GENDER DISPARITIES IN STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE AND ESWATINI

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Abstract
Gender disparities in student support services pose a significant barrier to equitable academic outcomes in African higher education institutions. While existing scholarship has examined gender gaps in student recruitment, programme participation and academic performance, disparities in institutional support systems have received comparatively less attention despite evidence that support services critically shape student retention and achievement. This study explored gender-based disparities in student support services at five higher education institutions, three in Zimbabwe and two in Eswatini. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 250 students (50 per institution) through open-ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicate that gender disparities are visible in most student support systems, with female students disproportionately disadvantaged across financial aid, career services, counselling and residential facilities. These findings are consistent with broader scholarship on gender inequality in African higher education, which identifies patriarchal institutional cultures, inadequate gender-sensitive policies, and resource disparities as persistent structural barriers to equitable student support The study concludes that gender-sensitive institutional policies, targeted financial support mechanisms, and inclusive frameworks for service delivery are essential to bridging these disparities and advancing equitable higher education in both countries.

Keywords: *gender equity, student affairs, higher education, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, academic support services, gender-based disparities*

Introduction

This study sought to establish gender disparities in student support services at higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, drawing on empirical evidence to highlight key issues and propose actionable solutions. Furthermore, the research tackled issues on gender disparities in services such as upkeep, psycho-social support such as counselling services and mental health initiatives which enhances health and wellness. Establishing areas on student support service that are gender biased and how students are affected and ways to mitigate the gender disparities in tertiary student support systems was also covered by this study. Student support services are integral to enhancing the student experience and fostering academic success in higher education. These services, encompassing academic advising, career guidance, counselling, and health support, among others, are designed to address diverse student needs, thereby improving retention and throughput (Sengupta, 2017; UNESCO, 2002). In Zimbabwe and Eswatini, the transformative agendas of Education 5.0 and Vision 2030 underscore the importance of inclusive and innovative higher education systems. However, gender disparities in the access and utilization of these services pose challenges to achieving equitable educational outcomes.

The global landscape of higher education has seen a gradual shift towards increased enrollment of women; yet significant gender disparities persist in terms of academic achievement and access to support services. Studies indicate that while female enrollment has increased, systemic barriers continue to hinder their academic success (Meyer, 2018). Factors such as gender-based violence, family obligations, and social expectations often disproportionately affect women, leading to higher dropout rates and lower academic performance as compared to male students (Casad et al, 2021; Manwa, 2015; UNESCO, 2002). Most student affairs divisions in universities concentrate on

providing basic serves without considering the how it is done and its impact on students' life (Torres & Madiba, 2021). This implies that there is a need to focus on how the support services affect students especially females.

According to UNESCO (2002) student affairs and services are an integral part of universities in providing services to students that contribute significantly on students' academic achievements which should not promote gender disparities. It is important for students to know and understand the mandate of student affairs department as this can assist in providing the support that is needed to facilitate learning. The main purpose of student affairs and services is to complement the institutional goals, the mission statement of the institution, that is, the context or locale in which it is established, and the student needs without gender bias. The division should operate in a framework that is guided by policies which promote gender equity. Programmes should be established and resources allocated for the purposes of meeting student affairs/services primary goals: enhancement of student learning/development (Gelana & Cheru 2014; UNESCO 2005). Tertiary institutions have the responsibility of addressing the personal and developmental needs of the student as human beings which operate in a context where they should thrive and not survive. Student affairs and services should take the lead in this regard, as well as appropriate advocacy of students in general (Ludeman et al, 2009; UNESCO, 2002).

The concept of Student Affairs emanated from the fact that universities stand in loco parentis, creating a greater legal obligation for the university to govern student life (Torres & Madiba, 2021; Frost et al, 2010). The student affairs department takes care of students' welfare that include their upkeep and social welfare. Student support services also include creating an environment that is fair and conducive for student success at the institution of higher learning to enhance students' academic performance and maturity, development and to maximize the student motivation to achieve best results. Student affairs practitioners or student affairs professionals should be well trained in order to be able to manage affairs of students. The student affairs practitioners should provide a variety of specialized services and support for students that drive student learning outside of the classroom at institutions of higher education. Gender parity is also a driving force that encourages female students to participate in recreational activities that enhance the wellbeing of students (Sekgobela, Munzhelele & Budeli, 2024; Lundine et al, 2018). The areas which should be monitored and supported by the student service are as follows: manage the changes and adjustments from high school into tertiary institutions where they should integrate the transitional process. Induction to bridge the gap into higher education should be given the precedent. While male students may struggle with independence and self-discipline, female students frequently face security concerns, discrimination, and a lack of representation in certain academic fields. Universities in Zimbabwe and Eswatini should adopt inclusive approaches that ensure a gender-equitable induction process, fostering a supportive environment for all students regardless of their background.

