Lastly the previous studies put much emphasize on tertiary as well as on primary education and forget girls' academic performance in secondary schools

Therefore, this paper is valid as it analyzed the influence of the cultural norms and practices on girls' academic performance in secondary schools of Rwanda, precisely in Nyanza district.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In order to understand the study findings, a conceptual framework has been developed to guide the study objective as it is indicated in the below figure.

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This figure indicates different variables that can have negative or positive effects on academic performance of girls in secondary schools in Rwanda such as early marriage, gender disparity, domestic duties, child labor and hawking and early girls' pregnancy. These variables have direct effects on girls' academic performance especially in secondary schools. The same figure shows other extraneous variables which are indirectly linked to the academic performance of girls in the secondary schools, these variables are like: government policy on girls' education, unequal power relations for girls and boys, schools' environment, long distance and poor means of transport and negative attitude towards girls' education.

### Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The objectives of this paper are to examine the cultural norms and practices practiced by girls of secondary school age group, to assess the academic performance of girls in secondary schools and to establish a relationship between cultural norms and practices and girls' academic performance in secondary schools in Rwanda. In order to achieve these objectives, the current paper gathered data using interview guides, questionnaires as well as document analysis. A descriptive research design has been used. Quantitative data was analyzed by the use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), presented and interpreted utilizing descriptive tables and others for better analysis. Qualitative data was presented and analyzed in form of extracts, explanations and interpretations. The target population for the study was 1984 population comprised of students, teachers, deputy head teachers in charge of studies and school head teachers from College du Christ-Roi Nyanza, G.S. Mater Dei, G.S. Rwabicuma, G.S. Gatagara and G.S. Kigoma. The sample of 332 students was selected randomly. Key informants were 19 teachers, 5 deputy head teachers in charge of studies and 5 Head Teachers from Nyanza District sampled purposively.

In addition, primary data were collected using questionnaires and interview guides while secondary data were collected through reviewing the

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past documents about cultural norms and practices and girls’ academic performance. The questionnaires contained closed question while interviews contained the open-ended questions that helped the research to reach the paper.

On the other hand, documentation helped the researcher to be more informed about effects of cultural norms and practices on girls’ academic performance.

Furthermore, the current paper was guided by the Cultural Deficit Theory. The pioneer of the Cultural Deficit Theory is Basil (1960). According to this theory, some students perform poorly in school because social and cultural nature of the home environment that does not prepare them for the work they are required to do in school. This theory is based on a perspective that minority group members are different because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority group. The Cultural Deficit Theory have two mains pillars which are the following:

The first pillar of the Cultural Deficit Theory argues that students who are not favored by the cultural believes are disadvantage compared to students favored by the cultural believes. The disadvantages the students face are anything from lack of supplies to lack of exposure and participation. This pillar has helped the researcher to examine the cultural norms and practices practiced by girls of secondary school age group. The second pillar of the same theory proposes that deficiencies in the home environment result in shortcomings in skills, knowledge, and behaviors that contribute to poor school performance. This pillar has helped us to assess the academic performance of girls in secondary schools of Nyanza District and to establish a relationship between cultural norms and practices and girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Rwanda.

**Examination of the Cultural norms and Practices Practiced by Girls of Secondary School Age Group in Rwanda**

**Table 1 Cultural norms and practices practiced by girls of secondary school age group in Rwanda**

Statement	SD		D		UC		A		SA		Total		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	MeanSd	
Early marriage is the cause of dropout amongst the girls in secondary schools	0	0.0	19	5.8	17	5.0	73	22.0	223	67.2	332	4.5	.8
Gender disparity is causing poor school attendance amongst girls	72	21.8	16	4.7	52	15.7	68	20.5	124	37.3	332	3.5	1.5
Domestic duties decrease girls’ commitment towards the school activities.	36	10.8	47	14.2	128	38.6	55	16.5	66	19.9	332	3.2	1.2
Child labor and hawking affects girls’ participation in the school activities	11	3.2	59	17.9	44	13.3	84	25.3	134	40.3	332	3.8	1.2
Early girls’ pregnancy is the cause of girls’ dropout	69	20.8	32	9.6	64	19.7	64	19.2	101	30.7	332	3.3	1.5

