

Institutional and Administrative Determinants of Gender Disparities in Public Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Gender disparities in public education remain a persistent governance challenge in South Africa, particularly in historically marginalized communities such as uMlazi Township. Despite progressive national policies aimed at promoting gender equality, the realities within public schools often reflect uneven implementation and limited institutional responsiveness. This study is informed by the need to understand the mechanisms behind persistent disparities and to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equity in education. Its relevance lies in its potential to inform policy, improve school governance, and promote inclusive educational practices. The study explored the persistent gender disparities in public education to inform future interventions on Umlazi Township. Despite formal commitments to equality, female learners continue to face barriers in academic performance, school retention, and leadership representation. The research is motivated by the observable disconnect between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities and aimed to uncover the institutional and administrative drivers that reinforce these disparities. A systematic review approach was adopted, collecting data from online databases and complemented by documentary analysis of school policies, performance reports, and government directives. A total of 17 studies were selected for review. Female students are significantly disadvantaged in the public education sector. Including the inconsistent application of policies by the government in public education, poor institutional governance and the poor institutional culture where female learners are subject to discrimination and violence. The data were analysed using a systematic literature review, specifically the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), by identifying key terms such as 'gender disparities' and 'education' to select relevant records. Insights from existing policy documents and institutional reviews suggest that while gender equity is formally endorsed, systemic gaps persist in areas such as staff training, policy enforcement, and support structures for female learners. Emerging themes point to the influence of entrenched institutional cultures, inconsistent policy application, and limited gender-sensitive planning at the school level. These factors inadvertently reinforce disparities in enrolment, retention, and academic performance. The key implications of the study are context-specific recommendations for strengthening gender-responsive governance in education, including inclusive policy reforms, targeted capacity-building, and enhanced community engagement. By critically examining the intersection of policy and practice, this research contributes to the broader discourse on equitable education systems and offers actionable insights for policymakers, school leaders, and civil society actors working to close the gender gap in South African public schools.

Keywords: Gender disparities, Education governance, Policy implementation, Institutional factors, Public education

1. Introduction

The recognition of gender equality in education as a basic human right and a key element of sustainable development persists globally. Global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), play a crucial role in efforts to eliminate gender gaps in education and to provide equal opportunities for all learners (Krupa and Taneja, 2020). Education functions not just to individual empowerment but also as a catalyst for wider social and economic change (Jamal *et al*, 2023; Khosa, 2023). Nevertheless, even after numerous years of reform and advocacy, gender inequalities continue to exist in various education systems, especially in areas characterized by poverty, social vulnerability, and inadequate institutional capacity.

In South Africa, the democratic government established post-1994 is often praised for implementing progressive reforms designed to eliminate apartheid-era inequalities and enhance equity concerning race, class, and gender (Akala and Divala, 2016). The Republic of South Africa's Constitution (1996) guarantees equality and forbids discrimination, while the South African Schools Act (1996) assures fair access to education. Additional policies such as the Gender Equality in Education Policy (1999) and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 reaffirm commitments to gender mainstreaming and educational equity. These frameworks reflect South Africa's adherence to global commitments towards gender justice and inclusive development. However, despite these reformative measures, ongoing gender disparities are evident in numerous public schools, especially in township areas such as Umlazi (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Furthermore, research by Chabaya and Gudhlanga (2013) exploring methods to attain gender equity in education revealed a significant rise in the enrolment of girls and women across all education levels; nonetheless, true equity had not yet been realized, as challenges like the absence of mechanisms for enforcing and monitoring policy implementation persisted. These outcomes are consistent with findings by Saâd and Ella (2019), which state that effective governance and adequate public

funding for education can help diminish gender disparities at all educational stages. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing the effective execution of policies by policymakers.

