



Gendered Pathways to Participation: Barriers and Enablers of Girls' Education in Refugee and Internally Displaced Contexts in Kenya

Dennis Otwor¹, Lilian Odundo², Beatrice Adhiambo³, Denis Nono⁴

¹National Defence University - Kenya

²Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Kenya

³Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

⁴Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa, (HERS-EA), Uganda

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Abstract

This paper discusses how gendered norms, poverty, and displacement interact to influence the educational participation of girls in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and refugee settings in Kenya. The study used a feminist capability framework to analyse the structural, socio-cultural, and psychosocial barriers to female education. A sample of 341 participants across four schools, namely, Runyu Primary School, Hagadera Central Primary, Malakal Primary, and Somalia Bantu Mixed Secondary School, was utilised. The study collected data from ten different stakeholder groups, including School Governance and Management, school children-boys, school children-girls, teachers, parents, Parent-Teacher associations (PTA), para-social workers, Camp leaders, and governance and national and local government officials. Data was analysed using Dedoose software version 10.0.59 through inductive and deductive thematic coding. The study findings are presented in verbatim quotes to ensure the originality of the voices of participants. The findings revealed that the major challenges to regular school attendance for the girls included menstrual insecurity, early pregnancy, and household labour. These were enhanced by patriarchal norms that place greater value on boys' schooling. However, parents, teachers, and community leaders observed that there is a gradual shift in recognising girls' education as an asset for household welfare and social advancement. The study concludes that gender-transformative pedagogies, including Tuseme ("Let Us Speak Out"), can enhance girls' confidence, leadership, and participation, especially when supported with inclusive school environments and active community engagement. These insights contribute to ongoing global conversations on gender, displacement, and educational justice in the context of the crisis.

Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Girls' and marginalised groups' education remains one of the most acute human rights and development concerns, particularly in fragile and displacement-affected settings. According to UNESCO (2023), the East African region experiences gender disparities in access to



education, retention, and learning outcomes, despite significant commitments to equality at the global and national levels. In Kenya, which is home to approximately 824,000 refugees, the girls face compounding education challenges which mostly overlap with poverty and entrenched socio-cultural norms (UNHCR, 2024; UNHCR, 2025). The government of Kenya has ratified several conventions on quality education and gender equality, yet the implementation of these policies still falls short in the context of displacement and vulnerability (UNESCO, 2023). Girls are disproportionately affected by early or child marriages, heavy domestic labour, lack of menstrual health materials and social stigma surrounding female education (Lloyd & Mensch, 2008). Refugee settings such as Dadaab and Kakuma clearly magnify these challenges through resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms and shifting demographics (UNHCR, 2024).

The *Tuseme* Project was initiated by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) to strengthen adolescent girls' agency, confidence, and leadership through school-based clubs and gender-responsive pedagogy (FAWE, 2013). "*Tuseme*" is a Swahili term meaning "Let Us Speak Out" *Tuseme* was first developed in Tanzania, and it has since been adopted in the rest of East Africa to inhibit the socio-cultural processes that silence the voices of girls and limit their educational attendance and participation. The *Tuseme* project was multi-phased and implemented under the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE-KIX) programme. Phase 1 examined enabling and disabling factors for the *Tuseme* model in contemporary schools in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, while phase 2 explored the contextualisation and scaling of the model in refugee and IDP settings in the 3 countries (Khaita *et al.*, 2025). This paper focuses on the Kenyan context, examining how gendered norms, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and displacement shape girls' educational participation and experiences. It argues that while structural barriers and patriarchal expectations persist, emerging pedagogical innovations and shifting community attitudes offer transformative potential for gender-responsive pedagogy in schools. The analysis contributes to ongoing debates on localising empowerment frameworks such as *Tuseme* and feminist capability approaches within complex humanitarian contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Capability Approach

The current investigation is premised on the feminist capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2017), a development of the broader capability approach developed by Sen (1999), which anticipates the substantive liberties of individuals or the genuine prospects to lead lives that they consider valuable. Nussbaum presents a cluster of key human capacities, including bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thinking, and mastery of the surrounding environment. Specifically, the ability of bodily integrity, the opportunity to remain unviolated and the freedom of movement have clear application to refugee girls whose educational attainment may be constrained by insecurity, gender-based violence, and limited menstrual health resources.

