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The influence of cultural beliefs on girls' completion of lower secondary education in Kayunga District. A cross-sectional study.

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Abstract

Background.

Girls' completion of lower secondary education remains a critical concern in Kayunga District, where cultural norms continue to influence schooling outcomes. This study examined the relationship between cultural beliefs and girls' completion of lower secondary education in Kayunga District.

Methodology.

A descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional survey design was employed, using a mixed-methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The target population comprised 550 individuals, from which a sample of 226 respondents was selected using stratified and purposive sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and documentary review checklists, and were analyzed using SPSS V26 for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

Results.

Most respondents (42.7%) were aged 16–17 years, 62.0% attended government schools, and 19.7% had experienced teenage pregnancy. Cultural beliefs strongly influenced schooling patterns, with high agreement on expectations of early marriage, domestic roles, and prioritization of boys' education (mean scores ranging from 3.84 to 4.18). Many respondents confirmed that girls frequently drop out before Senior Four (Mean = 4.23) and often repeat classes (Mean = 3.87). A strong, statistically significant correlation was found between cultural beliefs and girls' completion of lower secondary education ($r = 0.731$, $p = 0.001$). Regression results further indicated that cultural beliefs account for 75.9% of the variance in girls' school completion ($R^2 = 0.759$), demonstrating substantial predictive influence.

Conclusion.

Cultural beliefs have a significant and strong positive correlation with girls' completion of lower secondary education. Cultural norms such as early marriage, domestic role expectations, and negative perceptions of girls' education continue to impede educational attainment.

Recommendation.

Community sensitization programs should be intensified to challenge harmful cultural norms that prioritize early marriage and domestic roles for girls over education. These campaigns should involve local leaders, parents, religious institutions, and cultural gatekeepers.

Keywords: *Cultural Beliefs, Girls' Education, School Completion, Kayunga District, Lower Secondary Education.*
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Background.

One of the most significant cultural barriers to girls' education in Uganda is the social acceptability of early marriage. In communities where marrying girls off at a young age is culturally encouraged or economically motivated (as in the case of dowry systems), girls are often withdrawn from school before completing lower secondary education (Kyomuhendo, 2023). Once married, societal expectations typically restrict girls to domestic roles, leaving little room for educational pursuits. Cultural beliefs about traditional gender roles also impact girls' educational outcomes. In many Ugandan rural communities, girls are socialized to take on domestic responsibilities such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning, often at the expense of time and energy needed for schooling (Efuetngwa, 2021). Education for girls is sometimes seen as less important or even unnecessary, reinforcing gender inequalities.

Some traditional and religious beliefs perpetuate the idea that education may negatively influence a girl's morality or obedience. For instance, there are communities where schooling, particularly in co-educational settings, is viewed as exposing girls to "moral decay" or distracting them from their expected roles (Namono & Nyeko, 2021). These cultural narratives contribute to societal resistance against

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Original Article

girls continuing education beyond primary levels. Another indirect effect of cultural beliefs is the limited visibility of female role models in education and professional spheres. In cultures where few women have historically completed formal education or attained professional success, girls may lack aspirational figures. This limits motivation and community support for long-term schooling (Habaasa et al., 2024).

In regions like Ntoroko, cultural beliefs dictate that girls marry between ages 13 and 16, often leading to school dropout. The World Vision report highlights that early marriage, driven by cultural norms, contributes to a 40% dropout rate among girls in the district (International Center for Research on Women, 2023). Similarly, in Karamoja, cultural practices assign higher bride prices to less educated girls, prompting parents to marry off daughters early to secure financial benefits. This practice underscores the cultural preference for marriage over education for girls (Uganda Radio Network, 2023).

Traditional gender roles assign domestic responsibilities to girls, limiting their time and energy for education. In West Nile, Uganda, research by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found that 28% of girls who dropped out cited household chores as a major barrier to schooling. These gendered expectations not only affect girls' academic performance but also their self-perception and societal value (Women with a Mission, 2023).

Cultural stigma associated with adolescent pregnancy often leads to school expulsion or dropout. In East Africa, including Uganda, coercive pregnancy testing and subsequent expulsions violate girls' rights and disrupt their education. Despite legal guidelines permitting pregnant girls to continue education, cultural attitudes and inadequate enforcement perpetuate these practices (Msanzi, 2023).

Methodology.

Research Design.

This study utilized a descriptive, correlational, and cross-sectional survey design, employing a mixed-methods approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. The study was descriptive in nature to provide a comprehensive overview of the characteristics and experiences of girls' completion of lower secondary education in Kayunga District. Descriptive statistics such as mean, mode, median, and standard deviation were used to summarize and describe the characteristics of respondents and study variables, enabling a clear understanding of the findings. It was correlational to allow the researcher to explore and quantify the relationships between social factors and girls' completion of lower secondary education. Pearson's correlation was employed to identify the strength and direction of relationships between the identified variables, facilitating insights into how these factors interact.