Source: Primary data, 2023

Table 1. shows that 223(67.2%) by the mean 4.5 strongly agreed that early marriage is the cause of dropout amongst the girls in secondary schools,

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124 (37.3%) by the mean of 3.5 strongly agreed that gender disparity is causing poor school attendance amongst girls, 66 (19.9%) by the mean of 3.2 strongly agreed that domestic duties decrease girls' commitment to the school activities, 134 (40.3%) by the mean of 3.8 strongly agreed that child labor and hawking affects girls' participation in the school activities. Lastly 101 (30.7%) respondents by the mean of 3.3 strongly agreed that early girls' pregnancy is the cause of girls' dropout.

The present research concurs with the finding of Gitonga (2009) who conducted a study in Nyahururu Division in Kenya to identify factors influencing girl child participation in secondary education and contended that family, cultural factors and school related factors hinder girls from performing well in secondary education. It has been recommended that girls should gain the opportunity to quality education in order to exploit their talents for their own development as well as for the society development in general.

This paper has also collected qualitative data from teachers, deputy head teachers and teachers about cultural norms and practices that may have negative effects on girls' academic performance. In order to collect such data, this question has been posed to respondents. "What are cultural norms and practices that can affects girls' academic performance?" The following are some of answers that have been provided by respondents.

The cultural norms and practices that affects girls' academic performance in Rwanda are like early girls' marriage and pregnancy as well as difficulty domestic duties that are assigned to girls at their homes. When a girl is married at early age, it is very difficult for her to continue with her education. Additionally, when girls are assigned with different domestic duties, they can't get enough time to concentrate on school activities (Interviewee 1)

This answer indicates that the cultural norms that affects girls' academic performance are not only early girls' marriage and pregnancy but also domestic duties. These findings are not different from the findings MIGEPROF statistics that indicate that in 2017 more than 17000 young girls between sixteen and seventeen years old were early impregnated (Munezero, 2016). In addition, Beck (1999 ) says that even though, girls and boys are engaged in difficult work, girls are the one who are engaged in very dangerous duties like prostitution, bar waiters, baby sitters, hawking and so on. Another respondent provided the following answer:

The cultural norms and practices that affects girls' academic performance are many. In Rwanda, the one that affects girls' academic performance at the extent level is gender disparity. Even if much effort has been spent in enhancement of girls' education, still girls are facing the challenge of gender disparity resulted in their family believes.

There are some parents who favor boys' education over girls' because they consider girls' education useless (Interviewee 2).

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This implies that gender disparity is one of cultural norms and practices that affects girls' academic performance in Nyanza district in Rwanda. The findings of this paper don't differ from the findings of previous study. Johnson, (2011) highlights that some African families favor boys' education over girls' education because of their beliefs that the inferior role of a girl and women within the community does not require much education, furthermore, other families think that once a girl is educated, the benefits of her education will be benefited by the parents of the son-in-law once she is married.

### Assessment of the Academic Performance of Girls in Secondary Schools in Nyanza District

The second objective sought to assess the girls' academic performance in secondary schools in Rwanda. The second objectives established grades obtained by girls' students in senior three examinations in the previous four years. It has been observed that, the general performances of girls in O' level national examinations are poor. According to REB (2017) in 2015 girl candidates passed at only 46% and the rest 54% failed, in 2016 only 49 % girls passed and 61% failed.

In general, the REB girls' results from 2015 – 2017 for Nyanza District were as follows.

**Table 2 O' Level National Examination Results from 2016-2019**

Divisions	2016	2017	2018	2019
Division I	29	38	36	42
Division II	34	43	38	72
Division III	178	192	120	139
Division IV	218	300	289	410
Division VI	47	50	54	63
Division U	24	12	10	61

Source: REB results – 2016 – 2019

The girls' academic performance in O' level examinations in Nyanza District since 2016 was analyzed as follows: The study established that a trend of girls in Division I in the four years was between 29 to 42. By scrutinizing the results of individual schools, the researcher observed that in the year 2016, girls recorded a remarkable rise while others recorded a drop. Furthermore, the girls' performance in ordinary level national examinations in Rwanda was also compared to boys' by considering only four divisions from the first up to the fourth division.

