



# The Role of Social Workers in Advancing Girls' Education and Empowerment in African Countries: A Desktop-Based Thematic Review

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**Abstract:** This study examines the role of social workers in promoting girls' education and empowerment across African regions, where cultural, economic, and political barriers continue to restrict educational access and gender equality. Using a desktop-based research methodology, the study analyses secondary data from scholarly literature, government reports, NGO documents, and international organisation publications. Additionally, a PRISMA-based flow diagram was used to illustrate the screening and selection process, while thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns in social work practice related to educational development and empowerment. The final review included 49 sources selected through PRISMA-guided screening. The findings show that social workers contribute to gender-responsive policy development, provide essential support services for vulnerable girls, and challenge cultural norms that limit girls' educational opportunities. Moreover, social workers support girls through psychosocial assistance, mentorship, self-esteem development, and resilience-building interventions, which help them respond to systemic barriers affecting their educational participation. However, persistent challenges remain, including limited resources, inadequate educational infrastructure, weak institutional support, and cultural resistance to girls' education. Therefore, the study recommends expanding professional training programmes on gender equality and education, strengthening school-based social work support, and establishing collaborative networks among social workers, educational institutions, families, communities, and policymakers. These measures are essential for safeguarding girls' educational rights and advancing gender-responsive educational development across African contexts.

**Keywords:** Social Work, Girls' Education, Empowerment, Gender Equality, African Countries, Thematic Analysis

## 1. Introduction

The advancement of girls' education across African regions represents a critical nexus of social development, gender equality, and sustainable progress. International commitments to sustainable development and social justice underscore the importance of female empowerment through education (Ayenagbo, 2022). However, many African countries continue to face persistent obstacles in providing quality education for girls, as educational access is constrained by intersecting challenges such as gender discrimination, early marriage, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, school safety concerns, and limited institutional support (Ojong, 2025; Plessis, 2025). Within this context, social workers occupy an important position in addressing these barriers by promoting social justice, supporting vulnerable girls, strengthening family and community engagement, and contributing to broader development goals (Lombard, 2015).

Historical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors collectively create significant educational obstacles for African girls (Ojong, 2025). In many regions, girls' education receives limited societal recognition, while gender inequalities continue to shape family decisions and community expectations. Rural traditions may prioritise boys' education, thereby assigning girls to domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and caregiving roles. Similarly, economic hardship often leads families to invest in boys' schooling because males are perceived as future primary breadwinners (Munzhelele & Budeli, 2025). Furthermore, concerns related to early pregnancy, gender-based violence, unsafe school environments, and inadequate sanitary facilities continue to affect girls' school attendance and retention (Randima, 2025). These barriers are not isolated; rather, they operate together and reinforce wider patterns of educational exclusion and gender inequality.

The consequences of gender-based educational inequality are profound and long-lasting. Girls who are denied access to education often experience restricted occupational opportunities, reduced economic independence, and limited personal autonomy (Ayenagbo, 2022). Consequently, communities and national economies are also affected when women are unable to participate fully in economic, political, and social life. The underutilisation of female human capital, therefore, obstructs both community development and national progress while perpetuating existing inequalities (Noori, 2023). In this regard, girls' education should not be viewed solely as an educational concern; rather, it should be understood as a priority for social justice, human rights, and sustainable development (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2026).

Social workers contribute to girls' education through multiple and interconnected roles. At the policy level, they advocate for gender-responsive educational reforms, financial assistance, scholarship levels, safeguarding measures, and institutional support mechanisms that help girls

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remain in school (Gilboa & Weiss-Gal, 2022). At the community level, they work with families, local leaders, schools, and community organisations to challenge restrictive gender norms and increase awareness of the value of girls' education (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2023). Additionally, social workers provide psychosocial support, counselling, mentorship, confidence-building, and resilience-oriented interventions that help girls respond to personal, social, and educational challenges (Adams, 2017; Hoefer, 2019). Thus, their role extends beyond individual assistance and includes structural advocacy, institutional coordination, family engagement, and community transformation.