The study was also cross-sectional since data were collected at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the current situation regarding social factors and girls' completion of lower secondary education. This approach was particularly useful for identifying prevalent patterns and associations without requiring long-term tracking of participants. The mixed-methods approach was utilized too. For qualitative data, qualitative methods (interviews) were used to gather in-depth insights into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by girls in lower secondary schools.

Study Population.

The research used female students (S4) and head teachers as the study participants. The study also used 8 lower secondary schools to select target respondents. The selected secondary schools were: Galiraya Seed SS, Bbaale SS, Kitatya SS, Busaana SS, Kanjuki SS, Namagabi SS, Ndeeba SS, and St. M. Kalemba. According to the Kayunga District Education Department (2024), the selected secondary schools had a population of 537 female students (S4) and 13 head teachers. Therefore, the target population for the study was 550 people. Female S4 students were selected to participate in the study because they were the primary subjects of the study, being directly affected by the social factors under investigation. As students nearing the end of lower secondary education (Senior 4), they provided first-hand insights into the challenges and facilitators affecting their school completion. Their lived experiences shed light on peer influences, gender dynamics, family expectations, financial hardships, early marriages, and Family Education issues. Head teachers, as school leaders, have oversight over school policies, enrollment trends, and dropout records. Their administrative perspective helped understand institutional barriers or enablers to girls' completion of secondary education.

Sample Size.

The study adopted the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size. Based on the table, 226 respondents were selected proportionately from a population of 550 participants. Therefore, 5 head teachers and 221 female students were selected from S4 classes of various secondary schools selected for the study.

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Table 1: Study Population, Sample Size, Sampling Techniques and Data Collection Methods

Respondents	Population	Sample size	Sampling technique	Data collection method
S4 Female students	537	221	Stratified sampling	Questionnaire
Head teachers	13	05	Purposive sampling	Interview
Total	**550**	**226**		

Source: *Kayunga District Education Department (2024).*

Sampling Techniques.

This study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques to select a representative sample from the target population. The researcher used stratified sampling to select respondents from each sample category (lower secondary school).

Within each category, stratified sampling was used to select the majority of the respondents, i.e., S4 female students. This probability sampling technique ensured that every individual in the population had an equal and independent chance of being selected. The method was chosen to minimize selection bias and enhance the representativeness of the sample. Lists of eligible participants were obtained from school and district records. Using a computer-generated randomization process, 135 female students were selected from a population of 212, and 05 head teachers were selected from a population of 8 head teachers.

Purposive sampling was employed to select head teachers. This non-probability sampling method was appropriate due to their specialized role and responsibilities in educational management. The selection was based on the respondents' positions and their presumed ability to provide in-depth and relevant information on the subject matter.

Data Collection Methods.

Two primary methods of data collection were employed in this study: questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were administered to female students. The use of structured questionnaires allowed for the efficient collection of quantitative data across a large sample. The questionnaires included both closed-ended and a few open-ended questions, allowing for both statistical analysis and limited qualitative insights. This method was suitable due to the literacy levels of the respondents and the need to gather standardized responses.

Interviews were conducted with head teachers. Semi-structured interview guides were used to facilitate in-depth discussions and to capture detailed qualitative information. These interviews aimed to explore administrative perspectives and contextual factors affecting educational outcomes that could not be easily captured through a questionnaire. The interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

In summary, the combination of stratified sampling and purposive sampling, alongside the use of both questionnaires and interviews, ensured a comprehensive and methodologically sound approach to data collection that aligned with the objectives of the study.

Research Instruments.

An open- and close-ended questionnaire and an interview guide were designed to collect primary data for the study.

Questionnaires.

Open- and closed-ended questionnaires were developed to gather quantitative and qualitative data from S4 female students. This instrument facilitated the collection of a broad range of information efficiently. Demographic characteristics included age, gender, religion, tribe, education level, level of household income, and marital status. This data was essential for understanding the context of social factors and girls' completion of lower secondary education. Closed-ended questions included Likert scale items, which helped to assess cultural beliefs, family education, family economic status, and girls' completion of lower secondary education. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to provide more nuanced responses about their personal experiences, challenges faced, and suggestions for improving girls' completion of lower secondary education.

The questionnaires were distributed to a sample of female students in S4 and were picked from them at a predetermined date in their respective schools.

Interview Guide.

An interview guide was created, and interviews were scheduled and conducted with head teachers and the District Education Officer. This provided in-depth insights into their perspectives on social factors and educational challenges faced by female students.