The division of student affairs should implement policies that enhance gender parity and the effectiveness of the support system, health and social support should be a top priority of the department (Nittrouer et al, 2018; Sandeen & Barr, 2014). The areas that require most support is on academic advice or educational counselling and also social life related counselling. The practitioners should assist new students in navigating in a new environment and also developing educational plans that are consistent with their life goals is critical for academic achievements. Students should be guided in accessing campus resources that will enhance their ability to be academically successful without impartiality. The practitioners have the mandate of guiding students in a way that encourages a mindset of overcoming educational and personal problems. Self-examinations and reflective thinking by the practitioners may assist to identify external and personal conditions that may impede student academic achievement and developing appropriate interventions (Saadat et al., 2022; Anderson, 2015). The department should also evaluate and review progress through an evaluation process that checks on students' academic and educational needs, performance, aspirations and problems. Efforts should be

made to increase rapport with students by having personal contact that students often need and request, thereby connecting them to the institution.

There are important activities which are typically required to immediately assist students with decision-making and make the correct move as they try to solve their life challenges. New students should also get attention for them to be acquainted, understand and comply with institutional requirements and expectations. Clear and accurate information regarding institutional policies, procedures and programs should be provided during induction to avoid embarrassments on their part (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). Referring students to appropriate resources, on and off campus, is especially important for new students who may be misled by peers unfamiliar with institutional expectations.

Gender bias trends in universities is visible from numbers of female students in STEM subjects as well as student participation rates in university social activities such as sports (Stoet & Geary, 2018; Andres & Finlay, 2005). Male dominated sports in Zimbabwe are also given priority in funding. Student funding (financial aid is gender biased as most male dominated fields are heavily funded. Educational assistance and support system is directed towards students who excel in progress towards excellent attainment at graduation. Qualitative data from other research further illuminated the reasons behind these disparities, giving voice to students' lived experiences such as treating female students as second class citizens (Zhang, 2024; Huang, Gates, Sinatra & Barabási, 2020). Female students frequently reported feelings of being marginalized in career service settings, which they perceived as male-dominated environments (Leigh, Hiscock, McConnell, Haynes, Caltagirone, Kieffer, & Busschaert, 2022). It is against this background the study objectives are as follows:

Objectives of the study

1. To explore female and male students' lived experiences of accessing financial support services at selected higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini.
2. To describe gendered experiences of career guidance, counselling and residential support services among students at selected higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini.
3. To examine how institutional policies and cultural norms shape gendered access to student support services at selected higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini.

Literature review

Student support services encompass a range of resources designed to enhance students' academic and personal development, including academic advising, counseling, mentorship, and career services. Research suggests that these services are crucial for fostering a supportive learning environment (Huang et al, 2020; Tinto, 2012). However, access to these services can be influenced by gender. For instance, male students may be less likely to seek help due to societal expectations around masculinity, while female students may face barriers rooted in cultural norms and stereotypes (Cameron & Chatwin, 2019).

Gender bias in student upkeep and completion rate

Financial aid policies in Zimbabwe and Eswatini often fail to account for gender-specific financial challenges, leading to disparities in student funding and economic security. Female students are more likely to face financial difficulties due to family responsibilities, lower household income levels, and societal expectations that prioritize male education (Sekgobela, Munzhelele & Budeli, 2024; Manwa, 2015). Limited access to scholarships and bursaries further exacerbates this gap. Many female students in Eswatini rely on part-time work to fund their studies, yet in Zimbabwe they may have fewer employment opportunities due to economic issues and gender biases in hiring practices. Institutions should design financial aid programs that consider these disparities, offering targeted scholarships and grants for female students, particularly in high-cost programs and underrepresented fields like Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM). Gender disparities in financial aid and employment opportunities significantly affect students' financial stability. Female students, particularly those from

low-income backgrounds, face higher financial constraints due to limited access to scholarships and work opportunities. Many are forced into exploitative financial arrangements or informal employment that compromises their academic performance and health. Male students, while often having better job prospects, may also struggle with financial pressures, especially if they are expected to support their families.

Graduation rates among male and female students vary significantly due to gendered experiences in higher education (Moss-Racusin, Sanzari, Caluori & Rabasco, 2018). Women often face challenges such as increased caregiving responsibilities, harassment, and lack of mentorship, which impact their academic progression. Support systems, including tutoring programs and academic advising, should be structured to address these barriers and ensure that both male and female students have equal opportunities to succeed. Policies that enhance retention and improve graduation rates of female students should include gender-sensitive academic support programs, flexible learning options, and mentorship initiatives tailored to the unique challenges faced by female and male students (Pasque, & Nicholson, 2023; Moss-Racusin et al, 2018). Additionally, institutions should track student progress through a gender lens, using data to inform interventions that promote equitable outcomes.