Despite these contributions, systemic obstacles continue to limit girls' educational access and empowerment across many African contexts. In particular, socio-cultural traditions that privilege boys' education, economic constraints that restrict girls' schooling, and insufficient support structures for girls facing domestic violence, early pregnancy, and inadequate social services remain persistent challenges. Although existing studies have examined gender inequality and girls' education from educational, sociological, and development perspectives, the distinctive contribution of social work practice has not been sufficiently synthesised. More specifically, limited attention has been paid to how social workers simultaneously address structural, cultural, economic, institutional, and psychosocial barriers (Noori, 2023; Sekgobela, 2026).

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the role of social workers in advancing girls' education and empowerment in African countries through a desktop-based thematic review of existing scholarly and institutional literature. The study aims to identify the major barriers affecting girls' educational participation, examine the key social work interventions used to address these barriers, and analyse how social workers contribute to empowerment, psychosocial support, school retention, family engagement, community mobilisation, and policy advocacy. Additionally, the study interprets these roles through feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective. The study is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the major sociocultural, economic, institutional, and psychosocial barriers affecting girls' education and empowerment in African countries?

**RQ2:** What social work interventions are used to support girls' educational access, retention, and empowerment?

**RQ3:** How do social workers collaborate with families, communities, schools, and policymakers to promote girls' education?

**RQ4:** How can feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective explain the role of social workers in advancing girls' education and empowerment across African contexts?

This study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it provides a focused thematic synthesis of social workers' roles in advancing girls' education and empowerment, thereby addressing a gap in the literature that often treats social work as a secondary component of educational development. Second, it integrates feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective to explain how social workers address both structural inequalities and individual capacities. Third, it highlights the multidimensional nature of social work practice by linking policy advocacy, psychosocial support, family engagement, school collaboration, and community mobilisation within a single analytical framework. Therefore, the study offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, social work practitioners, and community stakeholders seeking to strengthen gender-responsive educational interventions in African contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Research examining the role of social work in girls' education and empowerment within African countries addresses critical social and educational inequalities. Across many African societies, cultural, socioeconomic, and political structures continue to reproduce gender-based disadvantage, thereby contributing to the widespread marginalisation of girls and women. Education is widely recognised as a fundamental mechanism for advancing gender equality, and social workers play an important role in expanding girls' access to education, strengthening empowerment processes, and supporting vulnerable groups across diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, this literature review examines how social workers contribute to girls' education and empowerment in African countries, identifies the major barriers that limit their work, outlines relevant intervention approaches, and highlights how social work practice contributes to reducing gender inequality.

### 2.1. Barriers to Girls' Education in African Countries

Gender-based discrimination remains one of the primary barriers preventing African girls from accessing and completing education. Many African societies maintain cultural practices that privilege male education over female education (Moshi, 2017). In several contexts, prescribed gender roles continue to position girls primarily within domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and childrearing, thereby reducing the perceived value of formal education for girls. Additionally, girls in rural areas face additional obstacles due to insufficient educational infrastructure, including limited school availability, inadequate transportation, and deficiencies in basic services (Hingston & Asuelime, 2019). Resource-constrained households also frequently prioritise boys' education, particularly because families must manage financial burdens such as school fees, uniforms, books, and other educational materials (Oloruntoba & Akinlade, 2022; Diop & Gueye, 2020).

Early marriage further threatens educational opportunities for girls in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, and other African contexts. In many cases, early marriage forces girls to discontinue schooling and relocate from educational environments into household and marital responsibilities (Munzhelele, Baloyi, & Sikhitha, 2025). Consequently, these practices restrict girls' personal development while simultaneously increasing poverty, illiteracy, dependency, and future vulnerability. Social workers address this challenge by delivering family counselling services, advocating for policy reforms, raising community awareness, and supporting girls through multiple intervention programmes. However, stronger empirical evidence is still needed to explain how these interventions differ across rural, urban, national, and regional contexts (Undurruga & Pokorny, 2024).

### 2.2. Empowerment Through Education: Building Girls' Confidence and Skills

Education-based empowerment represents a fundamental objective of social work practice within African contexts. Educational initiatives, when combined with social work interventions, can produce transformative outcomes for girls by strengthening confidence, self-esteem, leadership capabilities, and personal agency. The empowerment process extends beyond traditional classroom learning by enabling girls to develop personal growth, critical thinking, decision-making skills, and future-oriented aspirations that are essential for personal and professional advancement (Adeoye, Prastikawati, & Abimbowo, 2024).