Interviews were scheduled with head teachers and the District Education Officer at their convenience to ensure a comfortable environment for open discussion. The interviewer created rapport, explaining the study's goals and ensuring confidentiality. Interviews were recorded (with permission) for accuracy and transcribed for analysis, allowing for a detailed examination of responses.

https://doi.org/10.51168/45em6v92
Original Article

Documentary Review Checklist.

The documentary review was employed to systematically extract and analyze secondary data relevant to girls' progression and completion of lower secondary education (Senior 1 to Senior 4). The researcher examined gender-disaggregated data across the years 2020 to 2024, identified trends and gaps in educational access and outcomes for girls, evaluated the effectiveness of district and national policies, programs, and interventions aimed at promoting girls' education, and supported triangulation with primary data sources (interviews) where applicable.

A documentary review checklist was developed to ensure a systematic and comprehensive approach to data extraction. The checklist included pre-defined categories and indicators aligned with national education goals and international frameworks.

The checklist was structured to collect information on the following:

- Annual enrollment of girls in Senior 1 (S1).
- Completion numbers of girls in Senior 4 (S4).
- Promotion and repetition rates per year.
- Dropout rates and documented reasons (e.g., early marriage, pregnancy, poverty).
- Performance in Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) examinations.
- Availability and access to girl-friendly school infrastructure (e.g., sanitation facilities, menstrual hygiene support).
- Documentation of government or NGO-led initiatives aimed at supporting girls' education.

Data Collection Procedure.

The data collection process followed the steps below:

Permission and Access: Official permission was obtained from the Kayunga District Education Office, school head teachers, and other relevant authorities to access institutional documents.

Tool Piloting: The documentary review checklist was piloted on selected documents from two secondary schools to test its clarity, coverage, and functionality. Revisions were made based on feedback.

Document Review: The researcher visited selected schools and district offices. Hardcopy and digital records were reviewed, and data was extracted manually using the checklist.

Data Validation: Where discrepancies or gaps existed, clarifications were sought from responsible officers (head teachers, district education officials).

Data Entry and Storage: Extracted data was entered into the SPSS V26 database. Each entry was tagged by school, year, and data source for easy tracking and analysis.

Validity of Instruments.

Validity refers to the ability of the tool to accurately and correctly measure what it is supposed to measure. The researcher ensured that the research instruments accurately and consistently measured the intended variables.

Content validity was established through the expert judgment method, as recommended by Amin (2005). The initial versions of the research instruments (questionnaire, interview guide) were developed based on the study objectives, research questions, and a review of relevant literature.

A panel of at least 3 subject matter experts in the relevant fields was identified. These experts had extensive knowledge of both the subject matter and instrument design. The experts were requested to review each item in the instrument for relevance and clarity. Experts rated each item using a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Not Relevant, 2 = Somewhat Relevant, 3 = Quite Relevant, and 4 = Highly Relevant.

A minimum Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.70 was used as the threshold for retaining items, in line with Amin (2005). Items scoring below this threshold were revised for clarity or relevance, or removed if they did not significantly contribute to the construct being measured.

CVI = No. of items regarded relevant by judges (75)
Total No. of items (90)
CVI = (n/N) = (75/90)
Where:
CVI = Content validity of instruments
n = Number of items indicated relevant
N = Total number of items in the questionnaire

A Content Validity Index of 0.833 was obtained and compared with 0.7, as suggested by Amin (2009), as a good measure of validity.

Reliability of Instruments.

Reliability refers to the consistency of the data collected, and this was ensured through a baseline survey, pretesting of the tools, test, and post-test, hence coming up with the correct report. The pre-test was done at one of the secondary schools not selected for the study, and thereafter necessary corrections were made. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.7 was used to gauge whether the instruments were reliable or not. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86 was obtained upon entering the relative values of the answers into SPSS V26 after conducting the tests. Therefore, the instruments were consistent and reliable for data collection.

Data Analysis.

Descriptive statistics such as mean and frequency distribution were used to analyze the data. Inferential

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statistics were used in drawing conclusions. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using frequency distributions and percentages to determine the respondents' responses on demographic characteristics and study variables using SPSS V26. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to establish the strength and direction of the relationship between the study variables in line with the study objectives, and linear regression was used to establish the relationship between social factors and girls' completion of lower secondary education.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, where narratives that were repeated by respondents during interviews were critically examined.

Ethical Considerations.

The researcher acquired an introduction letter from the Director, School of Graduate Studies and Research of Team University Kampala, and sought permission from the District Authorities to collect data for the study.

The researcher self-introduced herself to get consent from the respondents before administering the questionnaires. The researcher kept time and confidentiality throughout the research work.