In the educational domain, the approach allows moving beyond enrollment rates to explore how schooling broadens learners' ability to learn, communicate, and lead (Walker and Mclean, 2013; Unterhalter, 2003). Walker (2007) asserts that education must be valued not only for access or attainment, but also for its role in developing learners' agency, critical thinking, and voice, which are fundamental aspects of their capabilities. The Feminists' descriptions of this structure presuppose power, relational agency, as well as intersectionality, in which the gender is in relationship with the class, displacement status, and cultural identity to influence learning experiences (Unterhalter, 2017). Robeyns (2017) and Unterhalter (2017) acknowledge that women and girls depend not only on their personal characteristics but also on institutional and structural conditions, which include displacement, patriarchy, and poverty, making them predisposed to their freedom.



This framework is relevant to displacement settings because girls' educational choices are constrained not only by individual ambitions but also by institutional and social structures (Walker and McLean, 2013). A case in point is the absence of accessibility to education in the Dadaab refugee camps due to the lack of access to a decent, secure, and hygienic environment to learn, meaning that the girls cannot attend school because of insecurity, inadequate sanitation and stigmatisation of menstruation (UNHCR, 2024). These bottlenecks directly affect their moral and bodily integrity, as well as their academic performance. A closer look at the lived life of refugee girls, therefore, through the feminist capability lens will present a clear understanding of how gender, displacement status and gender identity overlap to give or deny girls the ability to apply all capabilities they possess. The method presupposes power, relational agency, and social justice, which make it particularly suitable for examining educational inequality in refugee contexts (Unterhalter, 2017; Robeyns, 2017).

Methodology

Research Design

The research was a qualitative, multi-site case study research as part of a bigger GPE KIX *Tuseme* Phase 2 report. It aimed to identify issues and contextual facilitating factors as a tool to support adaptation and scaling of the *Tuseme* model within the refugee and IDP communities. The emphasis in the methodology was on the life experiences of community leaders, teachers, parents, and school children.

Study Sites and Study Participants

Between April and June 2025, data were collected across four schools representing Kenya's diverse displacement settings (Figure I). A total of 341 respondents participated, drawn from ten stakeholder groups, including school children, teachers, parents, PTAs, para-social workers, and government representatives (Table I). The sample was stratified by gender and position, comprising 128 females and 213 males who provided information through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

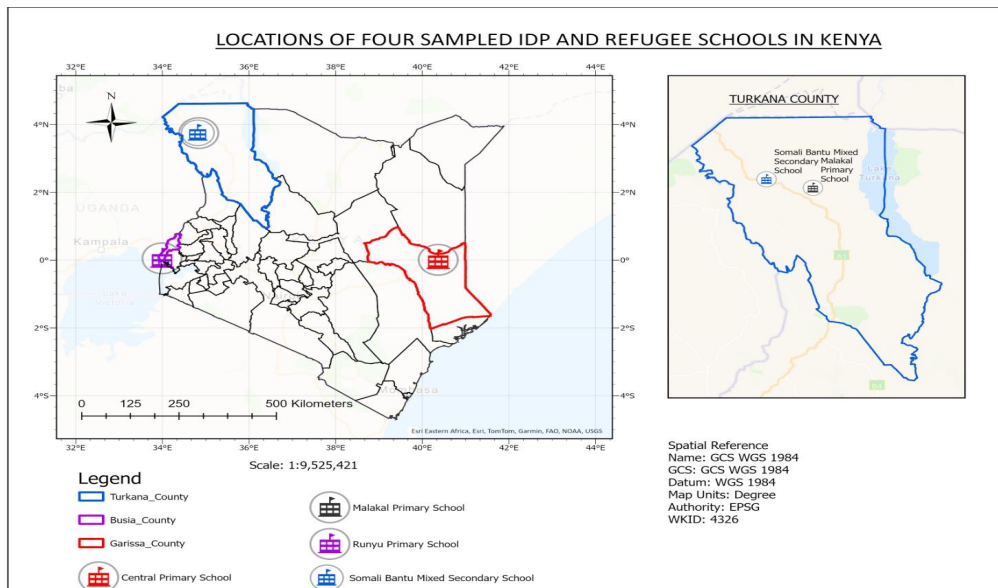


Figure I: Map showing the sampled Schools in Kenya



Source: Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA), and Australian Council of Educational Research-UK (ACER UK), (2025). GPE KIX Tuseme Phase 2 Research Report.