Umlazi Township, located south of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, provided a critical case study for examining these challenges. As one of the largest townships in South Africa, Umlazi continues to be characterised by high levels of unemployment, poverty, crime, and social vulnerability. These socio-economic conditions place significant pressure on public schools and disproportionately affect female learners. This is unfavourable as girls and women are an integral part of the South African economic system and thus deserve more attention (Moletsane *et al*, 2010). In a study by Doğan and Kirikkaleli (2021) to explore whether gender equality mattered for environmental sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa, they found that women were willingly participating in environmentally friendly campaigns where they are more educated. Moreover, this emphasises the importance of the perspectives and attitudes of girls and women towards their education (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008; Šidlauskienė and Butašova, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that girls in township schools are more likely to experience gender-based violence (GBV), teenage pregnancy, harassment, and dropout, while also facing limited access to psychosocial support services (Moletsane *et al*, 2010; De Wet, 2023; Pietersen & Langeveldt, 2025). Such challenges compromise not only educational access and participation but also long-term academic performance and life opportunities. The intersection of socio-economic disadvantage and institutional weakness creates a context in which gender disparities are reproduced and sustained.

Existing literature emphasises that gender disparities in South African education are not solely shaped by societal factors but also by institutional and administrative structures (Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Biased leadership, limited enforcement of gender policies, and insufficient teacher training will often perpetuate inequality (Morrell *et al*, 2012). Furthermore, Pietersen and Langeveldt (2025) argue that gender-based violence in South African education must be understood as an institutional phenomenon rather than merely individual misconduct. Their feminist legal and pedagogical analysis showed how school cultures often normalise power imbalances, thereby undermining safety and participation for female learners. De Wet (2023) reveals that sexual violence and harassment in South African schools remain widespread and underreported, with weak disciplinary enforcement and accountability failures allowing perpetrators to operate with impunity. Moreover, Khosa (2023) highlights that institutional gender inequality persists even within learning institutions designed to promote empowerment, identifying structural barriers such as male-dominated leadership, resistance to gender transformation, and limited institutional support for gender equity as key constraints. At a governance level, Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023) explained that South Africa's failure to fully realise SDG 5: Gender Equality, is driven by weak institutional capacity, fragmented policy implementation, and insufficient political accountability. Collectively, this literature confirms that gender inequality in education is not primarily a policy absence problem, but rather an institutional implementation failure characterised by weak governance, poor accountability, and deeply entrenched school-level cultures.

Although South Africa continues to develop robust legislative and policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality in education, their application at school level remains inconsistent and fragmented (Sturm, 2007; Walker *et al.*, 2019). School administrators often possess limited operational guidance on how gender policies should be implemented in daily school management practices, resulting in superficial or symbolic compliance rather than substantive transformation (Khosa, 2023). Moreover, De Wet (2023) further notes that inconsistent disciplinary responses to gender-based misconduct in schools reflect weak institutional oversight and accountability structures. Pietersen and Langeveldt (2025) argue that inconsistent policy enforcement reflects the persistence of patriarchal institutional cultures that resist gender transformation (Abbas and Smith, 2023; Jamal *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, this is emphasised in a study by Brown and Irby (2005) who found that women were unlikely to be in administrative and educational leadership positions because they were perceived as incompetent. For instance, in a study by Legewie and DiPrete (2012) compared the behaviour of boys and girls in a school setting, it was found that they differed in the way they engage with the institutions and resources; however, this does not suggest a division between them. Thus, taking these findings at face value may result into perpetuating the gender stereotypes in societies, which may lead to divided interventions among the genders, where research emphasises the need to improve educational systems where girls and boys are taught equally (Piatt, 2008). Consequently, the gap between formal policy commitments and actual school-level practice will continue to reproduce gender disparities in enrolment patterns, learner participation, safety, and academic performance in township schools such as those in Umlazi. Gender-responsive budgeting, an essential tool for equity, remains to be inconsistently applied in South African schools (Licumba *et al*, 2015; Gouws, 2017).