Informed Consent: Participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study. A written informed consent form was presented, which participants signed voluntarily before participating. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All personal information and responses were treated with strict confidentiality. Names and other identifying details were removed or coded to ensure anonymity. Data were stored securely and were only accessible to the research team.

Protection from Harm: The study was designed to ensure that participants were not exposed to any physical, emotional, or psychological harm. Sensitive topics were handled with care, and participants were allowed to skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. No participant was coerced, manipulated, or pressured into participating. Participants had the freedom to refuse to answer specific questions or to withdraw from the study at any point.

Ethical Approval: The research proposal was submitted to a recognized Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee for review and approval prior to data collection. The study only proceeded upon receiving formal ethical clearance.

Transparency and Honesty: The researcher-maintained honesty and integrity throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the real purpose of the study, and no deception was used.

Results.

Response Rate

The response rate is a critical indicator of the reliability and validity of research findings, particularly in studies involving human participants. Table 4.1 presents the response rate obtained from the targeted respondents during the field data collection phase of the study. To determine the response rate, the researcher used the formula;

$$\text{Response Rate (\%)} = \left(\frac{\text{Interviews Conducted and Questionnaires Collected}}{\text{Interviews Scheduled and Questionnaires Issued}}\right) \times 100$$

Table 2: Response Rate of the Study

Respondents	Interviews Scheduled and Questionnaires Issued	Interviews Conducted and Questionnaires Collected	Response Rate (%)
Female students	221	213	96.4%
Head teachers	05	05	100%
Total	226	218	96.4%

Source: Primary data (2025)

The response rate provides a measure of how many of the targeted respondents actually participated in the study. A high response rate is critical for ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings, as it minimizes the risk of non-response bias.

A total of 226 interviews and questionnaires were scheduled with two categories of respondents: female students and head teachers. Out of these, 218 were successfully completed and returned, yielding an overall response rate of 96.46%.

Specifically, of the 221 female students who were targeted, 213 responded, representing a response rate of 96.38%. All 5 head teachers who were selected for interviews

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participated, resulting in a 100% response rate for that category.

This high overall response rate demonstrates effective engagement and coordination with the selected schools and respondents. It also reflects the respondents' willingness to participate and share their experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility and generalizability of the study findings within Kayunga District.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 213)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age Group (years)	14–15	48	22.5%
	16–17	91	42.7%
	18–19	56	26.3%
	20 and above	18	8.5%
Type of School	Government	132	62.0%
	Private	81	38.0%
Family Structure	Both parents	105	49.3%
	Single mother	70	32.9%
	Single father	18	8.5%
	Guardian/Other	20	9.3%
Marital Status	Single	188	88.3%
	Married/In union	20	9.4%
	Divorced/Separated	5	2.3%
Years in Lower Secondary	6 year	24	11.3%
	5years	46	21.6%
	4 years	143	67.1%
Distance from School	Less than 2 km	45	21.1%
	2–5 km	98	46.0%
	More than 5 km	70	32.9%
Teenage Pregnancy	Yes	42	19.7%
	No	171	80.3%

Source: Primary data (2025)

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Age of Respondents: The age distribution of the respondents is presented in 3. The majority of students (42.7%) were aged between 16 and 17 years, followed by 26.3% who were aged 18 to 19 years. About 22.5% of the students were in the 14–15 age group, while a smaller proportion (8.5%) were 20 years and above. This distribution reflects a relatively typical age range for students in lower and upper secondary school levels, although the presence of students aged 20 and above may indicate grade repetition or delayed school entry, possibly linked to life events such as early pregnancy or socioeconomic constraints.

Type of School Attended: Out of the total respondents, a majority (62.0%) were enrolled in government schools, while 38.0% attended private schools. This indicates that most girls in the study area rely on government-funded education, which may have implications for access to reproductive health services, school support programs, and counseling often less available or differently structured in private institutions.

Family Structure: Nearly half of the respondents (49.3%) reported living with both parents, while 32.9% lived with single mothers. A smaller proportion lived with single fathers (8.5%), and 9.3% lived with guardians or other relatives. The relatively high number of students from single-parent or guardian-headed households could suggest reduced parental supervision and economic support, factors often associated with increased vulnerability to early pregnancy and school dropout among adolescent girls.

Marital Status: As expected in a school-going population, the vast majority of respondents (88.3%) identified as single. However, 9.4% reported being married or in a union, and 2.3% indicated being divorced or separated. The presence of married or formerly married students highlights the reality of early marriage within the district and suggests a need for inclusive educational policies that accommodate young mothers and married adolescents.

Years of Schooling at Lower Secondary Level: In terms of years spent in lower secondary education, 67.1% of the respondents had spent four years, which is the standard duration for completing the lower secondary cycle (Senior 1 to Senior 4). About 21.6% had been in lower secondary for

five years, and 11.3% for six years, implying grade repetition or disruptions in their schooling. These delays could be linked to factors such as absenteeism, illness, or pregnancy, which affect academic progression.