Sample Size and Sampling Strategy

The project team created a list of potential refugees and IDP communities, focusing on those that could be safely and feasibly accessed. Schools within these communities were selected based on their alignment with key variables, including school type/size, gender balance, and the project’s capacity to engage with them. In this qualitative study, four schools per country were selected, yielding a total sample of n=12. Communities and schools that the project team could safely access were prioritised. Schools that were accessible, given transportation and infrastructure challenges, were selected. Using Stakeholder mapping using a power/interest matrix, key voices to engage within that unit were identified. A purposive sampling strategy was used in selecting the schools and was informed by both logistical feasibility and the goal of ensuring diversity in perspectives, gender, and roles. The study participants were randomly selected for all listed categories, except national government officials and camp leaders, who were purposively selected.

Table I: Kenya Study Participants by Category, School, and Gender

Participant category	Runyu primary		Central primary Hagadera		Malakal		Somali Bantu mixed		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
School Governance and Management	2	7	2	10	3	9	4	8	45
School teachers	5	7	1	7	4	8	5	7	44
Schoolchildren - Girls	12	0	12	0	12	0	12	0	48
Schoolchildren - Boys	0	12	0	12	0	12	0	12	48
PTAs	6	6	3	9	5	7	4	8	48
Parents	7	5	2	10	3	9	3	9	48
National government officials	1	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	8
Local Government officials	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Camp leaders and governance	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	4
Para-social workers	7	5	4	8	4	8	5	7	48
Total	40	44	24	59	31	56	33	54	341

Source: FAWE, HERS-EA, and ACER UK (2025). GPE KIX Tuseme Phase 2 Research Report. Forum for African Women Educationalists

Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved qualitative techniques, including Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). These tools were used with the ten stakeholder groups. The original development of the tools was undertaken by the GPE KIX consortium, comprising the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Higher Education Resource Services-East Africa (HERS-EA), and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER-UK). The instruments were first piloted at Runyu Primary School with stakeholders who were not part of the study. A 10% sample (34 participants) participated in the pilot phase.



Data Analysis

Data were coded and analysed using Dedoose qualitative software, Version 10.0.059. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were used in the analysis. Codes derived from the feminist capability approach, such as bodily integrity, voice, affiliation, and control, were complemented by emergent categories from field narratives, including poverty, domestic burden, safety, and leadership. The co-occurrence and frequency of these codes led to the creation of themes. This paper examines the themes that influence the gendered trajectories shaping girls' education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the coordinating research institutions and local educational authorities of all three countries. In Kenya, approval was granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), the body responsible for issuing research permits. Additionally, the research protocol received approval from the Great Lakes University Scientific and Ethics Review Committee (GLUSERC) under GLUSERC/004/2024, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. All adult participants provided informed consent via a signed or audio form, and assent and parental consent were obtained for learner participants. During the research, pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Gender-matched researchers and para-social workers with psychosocial-support training dealt with sensitive topics such as menstruation, early marriage and gender-based violence. Finally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and provided with contact details for follow-up discussions.

Results

Economic and Logistical Challenges.

Economic hardship and structural deprivation emerged as the primary barriers to girls' education across all study sites. Families in Malakal (Kakuma) and Hagadera (Dadaab) refugee camps relied heavily on food rations, casual labour and donor aid. In Runyu (Busia IDP host community), frequent floods, crop losses, and displacement undermined household stability and their ability to meet school-related costs.

"As much as we want to educate our ladies to be educated, how can they learn without food, how can they learn without shelter, they even lack books, so we cannot do anything good, but we value girl child education." (FGD_BOM_Runyu – Busia IDP)

Participants reported that declining or fluctuating donor support had weakened school programmes and shifted more costs to families. Parents in Runyu described humanitarian support as seasonal and tied to flooding, while Somali Bantu leaders in Kakuma highlighted reduced food and cash assistance that had previously helped girls stay in school.