Gender disparities also manifest in study conditions and the allocation of leisure time. Female students often have additional household responsibilities, reducing the time available for studying compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, safety concerns may limit their ability to access study facilities at night, impacting academic performance. Leisure activities are also influenced by gender norms, with male students more likely to participate in sports and recreational activities, while female students may be engaged in domestic or caregiving roles (Sekgobela et al, 2024; Oduaran, 2017). Institutions should create inclusive policies that allow equitable access to study spaces, promote work-life balance, and encourage equal participation in extracurricular activities.

Gender disparities in residential facilities remain a critical issue in universities in Zimbabwe and Eswatini, as they affect student safety, comfort, and overall academic success. Female students often face more challenges related to accommodation due to concerns about security, privacy, and access to essential amenities (Kanga, 2017; Oduaran, 2017; UNESCO, 2005). On-campus housing is frequently limited, and when available, female dormitories tend to be overcrowded, with inadequate sanitation facilities and poor maintenance. Security concerns are among the most pressing issues for female students in residential halls. Many university accommodations lack proper security measures such as CCTV surveillance, secure entry systems, and well-trained personnel to ensure student safety (Sandeen & Barr, 2014). In contrast, male students may face fewer restrictions in their movement and are less likely to experience safety threats such as harassment and assault. The absence of gender-sensitive housing policies places female students at greater risk, especially those who live off-campus in private rental housing, where safety conditions are often even worse (Torres, & Madiba, 2021, UNESCO. 2005).

Another key disparity is in the allocation of residential spaces. In many institutions, priority is given to male students, particularly those involved in sports or technical fields, while female students are left to seek off-campus accommodation (Buchmann et al., 2019). This is compounded by financial constraints, as female students often have fewer financial resources to afford safe and decent housing. Lack of affordable on-campus housing forces many female students to commute long distances, increasing the risk of harassment while traveling. Access to essential facilities such as clean water, functional bathrooms, and common study areas is also gendered. In some cases, female dormitories have more restrictive curfews or rules, limiting their ability to study late or participate in campus activities, while male dormitories enjoy greater flexibility. Unequal distribution of resources contributes to stress and affects academic performance, as female students may struggle to find

suitable study environments (Sekgobela et al, 2024; Domingo et al, 2022; Kanga, 2017). Universities should implement policies that ensure equitable housing allocation, improved security measures, and better living conditions for female students. Expanding on-campus housing, enhancing safety protocols, and providing financial aid for disadvantaged students can help reduce these disparities and create a more inclusive residential experience.

Welfare of married females revealed gender disparities that are particularly evident among commuter and married students, as female students often bear a disproportionate burden of family and caregiving responsibilities. In Zimbabwe and Eswatini, married female students frequently struggle to balance academic work with childcare, household responsibilities, and financial constraints (Kanga, 2017). The absence of institutional childcare facilities places an additional strain on these students, often forcing them to reduce their course load or drop out altogether. Transportation challenges further exacerbate gender disparities, as female students may face safety concerns when commuting long distances, especially in rural areas. Limited access to reliable and affordable transport disproportionately affects women, making it difficult to attend classes, access campus resources, and engage in extracurricular activities (Domingo et al, 2022; González-Rivera, & Baigorri, 2020; Gelana & Cheru, 2014). Additionally, parking policies often fail to consider the unique needs of commuter students, with limited parking spaces forcing some students to arrive on campus hours in advance to secure a spot.

Gender bias in recreational facilities

In a broad sense, the college environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the years of study in an educational institution. The environment consists of the programs, personnel, curricula, teaching practices, and recreational facilities that become a part of any educational program and even the racial and institutional climate in which the program operates**.** For a student attending a college, apart from pedagogical techniques of the professors, the physical surroundings, behaviour of the classmates, the peer groups, and the co-curricular activities in which the students participate are important components of their environment (Lundine et al, 2018). The task of assessing the environment involves identification and quantification of these external circumstances and events that the students have been exposed to in college is part of support services.