Distance from School: Regarding proximity to school, 46.0% of the students lived 2 to 5 kilometers from their schools, 32.9% lived more than 5 kilometers away, and only 21.1% lived within 2 kilometers. The data suggests that a significant number of girls travel long distances to access education, which may increase their risk of exposure to sexual exploitation, fatigue, or truancy, all of which can indirectly contribute to early pregnancy and school dropout.

Teenage Pregnancy: When asked about experiences with teenage pregnancy, 19.7% of respondents reported that they had ever been pregnant, while the remaining 80.3% had not experienced teenage pregnancy. This figure is significant, indicating that nearly one in five school-going girls had encountered early pregnancy an issue central to the objectives of this study. It highlights the urgent need for reproductive health education, support systems, and policy interventions within schools.

Table 4: Cultural Beliefs on Lower Secondary Education of Girls in Kayunga District (N = 213)

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std
Education is seen as more important for boys than for girls	88	72	23	20	10	3.89	1.07
Girls are often expected to marry and take on domestic roles	95	70	25	18	5	4.01	0.94
Cultural expectations encourage early marriage for girls	84	76	22	24	7	3.91	1.03
Families believe that educating a girl increases the risk of "disobedience"	76	65	30	30	12	3.70	1.14
Girls are often expected to do household chores	100	83	15	10	5	4.18	0.89
Culture prioritizes domestic skills over academics for girls	80	79	27	19	8	3.84	1.01
The community lacks female role models	68	72	31	29	13	3.63	1.12
Cultural practices interrupt school attendance for girls	91	73	20	22	7	3.98	0.99
Girl's education is not necessary because they get married soon after school	60	54	38	43	18	3.35	1.23
It is shameful for a girl to get pregnant while still in school	102	81	10	15	5	4.23	0.88

Source: Primary data (2025)

Cultural beliefs on Lower Secondary Education of Girls in Kayunga District

The findings show that a significant number of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that education is seen as more important for boys than for girls (SA = 88, A = 72), yielding a mean score of 3.89 and a standard deviation of 1.07. This suggests that many communities in Kayunga District still uphold traditional beliefs that prioritize male education, possibly contributing to disparities in school completion rates between boys and girls.

Cultural expectations regarding marriage and domestic responsibilities were also strongly reflected in the data. A combined 165 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that girls are often expected to marry and take on domestic roles, with a high mean score of 4.01 (SD = 0.94). Similarly, the belief that cultural expectations encourage early marriage for girls received widespread agreement (SA = 84, A = 76), resulting in a mean of 3.91. These findings illustrate that traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched and potentially interfere with girls' ability to complete their education.

Another notable finding is that 141 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that families believe educating a girl increases the risk of "disobedience", with a mean score of 3.70. This perception reflects a cultural fear that education may empower girls to challenge traditional authority or gender norms, thereby discouraging some families from supporting their daughters' education.

The data shows a strong belief that girls are still largely expected to engage in domestic work. The highest levels of agreement were observed for the statement girls are often expected to do household chores (SA = 100, A = 83), producing a mean score of 4.18. Similarly, the statement culture prioritizes domestic skills over academics for girls also had high agreement (mean = 3.84). These findings suggest that domestic expectations take precedence over academic development for many girls, which can limit study time, concentration, and school attendance.

A considerable number of respondents (SA = 68, A = 72) agreed that the community lacks female role models, which may reduce motivation and aspiration among school-going girls (mean = 3.63). In addition, many respondents affirmed that cultural practices interrupt school attendance for girls (mean = 3.98), supporting the idea that cultural events, obligations, or restrictions disproportionately affect girls' education.

Although a lower level of agreement was recorded, some respondents (SA = 60, A = 54) expressed the belief that girls' education is not necessary because they get married soon after school, giving a relatively moderate mean score of 3.35. This suggests that while such beliefs exist, they are not as widely held as others, indicating a shift in perception regarding the long-term value of girls' education in some communities.

The strongest agreement was observed for the statement it is shameful for a girl to get pregnant while still in school, with 183 respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing (mean = 4.23, SD = 0.88). This highlights the stigma attached to teenage pregnancy, which may result in school dropout, discrimination, or forced early marriage, further limiting educational attainment for affected girls.

Qualitative Findings on Cultural beliefs on Lower Secondary Education of Girls in Kayunga District.