Social workers employ strengths-based approaches to empower girls by recognising their capabilities, resilience, and potential. Through mentoring programmes, life skills training, leadership development, and psychosocial support, girls are encouraged to develop self-confidence and a stronger sense of personal worth. Moreover, social workers assist girls in addressing the psychological consequences of gender-based abuse, trauma, discrimination, and educational exclusion, thereby facilitating academic progress and emotional well-being (Jain & Singh, 2017). This work helps young women understand their inherent value and potential, enabling them to determine their own life trajectories, pursue scholarships, and aspire toward professional goals. Additionally, empowerment-oriented social work practice is particularly important because it links individual confidence-building with broader efforts to challenge structural gender inequalities (Harehdasht & Saki, 2025).

### 2.3. Social Work Interventions Addressing Educational Barriers

Social work interventions designed to address educational barriers operate across multiple levels, including direct support for girls, family engagement, school-based support, community mobilisation, and policy advocacy. Social workers identify and respond to factors limiting girls' education, including poverty, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, unsafe school environments, inadequate infrastructure, and limited psychosocial support. In Uganda and Zambia, for example, social workers have implemented programmes that support girls' continued school attendance despite significant socioeconomic risks (Mafeje & Okome, 2021). These interventions include providing school materials, delivering tutoring and mentoring programmes, and collaborating with health and education sectors to support girls' physical, emotional, and academic well-being (Jain & Singh, 2017).

Social workers also support female survivors of abuse, sexual exploitation, and domestic violence through counselling, referral services, and protective spaces, all of which can promote sustained school attendance. In addition, health professionals and social workers jointly address teenage pregnancy while also responding to the educational obstacles associated with stigma, school dropout, and limited family support. Through the provision of essential services, social workers empower girls to make informed decisions about their futures while maintaining school enrolment and strengthening their capacity for long-term educational success (Fofana & Diallo, 2021; Mafeje & Okome, 2021). However, further evidence is required to assess the effectiveness, sustainability, and scalability of these interventions across different African educational systems (Herlitz, MacIntyre, Osborn & Bonell, 2020).

### 2.4. Theoretical Framework

Social workers employ theoretical perspectives to guide professional interventions, particularly when addressing complex social issues such as girls' education, gender inequality, and empowerment in African contexts. In this study, feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective provide complementary analytical frameworks for understanding how social workers respond to both structural barriers and individual/community capacities. Feminist theory is useful for examining patriarchal norms, gender-based discrimination, and institutional inequalities that restrict girls' educational opportunities. Conversely, the strengths-based perspective highlights resilience, agency, local resources, and community capabilities that can be mobilised to support girls' educational participation and empowerment. Therefore, the combined use of these two perspectives provides a broader understanding of social work practice as both a structural and empowerment-oriented intervention.

#### 2.4.1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory emphasises gender equality and social justice, with particular attention to dismantling patriarchal structures that sustain discriminatory systems against women and girls (Tong, 2019). This theoretical framework deliberately examines women's and girls' lived experiences by investigating the structural obstacles that restrict their educational, economic, and social access. In relation to girls' education in African countries, feminist theory enables researchers to analyse how institutional practices, sociocultural expectations, and gendered power relations prevent girls from accessing, remaining in, and benefiting fully from education.

Challenges to educational access for African girls often persist due to social customs that favour male education, early marriage practices, gender-based violence, and financial limitations rooted in poverty. These barriers do not emerge merely from individual household decisions; rather, they are connected to broader societal structures that reproduce patriarchal values and gender-biased expectations. Accordingly, feminist theory provides an important analytical framework for advocating structural reforms that protect girls from gender-based discrimination and promote equal educational rights (Bhandari, 2023). Feminist theoretical perspectives strongly support research examining the role of social workers in educating and empowering African girls. This theory offers fundamental insights into the gendered barriers that block girls' educational access and restrict their agency. Through feminist-informed practice, social workers challenge patriarchal traditions, address violence against women and girls, and promote policy transformations that enable girls to claim agency in their educational journeys. Moreover, feminist theory helps social workers understand girls' educational exclusion as a matter of social justice rather than merely a problem of individual disadvantage.