"Yes, when the girl is on her periods and the parent do not have money to purchase the sanitary towel, this girl will then involve herself in other activities thus leading to leading to early pregnancies, because she has told you 'mom I need such a thing' and yet you do not have money so this will make her go and ask for it from elsewhere hence early pregnancies." (FGD_PTA_Runyu – Busia IDP)

In Malakal, para-social workers linked the withdrawal of specific education partners to a collapse in structured support for girls.

"In previous years, there used to be remedial classes for girls, but now they are no longer there. Back then, even the girls themselves understood the reason why they were in school. However, the challenges they face currently make it difficult for them to attend school. They do not have



anyone to support them, advise them, guide them, or mentor them. Previously, the Windle Trust Organisation supported girls by providing remedial classes and by providing books, sanitary pads, panties, and other necessities. They were also being provided with mentors... But now, it is like, if a girl wants to go to school, she goes, and if she does not want to, she just stays at home.” (FGD_Parasocial_Malakal – Kakuma)

Lack of sanitary materials and private facilities remained a persistent issue, contributing to absenteeism and discomfort among adolescent girls.

“The major factor that undermines girls' education is when they are on their monthly period, and they do not have sanitary materials. That forces them not to come to the public because they may feel embarrassed.” (FGD_Parents_Malakal – Kakuma)

Infrastructure conditions were poor across all sites. Busia schools struggled with flooding and inadequate facilities, while refugee schools in Kakuma and Dadaab faced overcrowding and shortages of desks and latrines.

“When they come to school, they are asked, ‘Where is the uniform? Why are you coming without the uniform?’ They are then forced to return home, which is also one of the factors. When the teacher is teaching, the class can even be overcrowded, and the teacher cannot actually manage one hundred learners.” (FGD_Parents_Malakal – Kakuma)

Distance and unsafe routes further discouraged attendance, especially in the camps.

“Now for those students to come to school, it is so strenuous... Currently we are having several attacks from the road.” (FGD_BOM_SomaliBantu – Kakuma)

In Kakuma, language barriers and qualification downgrading for refugee learners forced some girls to repeat lower classes, which contributed to disengagement and drop-out.

“In our countries, we were taught using the French system, but when we come here, we face a language barrier. Another point is that someone might have completed schooling up to the diploma level in their home country, but when they come here, they are told to start at the primary level... Instead, many people, especially girls, prefer not to continue in school. They become idle at home and end up getting married or becoming pregnant.” (FGD_Parasocial_Malakal – Kakuma)

Finally, across all sites, families faced gendered economic trade-offs. When resources were scarce, boys were often prioritised for schooling, while girls were retained at home or pushed into survival strategies.

“Girls is pregnancy, teen motherhood... And then, sometimes a girl also may decide to look after the home... Because there is nothing... so he may decide to say, ‘Ah, let me be a problem’.” (FGD_BOM_SomaliBantu – Kakuma)

Gender Norms and Cultural Expectations

Across all study locations, ingrained gender norms influenced girls' access to and participation in education. Findings indicate persistent gendered division of labour, cultural notions of marriage and sexuality, and moral policing that limit girls' time, movement and self-expression. Stakeholders in Kakuma, Dadaab and Busia consistently reported unequal distribution of household labour. Girls contributed to cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, whereas boys had opportunities to play or even to earn income.



"In our community, girls are the ones doing the house chores like cleaning the house, fetching water, cooking and washing utensils. Boys are the ones going to school, and after school, they go for games like football and volleyball." (FGD_Girls_Malakal – Kakuma)

Teachers in Hagadera described how these norms extended into school routines.

"The girls are the only ones who clean the classrooms, the boys go to play football." (FGD_Teachers_Hagadera – Dadaab)

Cultural notions of respectability and protection further reinforced girls' subordination. Community leaders in Kakuma and Somali Bantu schools described enduring expectations that girls would marry early rather than complete their education.