During the Interview, one of the Head Teacher Response said *"In many of our communities, parents still believe that educating a boy is more valuable than educating a girl. They see boys as future breadwinners, while girls are expected to marry early and take care of the home. As a result, when school fees are limited, families tend to prioritize boys. This belief system affects our girls' morale and attendance, especially when they see their brothers getting support that they don't receive."*

Another Head Teacher said *"Most of our female students come to school already tired. They wake up early to fetch water, prepare meals, or take care of younger siblings before walking long distances to school. These household responsibilities are placed on them simply because they are girls. Boys rarely face the same demands. This imbalance contributes to absenteeism and poor academic performance among girls."*

Another Head Teacher added *"We've had cases where very promising girls have been withdrawn from school because their families arranged early marriages. The pressure often comes from cultural expectations or financial benefits like dowry. Even when we counsel the parents, they insist that marriage is a better option for the girl. They believe schooling might expose her to 'spoiled behavior' or make her rebellious."*

Another Head Teacher *"Teenage pregnancy remains a big challenge in our schools. When a girl gets pregnant, the stigma from fellow students, teachers, and even parents is very harsh. Some girls drop out on their own due to shame, while others are forced to leave. Yet the boy involved is rarely held accountable. The cultural judgment falls heavily on the girl, reinforcing the belief that once pregnant, she can no longer benefit from education."*

Table 5: Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Schools in Kayunga District.

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std
The percentage of girls who finish lower secondary education is higher than that of boys	10	15	25	90	73	2.00	1.18
A significant number of girls drop out before completing senior four	105	75	18	10	5	4.23	0.91
A small percentage of girls stay enrolled in school from S1 through to S4	98	72	20	15	8	4.10	1.00
A small proportion of girls pass the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE)	85	70	30	20	8	3.90	1.07
Few girls have goals to complete school	90	66	25	22	10	3.93	1.06
A big number of girls repeat class	75	80	28	20	10	3.87	1.02
Most girls complete lower secondary education above the appropriate age (17 years)	78	72	30	20	13	3.84	1.04

Source: *Primary Data (2025)*

Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Schools in Kayunga District.

Descriptive Findings of Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Schools in Kayunga District

A majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the percentage of girls who finish lower secondary education is higher than that of boys. The statement recorded a low mean score of 2.00 (SD = 1.18), indicating that girls are perceived to lag behind boys in completing the four-year lower secondary cycle. This aligns with broader national and regional data that highlight persistent gender disparities in education, particularly at the secondary level.

There is strong agreement among respondents that a significant number of girls drop out before completing Senior Four, with a mean score of 4.23 (SD = 0.91). This view is reinforced by the high agreement with the statement that a small percentage of girls stay enrolled from S1 through to S4 (Mean = 4.10; SD = 1.00). These findings suggest that many girls exit the education system

https://doi.org/10.51168/45em6v92
Original Article

prematurely due to factors such as early pregnancy, economic hardship, family responsibilities, or cultural expectations.

The statement that a small proportion of girls pass the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) also received a high level of agreement, with a mean of 3.90 (SD = 1.07). This may be linked to disrupted learning, poor school attendance, lack of support, or an unconducive learning environment. Poor performance at the UCE level further diminishes girls' chances of progressing to higher levels of education or accessing meaningful employment.

The finding that few girls have goals to complete school (Mean = 3.93; SD = 1.06) highlights a concerning gap in motivation and academic ambition among female students. This lack of goal orientation may stem from limited role models, low family support, or societal attitudes that discourage girls from pursuing long-term education.

Respondents generally agreed that a big number of girls repeat classes (Mean = 3.87; SD = 1.02), suggesting academic struggles or interrupted schooling. Additionally, many girls are reported to complete lower secondary education above the appropriate age of 17 years (Mean = 3.84; SD = 1.04). Delayed completion is often a result of late school entry, repetition, or temporary dropout due to domestic responsibilities or pregnancy.

Qualitative Findings on Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Schools in Kayunga District.

During the interview, a Head Teacher selected for the study said *"The number of girls who complete Senior Four is quite low compared to boys. Many of them drop out along the way, especially around Senior Two and Senior Three. The major reasons include teenage pregnancy, early marriages, and family responsibilities at home. Once a girl leaves school, it's rare that she comes back. Some parents don't see the need for girls to continue after they reach puberty."*

Another Head Teacher said *"Quite a number of girls are repeating classes due to poor performance. Many of them miss school frequently because they're helping at home or because their families can't meet school costs. When they fall behind, they're either forced to repeat or they give up entirely. Even those who sit for UCE often perform poorly because they haven't had a consistent learning experience."*

Another Head Teacher added *"Most girls who do complete Senior Four are older than 17 years. This is usually because they started school late or repeated multiple classes. You also find that some girls lack the motivation to complete school because they don't see the long-term value. There are very few role models in the community who've succeeded through education. Without encouragement from home or school, many girls just give up."*

Documentary Review Findings on Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Schools in Kayunga District

Documentary sources reviewed in this study included official records from the Kayunga District Education Department, selected secondary school enrolment registers, dropout reports, and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports working in the area of girls' education. The aim of the document review was to triangulate primary data from questionnaires and interviews with existing administrative data and reports.