Sports and physical activities play a vital role in student well-being, yet gender disparities persist in the allocation and accessibility of sports facilities in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. These disparities contribute to a lack of inclusivity in university environments, making it difficult for students to form meaningful academic and social networks that are crucial for their overall development (Oduaran, 2017). Male students tend to dominate access to sports facilities, benefiting from better infrastructure, greater financial support, and more competitive opportunities (Kwiek & Roszka, 2021). In contrast, female students often encounter inadequate resources, fewer sports scholarships, and societal attitudes that discourage female active participation in athletics. Many universities allocate more funding to male-dominated sports such as soccer, rugby, and basketball, while female sports teams struggle with inadequate budgets, outdated equipment, and limited coaching staff (Saadat et al, 2022). This discrepancy not only affects performance but also discourages female students from participating in sports. Additionally, the scheduling of training sessions often prioritizes male teams, leaving female athletes with less favorable time slots and restricted access to training facilities.

Lack of gender-inclusive sports policies also extends to the type of sports promoted within institutions (Domingo et al, 2022; Hanasono et al, 2019) While male students have a broad range of options, female students may find their choices limited to traditionally "feminine" sports like netball or aerobics. This restriction reinforces stereotypes and prevents women from exploring diverse sporting interests, particularly in high-profile or financially rewarding sports such as track and field or professional football. The social impact of unequal access to sports facilities is significant, as sports play a crucial role in promoting physical and mental health, teamwork, and leadership skills. Female

students who are excluded from sports activities may miss out on opportunities for personal development, scholarships, and networking, which can have long-term career implications. The absence of female representation in university sports leadership also means that decision-making remains male-dominated, further entrenching the existing disparities.

Gender-based violence and campus safety concerns

The absence of strong support systems for gender-based violence victims further worsens gender disparities in student welfare. Female students, who are more likely to experience sexual harassment and assault on campus, often lack access to proper reporting mechanisms, legal support, and psychological counseling (González-Rivera & Baigorri, 2020). Inadequate security measures make it difficult for them to move freely around campus, limiting their access to study facilities, extracurricular activities, and leadership opportunities. Male students may also experience violence but face societal stigma that discourages them from reporting abuse, leading to unaddressed trauma. Lack of gender-responsive security policies creates an unsafe learning environment that disproportionately affects female students' academic and social engagement (Casad et al., 2021; Buchmann et al., 2019).

Gender bias in counselling services

Guidance and counselling services are important in the adjustment of students because they represent the transition from the completely sheltered life in high school to the freedom and responsibility of their tertiary education and achievements. Women, in particular, encounter systemic barriers that hinder their academic progress, including limited access to counseling services, mentorship, and career guidance tailored to their unique needs (Domingo et al, 2022; Andres et al. 2005) In contrast, male students may find it easier to engage with support networks that are often dominated by their peers and mentors of the same gender.

Gender bias in guidance and counselling reinforces the gender differences as counselors are born and nurtured in a patriarchal system the emphasis that males are superior to females (Mugambi, 2017). Hence, female students should endure and cope with the unwanted pregnancy and demands of being a learner without institutional support. Male students, by contrast, tend to receive counselling framed as advisory guidance, often without equivalent disciplinary consequences. The differential treatment of male and female students in these contexts has documented adverse outcomes, including severe psychological distress and, in extreme cases, suicidal ideation among female students. Patriarchal norms and gender role expectations continue to exert significant pressure on female students, contributing to academic disengagement (Saadat et al., 2022). These deeply embedded gendered norms reflect broader structural inequities in higher education.

Limited social integration

Sharma, Nagpal and Sharma (2019) state that a number of factors contribute to the academic attainments and affect female students such as school attendance that get impaired, and self-confidence of the students get affected because of marginalization. The patriarchal perception, culture and social conventions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini are major contributors to the continued effects on higher education. They are in difficult mental state to perform better in their academic work due to the disparities (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2019). They isolate themselves from the other students and from attending classes to try and deal with the discrimination. Sugimoto (2019) states that gender inequality may have a detrimental impact on the social and emotional aspects of the female students. Stress, anxiety, and depression can strike students of marginalized genders and can result in low self-esteem, poor academic performance, poor attendance and dropout.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Gender Theory, a broad and evolving theoretical tradition that examines how socially constructed gender roles, norms and expectations shape individuals' experiences, opportunities and outcomes across institutional contexts. Rather than treating gender as a fixed biological category, Gender Theory understands it as a social and cultural construct that is continually produced and reproduced through everyday interactions, institutional practices and policy frameworks (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The intellectual lineage of Gender Theory spans several decades and draws from feminist, sociological and psychological scholarship. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) laid the philosophical groundwork by arguing that womanhood is not a natural state but a social position. This is famously captured in her assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Building on this foundation, West and Zimmerman (1987) advanced the concept of "doing gender," proposing that gender is not something individuals have but something they perform in response to social norms and institutional expectations. Judith Butler (1990) extended this further through her theory of gender performativity, arguing that gender identities are constituted through repeated, regulated performances rather than reflecting any pre-existing inner truth. Alongside these foundational contributions, Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality as a critical analytical lens, demonstrating that gender does not operate in isolation but intersects with race, class, socioeconomic status and other axes of identity to produce layered and compounding forms of disadvantage. Together, these theoretical contributions form the conceptual foundation of the framework applied in this study.