"When people come from home, there is no education there. They said the girl should not be sent to school; she should cook at home. If the child reached 15 years of age, she could marry. Those cultures were there before." (KII_Camp Mgnt_Malakal – Kakuma)

Pregnancy and sexual relationships were framed as key risks justifying heightened control over girls' movements.

"When we conduct small research on what their challenges are, some of them tell us that when we tell our parents to give us money to buy something we need, they do not give us. We come to school hungry; therefore, some of them say we are choosing to have boyfriends so that they can support us. That is why they are getting pregnant. The school now misses the girls, drop-out girls, and we have a lot of teenagers' mothers because they were not supported in the community." (FGD_BOM_Somali Bantu – Kakuma)

Parents, particularly in Malakal and Runyu, described adolescence as a period requiring strict surveillance and moral control.

"It is true that we advise our children at home, but when they go to school, they end up getting pregnant. And when you try to approach them, they do not talk, they just stare at you." (FGD_Parents_Malakal – Kakuma)

Boys' accounts reflected both awareness of girls' vulnerability and internalised gender privilege. Some boys saw themselves as more serious students, while also recognising that girls faced specific pressures, such as forced marriage or domestic work.

"No, girls are forced into marriages, forcing them to drop-out of school. Boys are forced to labour to feed the families and pay for their own fees, cutting short their dreams with education." (FGD_Boys_Malakal – Kakuma)

At the same time, some boys and parents recognised that girls' education was increasingly valued and that expectations were slowly changing.

"We talk about the culture also... Before, there was no different support in girls, they used to support only boys... But at least now I am seeing people are waking up. They are trying to balance." (FGD_BOM_SomaliBantu – Kakuma)

Girls also value safe, gender-responsive spaces, such as girls' clubs and mentorship programmes, where they can discuss sensitive issues without fear.

"You need to provide them with mentors and organise remedial classes specifically for girls where they can build courage and express themselves freely." (FGD_Parasocial_Malakal – Kakuma)



Emerging Enablers of Transformation

Signs of change and high expectations for a more enabling environment to empower girls were evident among participants across all sites. These enablers centred on girls' confidence and voice, peer and mentorship support, community and faith leadership, and the potential for better institutional coordination and policy support.

Teachers, parents, and learners viewed clubs such as *Tuseme* as important spaces for building confidence, fostering self-expression, and preparing for leadership. Boys and girls anticipated that these forums would enable them to speak publicly, share their problems, and challenge harmful norms.

"For me, this club will prepare me for the leadership roles, for maybe doing critical activities, and how to socialise with other people. The people I meet in this club will become very important in the future. The club will prepare someone to be courageous. When they want to express themselves in front of people, they can express." (FGD_Boys_Somali Bantu – Kakuma).

Para-social workers and teachers stressed that structured mentorship and psychosocial activities could help girls open up and cope better with the emotional burden of displacement and poverty.

"Earlier, I mentioned mentorship. If you send someone who cares about her, that is the only person she can confide in. Mentorship is important because it helps children express themselves. Through activities, their psychological well-being can also improve." (FGD_Parasocial_Malakal – Kakuma).

Learners also cited existing examples of student leadership as role models, including elected student leaders and head girls, thereby reinforcing the idea that girls could hold visible positions of responsibility.

"We have our school president, and the school head girl, who is a girl. They are well-suited for those leadership roles, because we are following what they are doing." (FGD_Boys_Somali Bantu – Kakuma).

Boards of Management, Parents, and PTAs highlighted the important roles that community and faith leaders play in advocating for girls' education and in supporting club activities. In Busia, parents expressed willingness to collaborate with teachers and *Tuseme* facilitators, while in Kakuma and Dadaab, religious and community leaders were seen as key allies.

"As far as education is concerned, these are our children, and we would like them to progress. So, it is up to you to organise how you will involve the boys and girls in the club, and we parents will support." (FGD_Parents_Runyu – Busia IDP).

Participants also described how previous and ongoing NGO programmes provided a foundation for empowerment, especially when they combined material support with counselling and gender-sensitive messaging. Parents in Kakuma recalled earlier initiatives that had supported girls' ability to remain in school.