The feminist framework also enables social workers to implement practice-based changes that enhance gender equality in educational settings and promote female empowerment across African nations. Social workers employing feminist interventions do not only respond to immediate educational barriers; they also challenge the wider social systems that normalise girls' marginalisation. Therefore, feminist social work practice can contribute to both individual empowerment and collective transformation by promoting girls' rights, strengthening their voice, and supporting long-term social and economic change (Hooks, 2000). However, further contextual application is needed to explain how feminist social work interventions operate differently across diverse African cultural and institutional settings (Cocker & Hafford-Letchfield, 2022).

#### 2.4.2. Strengths-Based Perspective

The strengths-based perspective, articulated by Saleebey (2012), focuses on the resources, resilience, capabilities, and potential that exist within individuals, families, and communities. Rather than concentrating primarily on deficits, this approach maintains motivation by recognising existing strengths, previous achievements, coping strategies, and community-based resources. In the context of African girls' education, the strengths-based perspective is particularly relevant because it supports empowerment, self-worth, and resilience among marginalised populations. Social workers use this perspective to identify the

existing capacities of girls, families, schools, and communities as critical foundations for achieving educational progress despite persistent barriers.

Social workers employing strengths-based approaches focus on how girls and families demonstrate resilience despite substantial social, economic, and cultural obstacles. Additionally, social workers collaborate with communities to identify local support systems for girls' education, including community volunteers, local leaders, religious organisations, women's groups, teachers, and traditional knowledge systems. These resources can then be integrated into educational support strategies in ways that are culturally relevant and community-centred (Assefa, 2022). In this respect, the strengths-based perspective acknowledges that girls and families are not passive recipients of assistance; rather, they possess capabilities that can be activated through participatory problem-solving and supportive intervention.

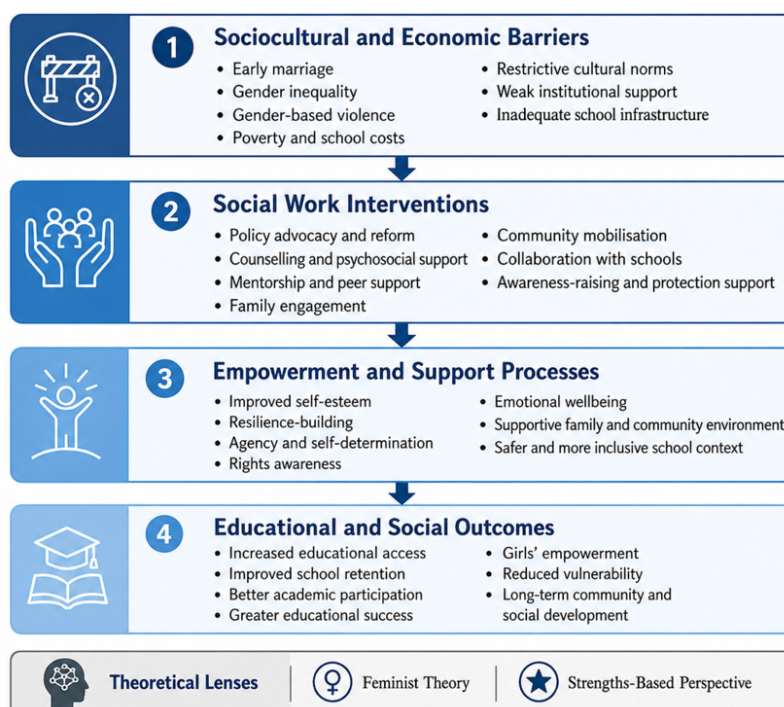
In practice, social workers assist families by developing strategies that balance educational investment with household budget constraints while also enabling girls to understand and protect their educational rights. Furthermore, strengths-based practice supports girls in developing confidence, leadership skills, emotional resilience, and future aspirations. These elements are central to empowerment because they encourage girls to recognise their abilities and pursue education despite social and economic challenges. Therefore, the strengths-based perspective complements feminist theory by linking structural awareness with individual and community capacity-building.