According to the Kayunga District Education Annual Report (2024), enrolment of girls in lower secondary schools remains fairly stable at Senior One level but declines significantly by Senior Four. For example, data from five sampled schools indicated that while 750 girls enrolled in S1 in 2021, only 412 were still enrolled in S4 by 2024, representing a completion rate of 54.9%. By comparison, boys in the same cohort had a completion rate of 71.4%.

The 2023 UCE (Uganda Certificate of Education) examination report for Kayunga District also showed a gender disparity in performance and participation. Of the 1,020 candidates who sat for UCE in the district, only 380 were girls (37.2%), and just 145 girls (14.2% of total candidates) passed with Division 1 or 2 grades. This trend underscores the ongoing academic disadvantage facing female students at the end of the lower secondary cycle.

School dropout reports collected from six lower secondary schools revealed that between 2022 and 2024, approximately 31% of female students dropped out before completing S4. The most frequently cited reasons included: Teenage pregnancy (42% of female dropouts), Early marriages (23%), Inability to afford school fees (19%), Domestic responsibilities or parental neglect (12%) and Illness or disability (4%).

Additionally, class repetition records indicated that girls are more likely than boys to repeat at least one class during lower secondary school. In three of the schools sampled, one in every five girls (20%) had repeated a class mostly in S2 or S3 due to poor academic performance or prolonged absenteeism.

Documents from the District School Inspectorate Office showed that many girls complete S4 above the official age of 17 years, with the majority completing at ages 18 or 19. This over-age progression was attributed to late school entry, absenteeism due to household chores, class repetition, and temporary withdrawal from school (particularly after childbirth).

Despite Ministry of Education guidelines promoting re-entry of teenage mothers, only two schools in the district had documented cases of re-admitted girls between 2022 and 2024. Most schools lacked structured re-entry programs, and community stigma often discouraged girls from returning. A

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local NGO report (GirlRise Kayunga, 2023) noted that many teenage mothers expressed interest in resuming their education but lacked financial and psychosocial support to do so.

Furthermore, bursary and sponsorship data indicated that only 12% of girls in lower secondary schools benefited from financial assistance, often provided through NGOs or faith-based organizations. Most families remained solely responsible for school-related costs, which often exceeded their financial capacity.

Reports from district inspectors also revealed gaps in monitoring and enforcement of policies aimed at keeping girls in school. For example, some schools had no records of reporting early pregnancies or dropouts to the district office, despite being required to do so. Additionally, the implementation of the Gender in Education Policy (2019) remained inconsistent, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools.

Table 6: Correlation between Cultural Beliefs and Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Education in Kayunga District.

	Cultural beliefs
Girls' completion of lower secondary education	Pearson Correlation = 0.731*
	Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.001
N	218

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Primary Data (2025)

Correlation Findings of the Study.

The findings indicate a strong positive correlation between cultural beliefs and girls' completion of lower secondary education, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of r = 0.731 and a significance level of p = 0.001. This correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), suggesting that changes in cultural attitudes are strongly associated with changes in the likelihood of girls completing their lower secondary education.

Table 7: Regression Coefficients of Cultural Beliefs and Family Education on Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Education (N = 218)

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.781	0.184	–	4.244	0.000
Cultural Beliefs	0.289	0.066	0.312	4.379	0.000

Model Summary.

R	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**Std. Error of Estimate**
0.871	**0.759**	**0.755**	**0.412**

Source: Primary Data (2025).

Regression Analysis

The regression model yielded a multiple correlation coefficient (R) of 0.871, indicating a very strong relationship between the set of independent variables and girls' completion of lower secondary education. The coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.759, suggesting that approximately 75.9% of the variance in girls' completion can be explained by the combined effect of cultural beliefs and the Family Education. The adjusted R^2 value of 0.755 further confirms the reliability of the model when generalized to the larger population.

Regression Coefficients and Significance Levels.

Cultural Beliefs had a moderate but statistically significant influence, with a beta coefficient (β) of 0.312 and a p-value of 0.000. This implies that entrenched traditional beliefs—such as favoring boys' education, encouraging early marriage, or viewing girls primarily as domestic caregivers—have a negative effect on girls' school completion. Reducing such cultural barriers can therefore lead to improved educational outcomes.

The regression constant (B = 0.781) implies that even in the absence of the three predictors, there is a minimal baseline

level of completion, though significantly lower than when the predictors are considered.

Discussions.

