

## **Education of Girls in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan: Influence of the Azande Monarchy and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura Yambio**

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### **Abstract**

Globally, more than 129 million girls, mostly in developing countries do not attend school. In Africa, the fight for girls' education is still entwined with poverty, and cultural systems. This research paper explores the challenges girls' face in order to access education in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan. The objective was to identify the key barriers facing education of girls, role of Azande Kingdom and Diocese of Tombura Yambio and assess cultural and spiritual interventions that could promote girls education in South Sudan's post-conflict context. The paper exploited mixed-methods (triangulation) framework. The population was 288 respondents where girls were 235; other stakeholders were 15 and teachers were 38. The study identified financial difficulties, insecurity, cultural limitations, and early marriage as barriers to girls' education. The results also indicate that the Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura–Yambio are emerging as significant agents for change through royal advocacy, cultural festivals and faith-based educational initiatives. The study recommends that the Ministry of General Education and Instruction is advised to fortify its ties with the Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese as measures for enhancing girls' access to education.

**Key Words:** Education, Monarchy, Sustainable Development, advocacy, cultural advocacy, adolescent girls, Diocese.

## **1. Introduction**

Education is a key human right and one of the primary drivers of social and economic progress. However, in many post-conflict communities, such as South Sudan, young girls continue to face significant challenges to obtaining basic education. The Western Equatoria State (WES) in the country's south has particular challenges due to insecurity, poverty, and traditional gender norms (UNESCO, 2022). Despite the government's commitment to universal education, the enrollment and retention rates for girls remain remarkably low when compared to those for boys.

In Western Equatoria State (WES), Sudan, the reign of King Atoroba Peni Rikito Gbudue II as king of the Revamped Azande Kingdom and the leadership of Rt. Rev. Bishop Hiiboro Eduardo Kussala of The Catholic Diocese of Tombura Yambio presents an opportunity to alter societal attitudes regarding girls' education. The potential influence of traditional institutions on educational inclusion as they regain credibility in community development and peace building spearheaded by the diocese cannot be understated. Thus, this study examined the primary obstacles to the education of young females in Western Equatoria State and considers how the cultural revival of the Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura Yambio (CDTY) promote educational equity.

## **2. Literature Review**

Literature review considered global perspective followed by African perspective. Then a review was considered on South Sudan with a major focus on Western Equatoria State.

Globally, girls' education is increasingly recognized as a vital component of sustainable development and human rights. According to UNESCO (2023), over 129 million girls worldwide, primarily in underdeveloped countries, do not attend school. Among the issues are poverty, early marriage, gender-based violence, and discriminatory social norms (World Bank, 2023). Households in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa often prioritize boys' education over girls' due to a lack of funds or cultural norms that place a lower value on girls' education (UNICEF, 2022).

Research from Latin America and some parts of Asia show that improved access to education for girls leads to greater family health, reduced fertility rates, and higher national wealth (OECD, 2021). Global initiatives including Education for All (EFA), Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), and UNGEI (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative) have raised awareness and

funding for girls' education. However, disparities remain evident in violent areas where safety and educational facilities are at risk (Save the Children, 2023). Therefore, even while global frameworks are crucial for successful implementation, localized tactics that consider cultural contexts are still necessary.

In Africa, the struggle for girls' education remains affected by patriarchal systems, poverty, insecurity, and cultural norms. According to the African Development Bank, early school dropouts are caused by nearly one-third of African girls getting married before turning 18 (AfDB, 2022). Studies in Kenya, Malawi, and Nigeria have shown that sociocultural gender roles significantly influence educational achievement (Morara and Omondi, 2020; Banda, 2021). Contextually, many rural communities consider girls' education to be a low-return investment because they believe that the husband's family will gain after marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

In contrast, some countries are making strides. Ghana and Ethiopia, for example, have made great strides in supplying school meals, creating gender-sensitive curricula, and hiring female instructors (UNESCO, 2022). The African Union-backed Girls' Education Movement (GEM) continues to advocate and mobilize resources (AU, 2023).