**Table 3 Mean Score of Girls versus Boys from 2017-2019 in Rwanda**

Years	2017		2018		2019	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
I	1,489	3,874	1,489	3,874	1,489	3,874
II	2,939	7,003	2,939	7,003	2,939	7,003
III	8,155	16,928	8,155	16,928	8,155	16,928
IV	57,413	79,220	57,413	79,220	57,413	79,220
TOTAL	69,996	107,025	69,996	107,025	69,996	107,025

Source: MINEDUC results from 2017-2019

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According to these results above, students were still performing poorly in their academic progress and more likely for girls' students. In education, the academic performance of students was considered as a key criterion to judge one's total potentiality and capability. As reflected in Table 3, it was indicated that the boys dominated girls in terms of academic performance. The table, also highlighted that girls were not able to reach even a high percentage rate in from Division I to Division III. In conclusion, the aforementioned results are related especially to harmful cultural norms and practices which are very dangerous to the girl's academic performance in secondary schools.

The researcher also analyzed girls' performance in advanced level national examinations in Nyanza District from 2015 to 2017 by compared to boys' by considering those who got between 73 and 30 marks.

**Table 4 Mean Score of Girls versus Boys from 2017-2019 in A' level in Nyanza District**

YEAR	Sex	SCORE		CANDIDATES	
		Marks (73-30)	%	Present	Registered
2017	F	1,788	12.10	3,947	6,583
	M	2,886	21.49	4,389	7,677
	T	2,674	17.18	8,336	4,260
2018	F	1,866	7.79	2,313	7,285
	M	6,908	14.67	3,434	8,902
	T	8,774	11.55	5,747	6,187
2019	F	825	7.12	8,050	5,700
	M	2,785	12.23	6,166	5,331
	T	2,610	10.0	4,216	1,031
	F	1,825	7.12	7,840	5,723

Source: MINEDUC (2023)

The findings indicate that from 2017 to 2019 the performance of girls was not adequate compared to the boys'. While analyzing the advanced level national examination results, it has been found that girls fail in the subjects like sciences that require a tremendous concentration; the situation like this was found in all sampled schools especially in day schooling schools. This is associated with some cultural norms and practices and beliefs that assign girls with heavy domestic works in the society which hinder them from concentrating to school activities. The findings of the current study do not go far from pre-current researchers' findings. Hedges and Newel (2015) found that in science, boys outperform girls, but in reading and writing girls have the advantage.

After considering different documents indicating the academic performance and the answers gotten through the interview indicates that girls' academic performance is still not adequate considered to the one of their brothers. The situation is like that because girls of secondary school age group in Nyanza district face challenges like early marriage, gender disparity, domestic duties, child labor, hawking, early girls' pregnancy, uncondusive environment, religion and sexism (Rollins & Thomas, 2009).



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**Assesment of the Relationship between Cultural Norms and Practices and Girls’ Academic Performance within Secondary Schools in Nyanza District**

The third objective assessed the relationship between cultural norms and practices practiced by girls of secondary school age group and girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Rwanda. The researcher examined whether cultural norms and practices affect girls’ academic performance based on the answers provided by the respondents during the data collection.

**Table 5 The relationship between cultural norms and practices and girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Nyanza District**

		Cultural norms and practices	Girls’ academic performance
Cultural norms and practices	Pearson Correlation	1	.854**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	165	165
Girls’ academic performance	Pearson Correlation	.854**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	165	165

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Source: Primary Data 2023

The Findings from the Table 5. indicate that there is a statistical significance relationship between cultural norms and practices and girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Nyanza District since the P-value = .000 which less than 0.01 as the level of significance and Pearson coefficient of correlation (r) is .854\*\* which is very high. This also implies that cultural norms and practices affect girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Nyanza District.

Study findings did not contradict the results of the research carried out by Scheerens and Creemers, (2009) who found that cultural practices are correlated with performance of girls. In addition, the findings of this paper are in line with the study of Tshui & Cai, (2011) who found that cultural norms affect academic performance of girls.

**Regression Analysis between Cultural Norms and Practices and Girls’ Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Nyanza District**

This paper carried out a regression analysis for cultural norms and practices and girls’ academic performance in secondary schools in Rwanda a case study of Nyanza District. The following table shows a regression analysis, through a summary of model, analysis of variance and regression coefficients.