The study scrutinised the processes by which formal policies are translated into practice, highlighting institutional capacity, administrative commitment, accountability mechanisms, and resource flows (Matland,

1995). An equity framework emphasised the redistribution of opportunities, resources, and support to ensure fairness, particularly for historically marginalised groups (Gooden, 2015; Pekkarinen, 2012). Applying these frameworks enabled a critical examination of how institutional structures, administrative decisions, and governance practices mediate the impact of gender-equality policies and why, despite formal commitments, gender disparities persist on the ground. Through these theoretical lenses, the study analysed the structural and institutional factors shaping the implementation of gender-equity policies within schools.

The central problem addressed in this study is therefore not the absence of policy frameworks but the ineffective institutionalisation of gender-responsive education at the school level. Institutional and administrative systems within public schools in Umlazi Township were examined to understand how they fail to operationalise gender equality policies effectively, resulting in persistent disparities in educational outcomes. By focusing on governance structures, resource allocation, and organisational cultures, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of gender equity policies and the need for systemic reforms. Ultimately, tackling gender disparities in education requires more than policy rhetoric; it demands institutional transformation. This paper, therefore, discusses the institutional and administrative drivers of gender disparities in public education in Umlazi Township, offering evidence-based recommendations for building inclusive, equitable, and responsive education systems in South Africa and beyond.

2. Methodology

This paper conducted a systematic literature review in accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The method is set in the following sub-topics, inclusion and exclusion criteria, type of studies, search procedures and search strategy, and data analysis, result, discussion, study limitations and conclusion. This systematic review purports to investigate the ways in which institutional and administrative drivers influence the differences between male and female students in public schools. The study will be guided by the main research question below:

In what ways do institutional and administrative practices influence gender-based academic performance in public schools?

The main question will be supported by the following sub-questions:

1. How do socio-economic factors intersect with gender to affect educational outcomes in public schools?
2. How do cultural attitudes towards gender roles influence administrative policies in public education?
3. What are the effects of Gender-Based Violence on student performance in public schools?

2.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A systematic review conducted encompasses research that outlines the methods for assessing gender disparities in public school education. Only studies focusing on gender disparities in the context of education were included, while those discussing gender disparities outside of education were excluded. Priority was given to articles published in peer-reviewed journals, as they are regarded as more reliable sources. The selected records were published between the period of 2005 to 2023 to ensure higher inclusivity. Additionally, policy documents were chosen to serve as a reference for expectations concerning gender equality in education. The research also concentrated on manuscripts addressing disparities between male and female students. Moreover, the study focused mainly on English publications and thus unintentionally applied a language restriction. Moreover, the study did not apply a strict geographical exclusion in the selection of the studies but maintained that the studies were focused on public schools. Additionally, studies from the developing countries were prioritised, specifically from the Sub-Saharan region for relevance.

2.2 Search Procedures

This systematic review adheres to the extended PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews and meta-analysis. The search process was primarily conducted from Sabinet, Noyam, Project Muse, Taylor & Francis Group, SagePub, Oxford Academic, Litmaps and Google Scholar. The search keywords in the databases were chosen to pinpoint the differences in educational experiences between girls and boys in public schools. The search words applied were 'education, public education' alongside 'gender disparities, gender differences, and 'gender disparities' alongside 'institutional structure, policy implementation, education governance in public education'.

2.3 Search Strategy

Creating a search strategy to find manuscripts about gender discrepancies was the first step in the review process. The text was categorized based on the issue of assessing institutional and administrative reasons for gender gaps in public schools using the selection criteria. Manuscripts that addressed the problem of gender inequality were included. If a manuscript's subject had nothing to do with the goals of the literature study, it was rejected. The authors, year of publication, title, document type, and findings were all included in the data extraction information.

2.4 Data Analysis and Presentation

The data was analysed according to coding categories and outcomes. The terms 'Gender disparities' and 'education' were used throughout to refer to findings from the entire included body of literature, including papers and policy documents that highlighted the need for overcoming gender disparities. The process of study selection is demonstrated below, whereas *Table 1* presents the information extracted from the records.