East Africa can learn a lot from Kenya and Uganda. The Elimu Scholarship Fund and Free Primary Education (FPE) have helped Kenya raise the percentage of girls enrolled in primary school to over 95% (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2023). Attendance has increased and stigma has diminished thanks to initiatives like the Sanitary Towels Program and the Return-to-School Policy for Adolescent Mothers (UNICEF, 2022). Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) have expanded access in Uganda, despite persistent problems like early marriage and school violence (World Bank, 2023). By showing that regular policy interventions, community sensitization, and traditional leader engagement lead to real improvements in girls' education, these examples provide South Sudan replicable alternatives.

The significance of traditional and cultural institutions is emphasized by scholars. By upholding laws against child marriage, Botswana's chiefs have increased student retention (Banda, 2021). Advocacy initiatives with a strong cultural foundation have also been essential in the success of community-driven education reforms in Malawi and Kenya (UNICEF, 2022). Consequently, the secret to African educational reform lies on fusing modern educational programs with long-standing authority structures.

South Sudan's educational system is still in its infancy following years of civil war, relocation, and sociopolitical upheaval. The Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI, 2023) advances that the primary reasons why more than 70 percent of school-age girls do not attend school are early marriage, instability, and inadequate infrastructure. Poverty, a lack of qualified teachers, and long treks to school make the issue worse (UNICEF, 2023). In Western Equatoria State, cultural customs still limit the value placed on girls' education, and parents are discouraged from investing in their children's education due to persistent insecurity (UNHCR, 2023).

In Western Equatoria State, cultural customs still limit the value placed on girls' education, and parents are discouraged from investing in their children's education due to persistent insecurity (UNHCR, 2023). The Catholic Diocese of Tombura–Yambio, under the leadership of Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala, has been a major voice in advocating for the education and protection of girls through faith-based schools, parish women's organizations, and youth empowerment initiatives. The Diocese's Education Secretariat, UNICEF, GESS, and the Ministry of Education have partnered to provide scholarships and mentorship to underprivileged girls. Additionally, the government's and the UN's educational goals closely align with the Diocese's social teachings, which emphasize human dignity and gender equality. However, inequality persists, especially in conflict-affected regions such as South Sudan and Somalia, where girls are unable to attend school due to displacement (UNHCR, 2023).

Recent government and non-governmental organization programs, such as Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS), have increased enrollment through stipends and community mobilization. However, without strong cultural backing, progress remains fragile. The restored Azande Kingdom in 2022 offers a culturally relevant forum for advocating for educational reform and swaying public opinion. At the October 11, 2025, Azande Cultural Festival in Yambio, King Atoroba Peni Rikito Gbudue ushered in a new era when traditional authority aligns with national educational goals by emphasizing education as a key component of gender equality and community rejuvenation.

### **3. Research Questions**

- i. What are the challenges affecting girls' education in Western Equatoria State?
- ii. How do the Azande Kingdom and Catholic Diocese of Tombura Yambio influence community perceptions and support toward girls' education?

- iii. What cultural and spiritual interventions can sustainably promote girls' education in South Sudan's post-conflict context?

#### 4. Research Objectives

- i. To identify the key Challenges young girls in accessing and completing education in Western Equatoria State.
- ii. To assess the role of the Azande Kingdom the Catholic Diocese of Tombura Yambio in promoting girls' education.
- iii. To propose community-driven strategies for enhancing girls' educational participation in post-conflict South Sudan.

#### 5. Research Methodology

This study's mixed-method Research Design exploited quantitative and qualitative data approaches. In Western Equatoria, 235 females aged 12 to 18 from five counties were subjected to structured questionnaires. Interviews with key informants included representatives of the Azande Kingdom, diocesans, priests, parents, and teachers. The quantitative data was evaluated using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data was examined using theme analysis to identify recurring themes and points of view.

#### 6. Data Analysis

The study's findings explored multiple factors influence girls' education in Western Equatoria State. A null hypothesis was used to assess learners and teachers perception on the issues that impede girl education. Table 1 below summarizes the responses collected from 235 girls.

##### 6.1 Responses from girls

**Table 1: Quantitative Findings from the Survey of Girl Child (N=235)**

| Variable              | Indicator/Description                                 | Frequency<br>(n) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|-----------------------|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Financial hardship    | Families unable to afford school fees or materials    | 160              | 68                |
| Insecurity/Conflict   | Fear of violence or displacement disrupting schooling | 127              | 54                |
| Cultural restrictions | Preference for boys' education and early marriages    | 111              | 47                |

|                              |   |    |    |
|------------------------------|---|----|----|
| Long distance to schools     | Daily walking distances exceeding 5 km          | 94 | 40 |
| Lack of female teachers      | Absence of female role models in rural schools  | 85 | 36 |
| Early marriage and pregnancy | Dropout due to childbearing or marriage         | 76 | 32 |
| School infrastructure        | Poor classrooms, lack of toilets and sanitation | 71 | 30 |

Source: Field data, 2025.