The key tenets of Gender Theory as applied here are threefold. First, gender is socially constructed: the roles, behaviours and expectations assigned to men and women are products of culture and history rather than biology (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Second, gender inequalities are structural: they are embedded in and perpetuated by institutional policies, organisational cultures and resource allocation practices that systematically advantage some groups over others (Buchmann, DiPrete & McDaniel, 2019; Oduaran, 2017). Third, gender operates intersectionally: disadvantages are compounded when gender interacts with other social categories such as socioeconomic status, marital status or geographic location (Crenshaw, 1989), all of which are highly relevant in the Zimbabwean and Eswatini higher education contexts.

Gender Theory was selected for this study because it provides the most analytically precise framework for examining why and how student support services such as financial aid, counselling, career guidance, residential facilities and health services are accessed and experienced differently by male and female students. In institutional environments shaped by patriarchal cultural norms and historically male-dominated governance structures, Gender Theory offers a lens through which the structural reproduction of inequity in service delivery can be identified, named and explained (Casad et al., 2021; Sekgobela, Munzhelele & Budeli, 2024).

The framework shaped this study at every stage of the research process. In terms of design, a qualitative-dominant descriptive survey was selected because Gender Theory prioritises the lived experiences and situated knowledge of participants particularly those from marginalised gender positions over aggregate statistical patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In terms of data collection, open-ended questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to allow participants to articulate their experiences of support service access in their own terms, without imposing predetermined categories. In terms of analysis, thematic analysis was guided by Gender Theory's sensitising concepts: the study actively searched for patterns of structural disadvantage, gendered institutional norms, and differential access linked to gender role expectations. In terms of interpretation, findings were read through the lens of gender performativity and intersectionality, examining how institutional practices and cultural norms reproduce those disparities in the specific southern African higher education contexts of Zimbabwe and Eswatini.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore gender-based disparities in student support services, consistent with the UNESCO (2002) framework on student affairs. The theoretical approaches were selected for their complementary strengths in ensuring rigour and credibility when integrated within a single study. Mixed methods are employed when a research problem requires the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clark & Creswell, 2015). A descriptive research design was employed to gather qualitative data. Descriptive surveys have the advantage of collecting data from a sizable population and the results may be generalized in a specific context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2016).

A sample of 250 students was chosen from a population of five universities. The descriptive survey, was conducted across three higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and two in Eswatini, involved a total of 250 students, 50 from each institution (100 and 150 from Eswatini and Zimbabwe respectively) for practical convenience. Interviews were chosen for the strengths of gathering in-depth data and detailed data (Leedy, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kothari, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted at each institution with students and staff to provide qualitative insights into their experiences and perceptions. Interviews were for 30 to 45 minutes per participant and the process covered 3 weeks. Institutional records were analyzed to assess the gender distribution of service users. Data collection adhered to ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality and informed consent. Adherence to ethical principles is mandatory for all research so as to produce authentic and credible findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study revealed significant gender disparities in the utilisation of student support services across all five participating institutions. To enhance clarity and enable meaningful cross-national comparison, findings are presented separately for Zimbabwe and Eswatini before being synthesised comparatively. Participant quotes are attributed using coded identifiers to protect anonymity: ZF = Zimbabwe Female, ZM = Zimbabwe Male, EF = Eswatini Female, EM = Eswatini Male, followed by a participant number.

Zimbabwe: Gender Disparities in Student Support Services

Financial Aid and Economic Support

Female students at the three Zimbabwean institutions reported significant disadvantage in accessing financial aid. Most female participants indicated that scholarship and bursary allocation favoured male-dominated fields, particularly STEM and sports-related programmes, leaving female students in humanities and social sciences with limited financial backing. This experience was captured vividly by one participant who stated that:

"I applied for the bursary three times and was told my programme does not qualify. My male classmates in engineering got theirs without any problem. It feels like the system was not built for us." (ZF04)

Another participant described the financial pressure that compelled her to seek informal employment at the expense of her studies:

"I sell vegetables on the roadside after lectures to pay my fees. I cannot afford to fail because there is no one to help me at home. My brother gets money from our father because he is studying engineering, but I get nothing." (ZF11)

A deeply rooted cultural norm that prioritises the male child as the primary heir and financial beneficiary within the family emerged among responses from most female participants as a fundamental cause of financial inequality.