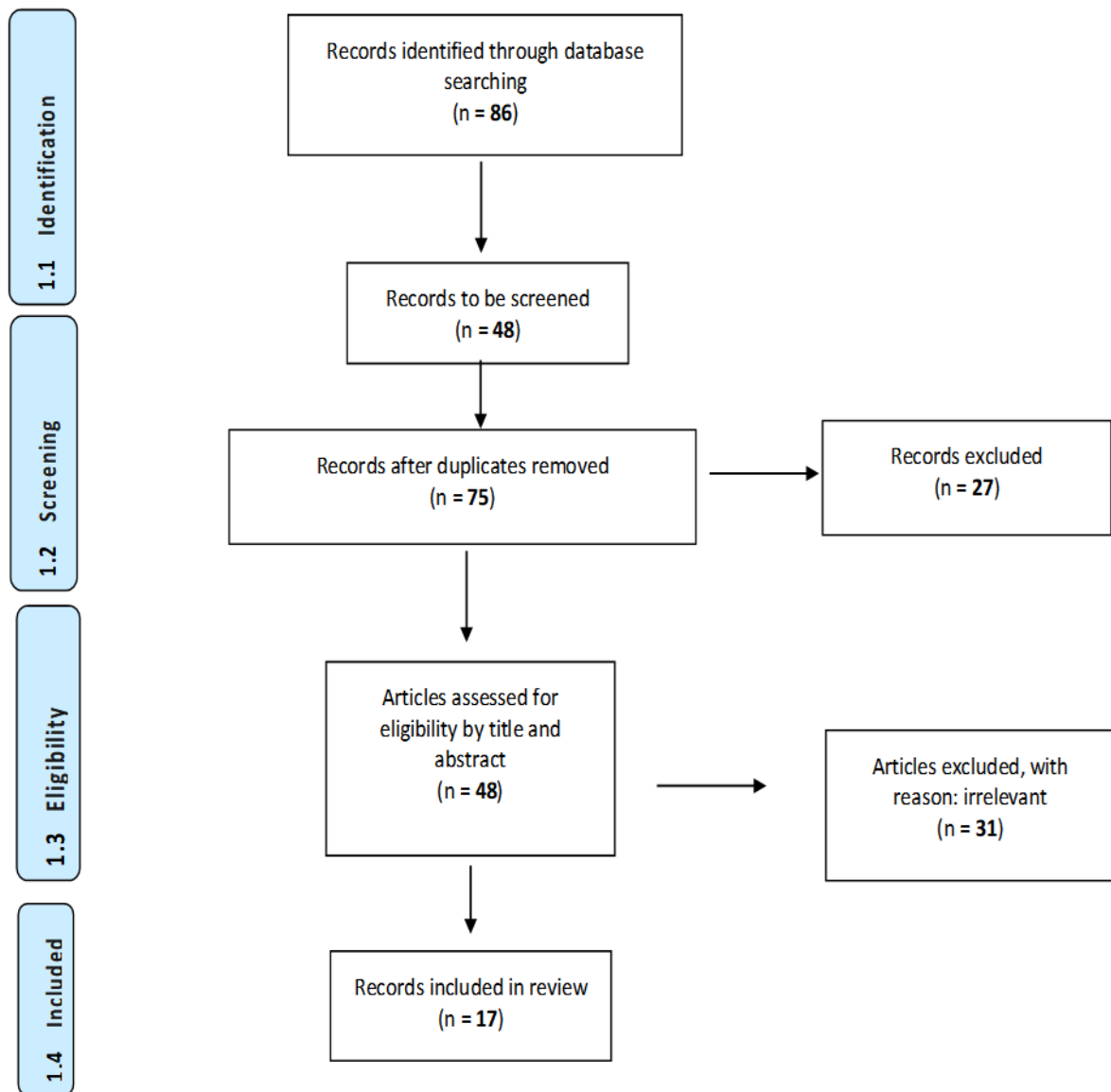


Figure 1: The screening process

Table 1: The Data extraction process

Author(s), (Year)	Title	Type of record	Findings
Abbas and Smith (2023)	Gender inequality in education: a comprehensive examination of social science studies	Journal	Persistent patterns of gender disparity across different educational levels and regions, the influence of specific sociocultural factors.
Jamal et al, (2023)	Addressing Gender Disparities in Education: Empowering Girls Through Education in Pakistan	Journal	Factors such as limited access to educational resources, societal norms, and discriminatory practices were identified as barriers hindering girls' educational advancement
Moletsane et al, (2010)	A critical analysis of gender violence and inequality in and around schools in South Africa in the age of AIDS: Progress or retreat	Report	If the South African government is serious about its pledge to educational equality, the national and provincial education departments must coordinate to take immediate steps to address the violence girls face in school by fulfilling its responsibility to prohibit and protect girls against such abuses.
Šidlauskienė and Butašova (2013)	Designing gender equality as institutional transformation at a higher education institution	Journal	Women remain more strongly underrepresented among researchers than among highly qualified professionals in traditionally male dominated scientific and professional fields.
Akala and Divala (2016)	Gender equity tensions in South Africa's post-apartheid higher education: in defence of differentiation	Report	A deliberate effort must be made to shift attention from aggregations to impediments for the promise of equality and equity to be realized for those who experienced most barriers in accessing higher education.
Saad and Ella (2019)	Economic complexity and gender inequality in education: an empirical study	Journal	The results show that public spending on education, good governance and financial openness reduce gender inequalities at all levels of education in all samples
Walker et al, (2019)	<i>The Power of Education to Fight Inequality: How increasing educational equality and quality is crucial to fighting economic and gender inequality</i>	Journal	Education can help tackle gender disparities in wages, poverty, reproductive autonomy and political power. It can dramatically improve the health outcomes for women and their children.
Chabaya and Gudhlanga (2013)	Striving to achieve gender equity in education: a Zimbabwean experience	Journal	Significant increase in the education of girls and women in terms of numbers was noted in all levels of education although equity is yet still to be achieved.