Table 1 showed that financial hardships whereby families were unable to afford school fees and the required learning materials were the biggest variable hampering girl-child education in Western Equatoria State at 68 percent. The second was Insecurity/conflict at 54 percent. Other variables negatively influencing girl child education were cultural restrictions, Long Distance from school, and lack of female teachers to inspire girls at 47 percent, 40 percent and 36 percent respectively. Whereas early marriage and early pregnancy accounted for 32 percent, School infrastructure only accounted for 30 percent. The quantitative facts unequivocally show that the biggest barriers continue to be cultural limitations (47 percent), insecurity (54 percent), and economic difficulty (68%).

The study’s findings further explored multiple factors influence girls’ education as perceived by teachers in Western Equatoria State. Table 2 below covers the summary of the data collected from 38 teachers.

## 6.2 Responses from teachers

Table II below covers the summary of the responses collected from 38 teachers.

**Table 2: Quantitative Findings from the Survey of teachers (N=38)**

| Variable              | Indicator/Description                                 | Frequency<br>(n) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|-----------------------|---|------------------|-------------------|
| Financial hardship    | Families unable to afford school fees or materials    | 31               | 82                |
| Insecurity/Conflict   | Fear of violence or displacement disrupting schooling | 33               | 87                |
| Cultural restrictions | Preference for boys’ education and early              | 15               | 39                |

|                              |   | marriages |    |
|------------------------------|---|-----------|----|
| Long distance to schools     | Daily walking distances exceeding 5 km          | 32        | 84 |
| Lack of female teachers      | Absence of female role models in rural schools  | 17        | 45 |
| Early marriage and pregnancy | Dropout due to childbearing or marriage         | 29        | 76 |
| School infrastructure        | Poor classrooms, lack of toilets and sanitation | 11        | 29 |

*Source: Field data, 2025.*

Table 2 showed the perception of teachers on the variables under test. The outcome showed that insecurity was the biggest variable hampering girl-child education in Western Equatoria State at 87 percent. The second was long distance from school at 84 percent. Other variables negatively influencing girl child education were financial factors, early marriage, and lack of female teachers to inspire girls at 82 percent, 76 percent and 45 percent respectively. Whereas cultural restrictions accounted for 39 percent, School infrastructure only accounted for 29 percent. The quantitative facts indicated that the biggest barriers continue to be financial hardships (82 percent), Long distance from school (84 percent), and insecurity (87%).

Table 3 below captures the qualitative themes from focus groups discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews. The variables were cultural changes, faith-based advocacy, economic obstructions, security concerns, gender roles and collaborative leadership (Kingdom and Diocese).

### 6.3 Thematic Responses

**Table 3: Qualitative Themes from Focus Groups and Key Informant Interviews**

| Theme                                 | Participant Views and Illustrative Quotes                    | Interpretation/Implication                                   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Cultural Shifts and the Azande</b> | “When the King said that girls should study like boys during | Traditional endorsement from the Kingdom is reshaping gender |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Kingdom</b>   | the festival, my father decided to let my sister go back to school.”<br>– Learner participant, Nzara   | perceptions and promoting educational equality.  |
| <b>Faith-Based Advocacy</b>                              | “The Church helps us understand that education is a blessing from God. The parish school also supports orphans with books.” – Teacher, Yambio                              | The Catholic Diocese’s faith-based message promotes moral and social legitimacy for girls’ education.            |
| <b>Economic Barriers</b>                                 | “Even if parents want to send girls to school, there is no money for uniforms and fees.” – Parent, Ezo County  | Persistent poverty remains a core impediment; scholarships and stipends are crucial.                             |
| <b>Security Concerns</b>                                 | “When there is fighting or rumours of attack –which are recurrent, parents withdraw girls from schools for safety.” – Boda Man, Ibba County                                | Insecurity continues to destabilize learning, especially in border communities.                                  |
| <b>Gender Roles and Household Chores</b>                 | “Most girls spend mornings fetching water before school, arriving tired or late. Others are mandated to sell in the markets to supplement family income” – Teacher, Yambio | Household labor obligations undermine girls’ performance and attendance.   |
| <b>Collaborative Leadership (Kingdom–Church Synergy)</b> | “Now that the Church and the Kingdom work together, people listen more. It feels like one voice for our daughters.” – Priest CDTY- Yambio                                  | Partnership between traditional and religious institutions enhances community trust and commitment to education. |