"Yes, Windle Trust facilitated the training of teachers on how to empower the girls. They even facilitated us with some kind of money." (FGD_Governance_Malakal – Kakuma).

National and county officials described government efforts to expand access and integrate leadership and empowerment within the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), while also acknowledging gaps in funding and policy frameworks. These perspectives suggest potential institutional enablers if partnerships are strengthened.



“Government priorities more so for access to education for refugees and internally displaced children is the government is trying to set up schools in those refugee camps and even where the internally displaced persons are settled, and in this course the government has made it that the children can access these schools at a free cost, so it makes it easy for children to go to school.” (KII National Government official Turkana).

Across Runyu, Malakal, and Hagadera, these accounts show early but important enablers: clubs and mentorship that build courage and voice, community and faith leaders who can shift norms, NGOs that combine material and psychosocial-support, and government actors who recognise the need for an enabling policy environment. At the same time, participants were clear that these gains depend on sustained facilitation, funding, and coordination rather than short-term projects.

Discussions

Economic and Logistical Barriers

The findings indicate that material deprivation and logistical hardships are the greatest limitations to girls' education in displacement environments. Constant hunger, frequent flooding, and the breakdown of livelihood systems in Runyu, Malakal, and Hagadera have direct negative effects on attendance and concentration. These trends validate Nussbaum's (2000) claim that education cannot thrive in a place where bodily and environmental needs are not met. In the feminist capability framework, the deprivation of capabilities for bodily health and learning is recognised (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2017).

The unsustainability of humanitarian interventions is evident in the withdrawal of school feeding programmes, teacher subsidies, and sanitation support. With the loss of institutional support, these families revert to their survival tactics, with schooling, especially for girls, becoming a secondary priority. It is explainable in the context of other refugee contexts, where the institutional capacity and sustainability are undermined by reliance on temporary assistance (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; UNESCO, 2025). These findings point to the failure of institutional conversion, whereby external resources are not translated into long-term access to girls' education.

Gender inequity is caused by menstrual insecurity and the lack of water and sanitation facilities. Across the four schools, girls' absenteeism during menstruation was due to various factors like gender, poverty, and infrastructure. These findings align with the international data, which depict that menstrual insecurity is linked to educational isolation and psychosocial pressure (Sommer et al., 2016; Plan International, 2018). A lack of menstrual support hinders girls' freedom and, hence, they are unable to engage in different activities with dignity, lowering their self-respect and bodily integrity (Unterhalter, 2003). Moreover, some estimates suggest girls may miss up to 10–20 % of school days due to menstruation when adequate products and facilities are not available (UNESCO, 2014), and it is difficult for them to make up this time and catch up with their male counterparts.

The congested classes, poor facilities, and insecure means of transportation compromise the security and privacy of the girls and limit their participation in education. These physical and environmental infrastructure issues affect access to education and actual learning outcomes. The feminist capability approach recognises that the broader structural context shapes motivation and mobilisation, which, in turn, shape opportunities to use education as an empowering tool or as a limiting cost (Robeyns, 2017; Unterhalter et al., 2022).

These structural inequalities in households augment an already existing economic ill-fortune. When families face financial stress, many allocate their limited resources to boys' schooling while keeping girls at home to perform domestic tasks or caregiving. This highlights the gendered use of time and



movement, where girls' labour supports household survival but restricts their educational opportunities. The *Tuseme* model points out that it is not only necessary to instil in girls the need to speak to achieve empowerment. It also involves creating an environment in which their voices are valued and respected, rather than neglected or condemned. Expressive agency should be made functional, and structural deprivation should address the issue; this, in turn, determines economic stability and institutional commitment (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005; FAWE *et al.*, 2025; Stromquist, 2015).

Gender Expectations and Culture

The results indicate that gendered norms still characterise the social role of girls, govern their sexuality, and determine their educational outcomes in displacement and IDP contexts. Domestic work and caregiving are culturally assigned to girls, limiting their time and focus on school. This corroborates prior findings that unpaid domestic duties are a key barrier to girls' participation in education in Sub-Saharan Africa (FAWE, 2020; UNESCO, 2025). In the feminist capability approach, these structural patterns indicate deprivation in time use, mobility, and learning capability (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2017).