Male students, while acknowledging some financial pressure, generally reported better access to funded programmes. One male participant acknowledged this disparity:

"I know my sister wanted to go to university but my father paid for me first because I am the son. That is just how it is in our culture. I feel bad about it but I cannot change it." (ZM07)

Another male participant noted the expectation placed on him as a financial provider:

"Even here at university, I feel pressure to send money home. But at least I got a sports bursary. My female friends do not have that option." (ZM03)

Career Services

Female students in Zimbabwe frequently reported feeling marginalised in career service settings, describing these environments as male-dominated in both staffing and orientation. One participant described her experience directly:

"When I went to the careers office, the officer kept suggesting nursing and teaching. I told him I want to go into mining engineering and he actually laughed. I never went back." (ZF08)

A second participant articulated the structural absence of female representation in career guidance:

"There is not a single female career counsellor in our department. How am I supposed to talk about my challenges as a woman when the person across from me has never experienced what I go through?" (ZF15)

Male students reported comparatively easier navigation of career services, though some acknowledged an emotional dimension that went unsupported:

"The careers office is good for job applications and CV writing. But if you want to talk about what you actually want to do with your life, they are not helpful. It is very transactional." (ZM09)

Another male participant observed the gender dynamic in career service interactions:

"I noticed that when female students come with questions, the officers seem less patient. I have seen it happen. They get shorter answers and less time." (ZM12)

Counselling Services

Counselling services in Zimbabwe showed a clear gender asymmetry in both access and outcome. Female students accessed counselling more frequently, primarily as a result of experiencing gender-based violence, pregnancy-related difficulties and discrimination. One participant described the institutional response to her pregnancy:

"When they found out I was pregnant, they told me I had to leave the hostel. My boyfriend, who is also a student here, was not told anything. He still lives in his room. I had to move in with my aunt far from campus and my grades dropped." (ZF02)

Another participant described the psychological toll of seeking help within a punitive institutional framework:

"I was afraid to go to the counsellor because I thought they would report me and I would be expelled. I suffered in silence for months before a friend forced me to go. By then I had already failed two modules." (ZF09)

Male students noted the cultural barriers that prevented them from accessing counselling, with one stating that:

"In Zimbabwe, a man does not cry. If you go to a counsellor, people think you are weak or crazy. I had serious problems last semester but I dealt with them alone." (ZM05)

A second male participant reflected on the cost of this cultural expectation:

"I failed a whole semester because of what was happening at home. I never told anyone here because I did not want to be seen as someone who cannot handle things. Men are supposed to be strong." (ZM14)

Residential Facilities

Female students in Zimbabwe reported overcrowded dormitories, inadequate sanitation and restrictive curfew policies. One participant described her living conditions in detail:

"There are four of us in a room built for two. We share one bathroom with twelve other girls on the floor. The light outside our block has been broken for six months. We are scared to go out at night." (ZF06)

Another participant highlighted the inequity in movement restrictions between male and female residences:

"The boys can come and go as they please. We have a 9 pm curfew. If I have a group assignment that runs late in the library, I have to choose between my studies and breaking the rules. Male students do not face this choice." (ZF13)

Male students acknowledged the relative advantage of their residential conditions:

"Our block is not perfect but it is better than the girls' side. We have seen the conditions over there. It is overcrowded and the security is poor. Our female colleagues are not safe." (ZM06)

A second male participant noted the flexibility afforded to male residents:

"We can come back at any time. There are no curfews for us. I think the university trusts men more than women, which is unfair when you think about it." (ZM10)

Recreational and Sports Facilities

Male students in Zimbabwe dominated access to sports infrastructure. Female students reported being channelled toward a narrow range of sporting options with one participant stating:

"The football team gets new kits every year and travels to competitions. The women's netball team has not had new equipment in three years. We fundraise ourselves while the men's teams are fully sponsored by the university." (ZF07)

Another female participant described the scheduling barriers she encountered:

"We are given the field on Wednesday afternoons only. The men use it every day. When we asked for more time we were told the men's schedule cannot be changed because they have fixtures. Our fixtures do not seem to count." (ZF12)

Male students confirmed the resource disparity, with one reflecting:

"I am on the football team and I know we get a lot more than the women's teams. The coaches are all men, the funding is more, the travel is more. I do not think it is fair but no one questions it." (ZM08)

A second male participant observed:

"Female students gave up on sports a long time ago at this university. They stopped trying to compete for resources because they always lose. That is a problem." (ZM11)