*Source: Field interviews and focus group discussions, 2025.*

Table 3 shows qualitative responses from respondents from Western Equatoria State. Their responses gave critical outcomes for the study. For example, a participant from Nzara gave the following view.

*“When the King said that girls should study like boys during the festival, my father decided to let my sister go back to school.”*

***Learner Participant, Nzara***

The qualitative view by learner participant from Nzara demonstrates that Traditional endorsement from the Kingdom is reshaping gender perceptions and promoting educational equality. This response highlighted that the Kingship has taken a positive stance in supporting girl education. This is a welcome endorsement that will bear fruit in the foreseeable future.

The view reveals a significant cultural shift in attitudes toward girls’ education. This is influenced by traditional authority within the Azande Kingdom. Public endorsement by the King has played a transformative role in reshaping long-held gender norms, encouraging families to view girls’ education as both acceptable and valuable. Such traditional validation carries substantial social weight, enabling parents—particularly fathers—to reconsider earlier reservations and support their daughters’ return to school. This demonstrates how culturally rooted leadership can act as a catalyst for social change by legitimizing new educational aspirations for girls.

Faith-based advocacy further reinforces this transformation by providing moral and social justification for educating girls. The Catholic Church, through its teachings and parish-based initiatives, frames education as a divine blessing and a communal responsibility. Support for vulnerable learners, including orphans, strengthens trust in church-run schools and positions the Church as a credible partner in promoting inclusive education. Together, faith-based messages and tangible support systems help normalize girls’ schooling while addressing ethical and social dimensions of education within the community.

Girls' participation in school is nevertheless hampered by institutional issues, notwithstanding these encouraging achievements. Long-term poverty makes it difficult for families to meet the standards of basic education, and insecurity, especially in border regions, compels parents to put safety before education. Gender norms also force girls to perform a lot of household chores,

which has a detrimental impact on their attendance and academic achievement. A potential method to overcome these obstacles is through the Kingdom and the Church's growing partnership, since shared leadership fosters community trust and group action, strengthening the case for ongoing funding for girls' education.

While the qualitative insights demonstrate how moral authority from the Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura-Yambio is affecting community opinions, the quantitative numbers, taken as a whole, reveal that there are several structural and economic difficulties. As religious and cultural campaigns come together, gender norms surrounding education appear to be progressively shifting.

### **6.1 Discussion of Findings**

The findings point to a complex web of interconnected challenges influencing females' education in Western Equatoria State. These results are consistent with national patterns in South Sudan's education system, where girls' enrollment and completion rates are nevertheless suppressed by poverty and gender-based discrimination (MoGEI, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). In rural places, where families prioritize subsistence above education, financial hardship is still extremely severe.

By providing subtle insights into changing community perceptions, the qualitative findings enhance these statistics. Traditional and faith-based leadership has been crucial in changing views about girls' education, according to the opinions of girls, parents, and local leaders. As part of cultural restoration, the redesigned Azande Kingdom has reignited pride in education through its royal festivals and public cultural statements. The King's support during the Azande Cultural Festival in Yambio (October 11, 2025) broke long-standing preconceptions that limited girls to household tasks and symbolically repositioned education as a shared communal value.

An equally significant role is played by the Catholic Diocese of Tombura-Yambio, which supports these cultural endeavors both institutionally and morally. Through parish schools, literacy programs, and the Girls' Dignity and Literacy Initiative, the Diocese provides financial assistance, direction, and a religious justification for educating the girl child. The Diocese of Tombura Yambio (CDTY) and the Kingdom provides a powerful combination of spiritual and cultural leadership that promotes community involvement and trust (Banda, 2021).