The unwillingness, or rather the reluctance, to discuss sexuality and moral policing reflects cultural discomfort with adolescent autonomy. The lack of freedom of movement and expression in the name of protection, and harassment incidents, are often concealed to preserve or maintain the family's image. This can be compared to the so-called moralised gender hierarchies that legitimise the control of female bodies and voices (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2022). The *Tuseme* model is highly vocal in challenging such silence by facilitating dialogical spaces in which girls collectively reflect on and challenge these limits (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005; FAWE *et al.*, 2025).

Boys' accounts across sites showed that gender bias is socially reproduced by peer hierarchies. The superiority and endowment of anguish to positive action against girls are the phenomena that Stromquist (2015) describes as gendered social conditioning. When boys cannot interact sociologically to transform their gender, then any attempt to empower them will only widen the difference. This highlights the need to introduce integrative pedagogies, which entail sensitising boys and empowering girls (Leach *et al.*, 2014).

The rise of gender clubs is a positive sign of expanding girls' capabilities, driven by changing parental attitudes. The *Tuseme* empowerment model emphasises safe spaces in which individuals can express themselves and learn from one another through dialogue and performance (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). These participatory spaces can, in fact, promote structural deprivation and individual agency, and help girls build their voices and affirmations even within the cultural status quo, given shifting social attitudes.

Emergent Transformation Enablers

The results indicate a gradual yet significant shift toward the expansion of capabilities in refugee and IDP education. New spaces for girls' agency, self-expression and leadership are emerging in communities despite enduring material and social obstacles. These developments signal growing capabilities in voice, affiliation, and agency within the feminist capability framework (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2017). It is not merely a structural but also a relational change, as girls, teachers, and parents begin to co-create conditions in which freedom and dignity in learning can be realised.

Across sites, girls gained confidence to speak, act and lead. Peer clubs, *Tuseme* sessions, and school assemblies provided safe spaces in which girls shared experiences of exclusion and proposed collective solutions. Teachers noted that "they are no longer shy; they are chattering at assembly," while girls explained that dramatising early marriage "made us become courageous." These processes



operationalise empowerment through reflection that is translated into social expressions (FAWE, 2025; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Robeyns (2017) argues that the agency grows when social and institutional circumstances legitimise self-expression.

This empowerment process is additionally supported by mentorship and the availability of female role models. Girls in Kakuma, Hagadera, and Runyu associated female teachers and social workers with aspirations for independence and leadership. Such mentoring expands imaginative capability, enabling girls to envision alternatives to domestic roles (Nussbaum, 2000). Studies by Plan International (2018) and Unterhalter *et al.* (2022) establish that the presence of women in educational and leadership positions shifts girls' mindsets about what is possible and fosters self-respect and aspirations.

The increasing partnerships among education stakeholders and the development of policy at the institutional level were indicators of the shift towards systemic sustainability. Education officers discussed the harmonisation of NGO operations and the integration of gender indicators into systems. They align with UNESCO's (2023) recommendation to ensure policy coherence and to invest in gender-sensitive education in the long-term. In areas where digital and radio learning initiatives were implemented, particularly during floods or periods of insecurity, these initiatives demonstrated the potential of technology to ensure resilient access (UNHCR, 2023).

Conclusion

This research has identified several factors influencing girls' education in both host and refugee settings in Kenya. The findings reveal that girls' involvement is hindered by factors like poverty, patriarchy, and psychosocial distress. These are enhanced by community agencies, emerging pedagogies, and societal provisions.

Within the feminist approach, capabilities and education may be used as instruments of oppression and of emancipation. Empowerment does not mark the final stage of the learning process but the extension of freedom through the introduction of discussions, recognition and enabling mechanisms. The *Tuseme* model, as a school programme, clarifies that when learners are first given a platform to speak out, they can regain their identities and the moral imagination of their communities.

In conclusion, to achieve gender equality in education, schools should institutionalise a girl-centred empowerment framework through the *Tuseme* model. This can be achieved through national and school-level education policies. Through this, we can develop gender-responsive school governance structures and protect mechanisms for student voice.

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