Doğan and Kirikkaleli (2021)	Does gender equality in education matter for environmental sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa?	Journal	The results suggest that girls' skills in climate, environmental, and energy solutions can be possible through their education.
Pekkarinen (2012)	Gender differences in education	Journal	Widening gender gap in education combined with recent wage and employment polarisation will likely lead to widening inequalities and is linked to declining male labour force participation.
Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008)	<i>Gender Equity in Education: A Review of Trends and Factors</i>	Report	The study highlights that the participation of the girl-child is affected significantly due to social attitudes towards their education and by other forms of gender and social discrimination in Indian society.
Khosa (2023)	Gender equality or inequality in learning institutions in South Africa: A case of the professional advancement of women	Journal	It was indicated that the paradigm for empowering women in South Africa must emphasise seizing chances, providing a guiding structure, recognising efforts and successes, and eliminating patriarchy
Licumba et al, (2015)	Gender equality in education and economic growth in selected Southern African countries	Report	Reducing gender inequality in education will not only promote growth but also help to advance other valuable development goals.
Sturm (2007)	Gender equity as institutional transformation. <i>Transforming</i>	Journal	Change requires a process of institutional mindfulness to enable women.

Author(s), (Year)	Title	Type of record	Findings
	<i>science and engineering: Advancing academic women</i>		
Brown and Irby (2005)	Increasing gender equity in educational leadership	Journal	Women were unlikely to be hired as administrators partly because women were believed to be “unfit” for administrative jobs due to their supposed inability to discipline, to work with men, to “command” respect, and to possess rational and logical approaches to leadership.
Legewie and DiPrete (2012)	School context and the gender gap in educational achievement	Journal	Therefore, boys are more sensitive to school resources that create a learning-oriented environment than are girls.
Piatt (2008)	Gender segregation in the public schools: opportunity, inequality, or both?	Paper	Instead of trying to find justification for segregation, it might be a better use of resources to focus on improving an educational system where boys and girls can learn together.