One important element in changing gender standards is the confluence of culture and religion. Both the Diocese and the Azande Kingdom view education as a moral and social obligation in

addition to a developmental objective. In South Sudan's post-conflict environment, where state institutions frequently lack the legitimacy and grassroots reach afforded by traditional and ecclesiastical entities, this collaboration provides a specific paradigm for educational reform.

The findings ultimately demonstrate that for Western Equatoria State to witness sustained progress in girls' education, community-owned strategies that synchronize the efforts of governmental agencies, religious institutions, and cultural leaders would be required. By strengthening this tripartite partnership, it would be able to overcome long-standing obstacles and guarantee that education becomes a shared cultural value and a right throughout South Sudan.

## 7. Hypothesis Test

Table 4: Test of Hypothesis on Factors Hampering Girls' Access to Education

| S/N | Variables                    | Teachers Responses | Students Responses |
|-----|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|     |                              | N=35               | N=235              |
| 1   | Financial hardship           | 31                 | 160                |
| 2   | Insecurity/Conflict          | 32                 | 127                |
| 3   | Cultural restrictions        | 15                 | 111                |
| 4   | Long distance to schools     | 32                 | 94                 |
| 5   | Lack of female teachers      | 17                 | 85                 |
| 6   | Early marriage and pregnancy | 29                 | 76                 |
| 7   | School infrastructure        | 11                 | 71                 |

The study sought to test the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between teacher respondents and girl respondents regarding view on issues that hinder girls' access to education. To test this hypothesis, a Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test of independence was conducted using responses from teachers and girl respondents across seven identified categories of factors affecting access to education.

The null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) stated that there is no significant difference between teachers and girl child learners in their responses on issues that hamper girls from accessing education. The alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) stated that a significant difference exists between the two groups on their perception of factors limiting girl education in Western Equatoria State.

The Chi-square test results showed a Chi-square value of  $\chi^2 = 15.77$  with 6 degrees of freedom. The corresponding p-value was 0.015. Since the p-value was less than the level of significance set at  $\alpha = 0.05$ , the null hypothesis was rejected.

This result indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between teachers and girl child learner's perceptions of the issues that hamper girls' access to education. The findings suggest that teachers and learners do not view or experience the barriers to girls' education in the same way. This disparity in perspectives highlights the need for inclusive educational planning and policy interventions that take into account both professional and learner-centered experiences when addressing challenges to girls' access to education.

## **8. Conclusion**

The study comes to the conclusion though teachers and girls in school differ in their perception of factors hindering girl's education, economic hardship, instability, and deeply ingrained cultural norms present a complicated web of challenges to girls' education in Western Equatoria State. Emerging structures like the revitalized Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura-Yambio and have brought fresh hope and direction in spite of these challenges.

The study further concluded that advocacy of the Azande Kingdom, particularly through public celebrations and customary laws, has rekindled a cultural dedication to equality and education. At the same time, the Catholic Diocese's social teachings, educational initiatives, and pastoral involvement have strengthened the social, moral, and spiritual arguments in favor of young girls' education. Collectively, these organizations are proving that religious and cultural leadership can be powerful instruments for changing public perceptions and advancing inclusive education in South Sudan.

The paper concluded that Barriers like early marriage, domestic work, and gender bias wanes when cultures view education as both a cultural value and a spiritual obligation. In Addition, South Sudanese needs a paradigm of change that balances traditional values with contemporary goals. This is presented by the harmony between the throne, church, and community. Essentially, this dynamic collaboration between policy, faith, and legacy holds the key to the future of girls' education in Western Equatoria.

## 9. Recommendations

- i. The Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) of the Government of South Sudan should fortify its alliances with traditional leadership, religious institutions and other non-mentioned stakeholders to keep an eye on females' enrollment, resolve cultural barriers, and foster national development.
- ii. Joint committees including The Government of South Sudan, the Azande Kingdom and the Catholic Diocese of Tombura-Yambio ought to be established.
- iii. There is need for increased national funding for girls' education. Additionally, the paper recommends incorporating gender-sensitive curricula and peace education to aid in mitigating the impact of trauma and insecurity on students.
- iv. The Catholic Diocese and the Azande Kingdom should keep using their platforms for parental sensitization, mentorship, and advocacy. The Diocese could broaden mentorship clubs and parish-based scholarship programs for teenage girls.

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### **Author Biography**

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