Eswatini: Gender Disparities in Student Support Services

Financial Aid and Economic Support

Female students at the two Eswatini institutions reported disadvantage in financial aid access, with many relying on part-time work to sustain their studies. One participant described the compounding effect of transport costs on her financial situation:

"I come from a rural area. Every week I spend a large portion of my allowance on transport. There is no bursary for transport and the university does not consider this when allocating financial aid. Male students from my area seem to manage better because they have more ways to earn." (EF03)

A second participant described the impossible trade-off between work and academic performance:

"I work at a supermarket on weekends to pay my fees. By Monday I am exhausted. I have missed assignments because of this. My male classmates do not have to do this because their families support them more." (EF09)

Male students in Eswatini acknowledged the gender dimension of financial support, with one stating:

"My family supports me fully. My sister wanted to study but she is at home. They said they can only afford one of us and it should be me because I am the son. I feel guilty when I think about it." (EM04)

Another male participant reflected on the intersecting burdens of financial expectation:

"As a man, I am expected to finish quickly, get a job and support my family. So there is pressure but it is different from what women face. Women have less support and more obstacles." (EM07)

Career Services

Female students in Eswatini placed particular emphasis on the absence of female mentors and role models within career services. One participant stated that:

"All the career advisors I have met are men. When I tried to talk about the challenges of being a female student going into a male field, he could not relate. I left feeling more lost than when I arrived." (EF05)

A second participant described how gender bias shaped the guidance she received:

"I was told that accounting is competitive and maybe I should consider teaching or social work. I have a B average. No one tells the male students to lower their ambitions." (EF11)

Male students in Eswatini reported more positive experiences in career services, though one acknowledged the differential treatment he observed:

"The careers office helped me a lot with my CV and internship applications. But I have noticed that my female friends do not seem to get the same level of enthusiasm from the staff. It is subtle but it is there." (EM02)

Another male participant reflected on the structural absence of female guidance figures:

"If I look at all the people who have helped me with my career here, they are all men. For a female student looking for someone who understands her experience, I do not think this institution offers that." (EM06)

Counselling Services

In Eswatini, female students identified reproductive health support as the most critical gap in counselling provision. One participant described the institutional response to her pregnancy:

"When I told the counsellor I was pregnant, she referred me to a clinic off campus and that was it. There was no follow-up, no support, no conversation about how I would continue my studies. I felt completely abandoned by the institution." (EF02)

A second participant articulated the invisibility of reproductive health as an institutional concern:

"Being pregnant at university here is treated like a personal failure. No one asks how they can help you continue. They just wait for you to disappear. I almost did." (EF08)

Male students in Eswatini similarly described avoiding counselling due to cultural stigma, with one participant stating that:

"Men in Eswatini do not go to counsellors. It is seen as a sign of weakness. If you have problems, you drink or you keep quiet. I chose to keep quiet but my studies suffered." (EM03)

Another male participant reflected on the cost of this silence:

"I went through a very dark period last year. I thought about dropping out. I never told anyone here because I was afraid of how it would look. There should be a way to get help without everyone knowing." (EM08)

Residential Facilities

Female students in Eswatini highlighted the particular dangers of off-campus accommodation. One participant described her situation:

"I could not get a place in the university residence so I rent a room near campus. My landlord enters without knocking. There are no locks on some doors. The university does not care what happens to us off campus." (EF04)

A second participant contrasted the security of on-campus male residences with the conditions she experienced:

"Male students get priority for on-campus housing. I was on the waiting list for two years. In that time I lived in three different places, each worse than the last. The university has a duty of care that it is not fulfilling for female students." (EF10)

Male students acknowledged the priority they received in residential allocation:

"I got a room on campus in my first year. I later found out that female students I know have been waiting since first year and still have nothing. That does not seem right." (EM05)

Another male participant noted the disparity in facility quality:

"The male residence is older but it is maintained. When I visited a female friend in her off-campus place, I was shocked by the conditions. The university should be ashamed of that situation." (EM09)

Recreational and Sports Facilities

Female students in Eswatini described cultural and institutional barriers that compounded their exclusion from recreational activities. One participant stated:

"My family told me that sport is for men. The university does nothing to challenge that. There are no female coaches, no campaigns to get women involved, no female representation in the sports committee. It is like we are invisible." (EF06)

A second participant described the practical barriers she encountered when attempting to access facilities:

"I tried to use the gym during the times listed for female students. Half the equipment was broken and had been broken for months. The equipment in the men's section was new. I stopped going because it felt pointless." (EF13)

Male students in Eswatini confirmed the resource differential, with one participant stating:

"The men's football team is treated like a professional club. We get everything we need. The women's team barely has boots. It is an embarrassment when you see it side by side." (EM01)