Cultural Beliefs and Girls' Completion of Lower Secondary Education in Kayunga District.

The findings from the current study reveal a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between cultural beliefs and girls' completion of lower secondary education in Kayunga District ($r = 0.731$, $p = 0.001$). This indicates that cultural attitudes and norms have a profound influence on whether girls continue and complete their education at this critical stage. These findings are consistent with existing literature that highlights how entrenched cultural practices and gender norms act as substantial barriers to girls' educational attainment in Uganda and similar contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the major cultural factors identified is the social acceptability and prevalence of early marriage, a practice deeply embedded in many Ugandan communities. As Kyomuhendo (2023) explains, early marriage is often economically motivated or culturally encouraged, with dowry systems incentivizing parents to marry off their daughters at a young age. This cultural norm aligns with the study's finding that girls are frequently withdrawn from school prematurely, often before completing lower secondary education. Once married, societal expectations shift dramatically, relegating girls to domestic roles that leave little opportunity for continuing formal education, reinforcing Bradley et al.'s (2022) observations about the prioritization of marriage and household responsibilities over schooling for girls.

Moreover, the study's results echo Efuetngwa (2021) in highlighting the gendered division of labor, where girls are expected to shoulder domestic chores such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning. These responsibilities consume time and energy that could otherwise be invested in schooling, thereby adversely affecting girls' academic engagement and completion rates. This also ties in with findings from the International Center for Research on Women (2023), which noted that household chores were a significant factor contributing to dropout rates among girls in rural Ugandan districts.

The research also supports the idea, advanced by Namono and Nyeko (2021), that some cultural and religious beliefs discourage girls' education by associating it with moral risks or disobedience. This cultural stigma contributes to societal resistance against girls' continued schooling, especially beyond the primary level, thereby curtailing their educational progress. The lack of female role models within communities, as highlighted by Habaasa et al. (2024), further exacerbates this issue by limiting girls' aspirations and the perceived value of education.

Regional examples provide additional context: the high dropout rates linked to early marriage in Ntoroko and Karamoja (International Center for Research on Women, 2023; Uganda Radio Network, 2023) exemplify how cultural practices directly undermine girls' schooling. The prioritization of bride price over educational attainment in these areas illustrates a tangible economic-cultural mechanism through which education is devalued.

The study's findings on cultural stigma related to adolescent pregnancy further reinforce barriers to educational continuation. Despite legal protections, societal attitudes and poor enforcement lead to punitive measures such as expulsions, which derail girls' educational trajectories (Msanzi, 2023). Such cultural stigma directly affects girls' self-esteem and societal status, contributing to dropout.

In sum, the study corroborates the literature in demonstrating that cultural beliefs exert a powerful influence on girls' lower secondary education completion rates. The statistically significant correlation suggests that interventions aiming to increase girls' educational attainment must address these deeply rooted cultural barriers. Promoting community-level awareness, challenging traditional gender roles, and supporting positive cultural shifts towards gender equality are crucial for enhancing girls' school retention.

By fostering an environment where families and communities value girls' education on par with boys', and by mitigating cultural practices such as early marriage and gendered domestic responsibilities, the likelihood of girls completing their lower secondary education improves substantially. This aligns with broader development goals emphasizing gender equality and the empowerment of girls through

Conclusion

The study concludes that cultural beliefs have a significant and strong positive correlation with girls' completion of lower secondary education. Cultural norms such as early marriage, domestic role expectations, and negative perceptions of girls' education continue to impede educational attainment. Addressing these cultural barriers is essential to improve girls' retention and completion rates.

Limitations to the Study

Incomplete Records: Some schools had poor record-keeping practices, leading to data gaps.

Data Inconsistency: Variations in how different schools document information could affect comparability.

Access Constraints: Some NGOs and institutions may restrict access to internal evaluation reports or unpublished data.

Recommendation.

Community sensitization programs should be intensified to challenge harmful cultural norms that prioritize early marriage and domestic roles for girls over education. These campaigns should involve local leaders, parents, religious institutions, and cultural gatekeepers.

School-community partnerships should be developed to promote positive attitudes toward girls' education through mentorship programs, community dialogues, and showcasing successful female role models.

The Ministry of Education and Gender Affairs should work with NGOs to integrate gender and cultural education into the curriculum to reshape perceptions among youth from an early age.

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List of Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CVI	Cultural Values Index
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UCE	Uganda Certificate of Education
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USE	Universal Secondary Education
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

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Conflict of interest.

There is no conflict of interest.

Availability of data.

Data used in this study is available upon request from the corresponding author

Authors contribution.

DN designed the study, conducted data collection, cleaned and analyzed data and draft the manuscript and VK supervised all stages of the study from conceptualization of the topic to manuscript writing and submission.

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