The studies selected for the systematic review were charted above by looking mainly at the title, year of publication, type of document and most importantly the findings. The studies are not presented in the order of the year of publication; however, they were presented according to the identified themes, identifying institutional governance and institutional culture as the priority as these themes expose the extent to which males and females are treated differently in public schools and how the policies are not well implemented. Furthermore, through the application of the relevant search keywords, the study was able to identify studies that addressed pertinent themes by looking at their titles, key population and findings.

3. Results

The research utilised a systematic review to identify themes that surface from the examined records. In addition, this section offers a narrative summary of the recognized gender inequalities within public schools. The identified themes to be discussed below are poor institutional culture, Gender-Based Violence against females, poor institutional governance and inconsistent policy application.

3.1 Poor Institutional Culture

Institutional culture in many public schools continues to reflect patriarchal norms, limiting safe and supportive environments for female learners (Brown and Irby, 2005; Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2008); Jamal *et al*, 2023). Structural or symbolic violence—including bullying, harassment, and gender-based intimidation—remains widespread and normalised within school settings (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008; Moletsane *et al*, 2010; Jamal *et al*, 2023; Khosa, 2023).

3.2 Gender-based Violence Against Females

Female learners may face heightened risks of GBV, harassment, and lack of access to gender-sensitive facilities such as menstrual hygiene support, safe sanitation, and counselling services. (Moletsane *et al*, 2010, Khosa, 2023). These deficits are likely to undermine attendance, retention, and academic performance (Licumba *et al*, 2015).

3.3 Poor Institutional Governance

Institutional governance and resource allocation practices may prioritise generalised needs over gender-specific interventions (Akala and Divala, 2016; Abbas and Smith, 2023). Insufficient staff training and a lack of gender-aware administrative planning further marginalise female learners, mirroring broader findings on institutional resistance to gender equity and the weak professional advancement of women in learning institutions (Piatt, 2008; Pekkarinen, 2012; Saād and Ella, 2019).

3.4 Inconsistent Policy Application

Although South Africa has developed progressive gender equality policies, their application at the school level remains inconsistent and fragmented (Sturm, 2007; Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2013; Abbas and Smith, 2023; Khosa, 2023). School administrations often lack clear operational guidelines and adequate monitoring support to implement gender-responsive practices effectively, resulting in superficial or symbolic compliance rather than substantive transformation (Khosa, 2023). Moreover, De Wet (2023) observes that disciplinary responses to gender-based misconduct are inconsistent and frequently suppressed to protect institutional reputations, while

Khosa (2023) attribute these failures to entrenched patriarchal leadership cultures that resist accountability and gender transformation. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the gap between policy and practice continues to undermine the safety, participation, and academic progression of female learners in public schools (Legewie and DiPrete, 2012).

Synthetic analysis of these trends indicates that the problem is not simply one of weak enforcement but of institutional cultures that actively reproduce inequality (Pait, 2008; Walker *et al*, 2019; Doğan and Kirikkaleli, 2021). Policies are often interpreted through the lens of existing power hierarchies, meaning that even when frameworks exist, their translation into practice is filtered by patriarchal norms, resource constraints, and administrative inertia (Sturm, 2007; Šidlauskienė and Butašova, 2013; De Wet, 2023). This creates a cycle in which gender equity remains aspirational at the policy level but elusive in everyday school governance.

Synthesising these findings, the study demonstrated that gender disparities in township education are less a result of policy absence than of systemic institutional and administrative failure to operationalise equality commitments. The persistence of these disparities reflects a structural disconnect between policy intent and institutional practice. Formal policies exist at provincial or national levels, but implementation gaps at the school level—driven by limited oversight, capacity, or institutional will—results in minimal practical change.