Another male participant reflected on the cultural dimension of female exclusion:

"In Eswatini, there is still a strong feeling that women should not be too athletic or too competitive. Our imstitution reflects that attitude instead of challenging it. That needs to change." (EM10)

Table 1: Comparative Summary

The table below synthesises the key findings across both country contexts:

Domain	Zimbabwe	Eswatini	Common Finding
Financial Aid	Cultural preference for male child; bursaries favour STEM/sports; female students in informal employment	Rural transport costs compound disadvantage; part-time work compromises academic performance	Female students systematically disadvantaged; male-dominated fields prioritised in funding allocation
Career Services	Male-dominated staffing; guidance biased toward feminised careers; female students discouraged from high-income fields	Absence of female mentors and role models; male advisors unable to relate to female student experiences	Female students marginalised and misdirected; career aspirations constrained by gender bias
Counselling	Punitive pregnancy policies; cultural stigma prevents male help-seeking; institutional abandonment of vulnerable students	Reproductive health needs unrecognised; pregnancy treated as personal failure; male stoicism entrenched	Asymmetric institutional response; mental health and reproductive needs unmet across genders
Residential Facilities	Overcrowding; curfew restrictions; inadequate security; no institutional childcare	Off-campus accommodation unsafe; institutional oversight absent; female students deprioritised in allocation	Female students face greater security risks, resource limitations and institutional neglect
Recreational and Sports	Male sports heavily funded; female teams under-resourced; scheduling disadvantages female athletes	Cultural norms restrict female participation; facilities gendered in maintenance and quality	Male students dominate access; female participation structurally discouraged at institutional and cultural levels
Psychological Wellbeing	Stress and depression among female students; male students suffer in silence due to cultural norms	Reproductive health stigma; male stoicism prevents help-seeking; dark periods go unaddressed	Both genders carry unaddressed mental health burdens driven by gendered institutional and cultural norms

Across both contexts, the participant voices documented in this study powerfully affirm that gender disparities in student support services are not abstract policy failures but lived realities that shape daily decisions, compromise academic performance and determine whether students remain in or exit higher education. The consistency of these experiences across Zimbabwe and Eswatini despite differences in national context, confirms that the structural mechanisms identified by Gender Theory, namely the

institutional reproduction of patriarchal norms through policy, resource allocation and cultural practice (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989) operate with remarkable regularity across southern African higher education contexts.

Conclusions

This study has established that gender disparities in student support services constitute a significant and systemic barrier to equitable academic participation and success at higher education institutions in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. The findings demonstrate that these disparities are not incidental but are structurally embedded across multiple domains of institutional support, reflecting broader patriarchal cultural norms and inadequate gender-responsive policy frameworks. Female students are disproportionately disadvantaged across financial aid, career services, counselling, residential facilities and recreational resources, while male students face their own gendered barriers particularly the cultural stigma surrounding help-seeking behaviour that leaves mental health needs unaddressed. Institutional policies were found to actively reinforce these disparities, most starkly in the asymmetrical treatment of pregnant female students relative to their male counterparts. Married and commuting female students face compounded disadvantages arising from caregiving responsibilities, inadequate institutional childcare, and unsafe commuting environments that collectively threaten their academic persistence. These findings are consistent with Gender Theory's central proposition that institutional practices and cultural norms continuously reproduce gendered inequalities in ways that systematically limit the opportunities and outcomes of female students (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Crenshaw, 1989). The study therefore concludes that achieving equitable higher education in Zimbabwe and Eswatini requires deliberate, sustained and structurally oriented reform of student support systems, reforms grounded in gender-sensitive policy, adequate resourcing, practitioner capacity development and robust institutional accountability mechanisms aligned with the transformative goals of Education 5.0 and Vision 2030.

Recommendations

1. Financial Aid and Economic Support

Governments of Zimbabwe and Eswatini should introduce gender-responsive financial aid criteria that prioritise female students from low-income and rural backgrounds, and institutions should conduct annual gender-disaggregated audits of scholarship and bursary distribution to correct systemic allocation biases.

2. Career Services

Universities should prioritise the recruitment of female career counsellors and establish formal mentorship programmes connecting female students with successful women in their fields, ensuring that career guidance actively encourages female students to pursue high-income and STEM careers rather than directing them toward traditionally feminised pathways.

3. Counselling Services and Reproductive Health Support

Institutional leadership in both countries should urgently repeal punitive pregnancy-related expulsion policies and replace them with gender-responsive support frameworks that guarantee residential continuity, academic accommodation and reproductive health referrals for pregnant and nursing students.

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