**Table 6 Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.832 <sup>a</sup>	.751	.741	.29306

a. Dependent Variable: Girls’ academic performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), Cultural norms and practices (early girls’ pregnancy, early marriage, domestic duties, gender disparity, child labor and hawking).

Source: Primary Data (2023)

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The findings from Table 6. Shows that the value of Adjusted R Square is .741 an indication that 74.1% of the variation in girls' academic performance can be explained by one level of independent variables (early girls' pregnancy, early marriage, domestic duties, gender disparity, child labor and hawking). This implies that there is a strong relationship between cultural norms and practices and girls' academic performance.

**Table 7 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.523	4	.881	.845	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	166.877	160	1.043		
	Total	170.400	164			

a. Dependent Variable: Girls' academic performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), Cultural norms and practices

Source: Primary Data (2023)

The table 7 shows that the degrees of freedom are 3.523 and 166.877, the F. Value equals .845 and the significance (P- Value) equals 0.000<sup>a</sup>. Therefore the model is significant because the significance (P- Value) is 0.000<sup>a</sup> which is less than alpha (.05). This implies that availability of cultural norms and practices effects girls' academic performance in secondary schools of Nyanza District.

**Table 8 Regression Coefficient**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.713	.190		3.761	.000
Cultural norms and practices	.845	.040	.854	20.917	.000

a. Girls' academic performance

Source: Primary Data, 2020

The findings in the above table indicates that the regression equation is ( $y = ax + b + \epsilon$ ) thus y: dependent variable as girls' academic performance, x: independent variable as cultural norms and practices. Therefore,  $y = .854x + .713 + \epsilon$ . This slope is significant since the significance value is .000 which is less than .5. Despite. This implies that availability of cultural norms and practices effects girls' academic performance in secondary schools of Nyanza District.

After collecting quantitative data, this paper collected qualitative data from teachers, deputy head teachers and head teachers about effects of cultural norms and practices on girls' academic performance in Nyanza district in Rwanda. In order to collect such data, the researcher conducted interview with respondents in order to get vital information indispensable for the current paper. All of 29 (100%) respondents answered that cultural norms and practices affect negatively girls' academic performance in secondary schools of Nyanza district in Rwanda. They also noted that in order to increase girls' academic performance, the culture should support girls' academic performance. These findings don't contradict the findings of the study conducted by Simatwa and Atieno (2014) who find that

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cultural norms and practices affect girl students' academic performance in secondary schools.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, findings of this paper show that cultural norms and practices that may affect girls' academic performance in secondary schools of Nyanza district in Rwanda are early marriage, gender disparity, domestic duties, child labor and hawking, as well as the early girls' pregnancy.

After analyzing the national examination results, the researcher discovered that girls are not doing well in terms of academic performance as they do not have a great number in among best performers. Even the findings from the key informants and documents analysis highlighted that the girls' academic performance in secondary schools is poor.

In establishment of the relationship between two variables (independent and dependent variables), it has been found that early marriage, gender disparity, domestic duties, child labor and hawking as well as the early girls' pregnancy negatively affect girls' academic performance. The current research also revealed that the pre-mentioned cultural norms and practices are the main stimuli to girls' absenteeism and dropout. The correlation between the mentioned above cultural norms and practices and girls' academic performance was found as meaningful. This shows that the relationships between independent and dependent variables were positive and statistically significant. Each of the discussed cultural norms and practices significantly affects girls' academic performance.

### **Recommendations**

The paper recommends that more emphasis should be placed on helping girls to overcome cultural norms and practices that are harmful to their education. The Government of Rwanda should design and proliferate effective policies tailored towards empowering its education agencies to work collaboratively in order to eradicate the cultural norms and practices affecting girls' academic performance in all Rwandan secondary schools. Moreover, offices of education at all levels are recommended to conduct periodical inspections in all schools to ensure that harmful traditional cultural norms and practices are effectively eliminated. In addition, it would be very important to establish a constant communication among educators, parents and the school leaders in order to assess the academic performance of the students. Finally, other researchers are recommended to conduct a study on the following topics: girl's opportunity to quality education, effects of creating awareness on importance of girls' education at all level, and the strategies for changing negative attitudes towards girls' education.

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