4. Discussion

The records identified by this study provided significant evidence for its initial assumptions. The study assumed that the gender disparities in public education were not caused by a lack of functional policies but their poor administrative and institutional application resulting into discriminatory perspectives and behaviour towards female students. There remains a significant gap between the treatment of male and female students in public schools (Chabaya and Gudhlanga 2013; Licumba *et al*, 2015; Abbas and Smith, 2023; Jamal *et al*, 2023). The records on Table 1 demonstrate that there are administrative and institutional drivers that contribute to gender disparities in education. Factors such as poor access to educational resources, discriminatory practices and norms held by the society were barriers to the girls' education (Pekkarinen, 2012; Jamal *et al*, 2023; Smith, 2023). The hindering societal norms are evident where women were viewed as unfit for administrative jobs because according to society, they lacked the discipline and command (Brown and Irby, 2005; Šidlauskienė and Butašova, 2013). Moreover, Moletsane *et al*, (2010) and Khosa (2023) posit that these societal norms may even lead to violence against girls and women, further emphasising the need to address them. Hence, there remains a need to improve the education of both men and women by providing them with equal opportunities and fair treatment (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2008; Akala and Divala, 2016; Saâd and Ella, 2019; Walker *et al*, 2019). This aligns with the goals of policy makers nationally and internationally where they demonstrate the desire to empower women through education to ensure equality (Piatt, 2008; Legewie and DiPrete, 2012; Doğan and Kirikkaleli, 2021). Therefore, there is a need for the South African government to improve the institutional structures in society and address the issues of patriarchal norms to empower women in education (Sturm, 2007; Moletsane *et al*, 2010; Licumba *et al*, 2015; Khosa, 2023). The paper reiterates that the problem is not that the government has not put the policies in place but the inconsistency in their application. These are linked to administrative ineffectiveness, inconsistent policy applications and institutional drawbacks.

4.1 Policy Implications for the Future

This paper underscores the necessity for gender-sensitivity training for school administrators, teachers, and School Governing Body members to raise awareness and promote institutional capacity for gender-responsive governance. Moreover, more allocation of resources to gender-specific facilities and support services (e.g., safe sanitation, menstrual hygiene management, counselling, safe transport) in township schools. Furthermore, the establishment of monitoring and accountability mechanisms at school and district levels to ensure gender equity policies are not only adopted but enforced. Additionally, the inclusion of female representation in school leadership and decision-making bodies (SGBs, management teams) to ensure institutional culture and governance reflect gender equity. Lastly, the engagement of community stakeholders and civil society (parents, local organisations, youth groups) to foster a supportive environment for gender-sensitive education and help monitor implementation of policies.

5. Study Limitations

Although a systematic review typically encompasses a wide array of literature on the subject being examined, this study highlights the importance for additional research specifically focused on public schools in South African townships.

6. Conclusion

This paper argued that persistent gender disparities in public education in Umlazi Township cannot be addressed solely through normative policy frameworks or socio-cultural interventions. Instead, they are deeply rooted in institutional and administrative practices, governance weaknesses, and resource allocation decisions that fail to reflect gender-responsive priorities. By adopting a systematic review and analysing the relevant literature, the study uncovered how governance and administration shape gendered education outcomes and propose context-specific, actionable recommendations for strengthening equity in township public schools.

In doing so, it contributed to a more realistic, systematic, and structural understanding of gender inequality in education—one that holds institutions accountable rather than casting blame only on cultural or individual factors. Addressing these institutional drivers were therefore critical for achieving gender equality in education and for advancing South Africa's commitments under SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 5: Gender Equality.

Ethical Declaration: This systematic review analysed data from published studies and publicly accessible sources. No ethical approval was required as the study did not involve primary data collection, human participants, or personal data.

AI usage Declaration: The study used some AI software to improve English grammar and for concise writing.

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