Despite its usefulness in facilitating resilience and empowerment, the implementation of the strengths-based perspective in cross-cultural African contexts requires critical consideration. Since the framework was largely developed within Western academic and professional traditions, it may not fully capture culturally specific meanings of agency, community responsibility, collective identity, and social support (Healy & Thomas, 2020). Additionally, there is a risk that an exclusive emphasis on individual or community strengths may unintentionally minimise the role of structural inequalities, including poverty, patriarchy, weak state support, unsafe school environments, and limited social protection systems. Therefore, while the strengths-based perspective is valuable for identifying resilience and local resources, it should be applied alongside feminist theory to ensure that empowerment is not separated from broader structural analysis.

Taken together, feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective provide a coherent theoretical foundation for this study. Feminist theory explains how gendered power relations, patriarchal norms, and institutional inequalities restrict girls' educational opportunities, while the strengths-based perspective explains how social workers mobilise girls' capacities, family resources, and community support to promote educational participation and empowerment. Accordingly, these frameworks guide the thematic analysis by supporting an examination of both barriers and interventions, including policy advocacy, psychosocial support, family engagement, school collaboration, community mobilisation, and resilience-building.

### 2.4.3. Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature and the theoretical grounding of feminist theory and the strengths-based perspective, this study proposes a conceptual framework illustrating how social workers contribute to girls' education and empowerment in African countries. The framework shows that girls' education is constrained by sociocultural and economic barriers, including early marriage, poverty, gender inequality, gender-based violence, and weak institutional support. In response, social workers implement a range of interventions, such as policy advocacy, counselling, mentorship, family engagement, community mobilisation, and collaboration with schools. These interventions promote empowerment and support processes, including self-esteem, resilience, agency, rights awareness, emotional well-being, and supportive family and school environments. As a result, such processes contribute to improved educational access, school retention, academic participation, and broader empowerment outcomes for girls. Therefore, the framework positions social work practice as a critical bridge between structural barriers and positive educational and social outcomes.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework of Social Workers' Role in Advancing Girls' Education and Empowerment in African Countries. Source: By the author

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a desktop-based thematic review methodology to examine the role of social workers in advancing girls' education and empowerment across African countries. Desktop research, as a form of secondary research, involves the systematic collection, review, and analysis of existing sources rather than the generation of primary data through surveys, interviews, or field observations (Taherdoost, 2021). This approach was appropriate because the topic has been widely addressed in academic literature, policy documents, government reports, NGO publications, and international organisational reports. Therefore, the method enabled the study to identify recurring patterns, document barriers, theoretical perspectives, and social work interventions related to girls' educational empowerment.

#### 3.1. Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria

Relevant sources were identified through structured searches in Google Scholar and Scopus. In addition, grey literature was considered where it was published by credible government agencies, NGOs, or international organisations and directly addressed girls' education, gender equality, empowerment, or social work interventions in African contexts. The search used combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, including: "social workers" AND "girls' education" AND "Africa"; "social work interventions" AND "girls' empowerment" AND "African countries"; "gender equality" AND "girls' education" AND "social work"; "early marriage" AND "school retention" AND "Africa"; "psychosocial support" AND "girls' education"; "community mobilisation" AND "girls' education" AND "Africa"; and "social work advocacy" AND "gender-responsive education." These combinations were adjusted according to the search functions of each database.

The search was limited mainly to sources published between 2015 and 2026 to capture recent debates, policy developments, and empirical evidence. However, seminal theoretical works published before 2015 were retained where they were directly relevant to feminist theory, the strengths-based perspective, or foundational social work practice. Only English-language sources were included to ensure consistent interpretation and thematic analysis. The Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria have been mentioned in Table 1:

**Table 1:** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Academic and empirical studies focusing on the role, functions, or interventions of social workers in supporting girls' education and empowerment.	Studies that did not focus on girls' education, empowerment, or social work practice within African contexts.
Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference papers, respected organisational reports, government publications, and NGO reports.	Opinion articles, blogs, non-academic commentaries, and sources lacking methodological transparency.
Studies published in English.	Studies published in languages other than English.
Studies published between 2015 and 2026, except seminal theoretical works.	Studies published before 2015, unless they represented foundational theoretical contributions.
Sources directly related to gender inequality, educational access, empowerment, social work advocacy, psychosocial support, or community mobilisation.	Redundant publications, unrelated studies, and sources without empirical, theoretical, or policy relevance.

Source: by the author

#### 3.2. PRISMA Screening and Selection Process

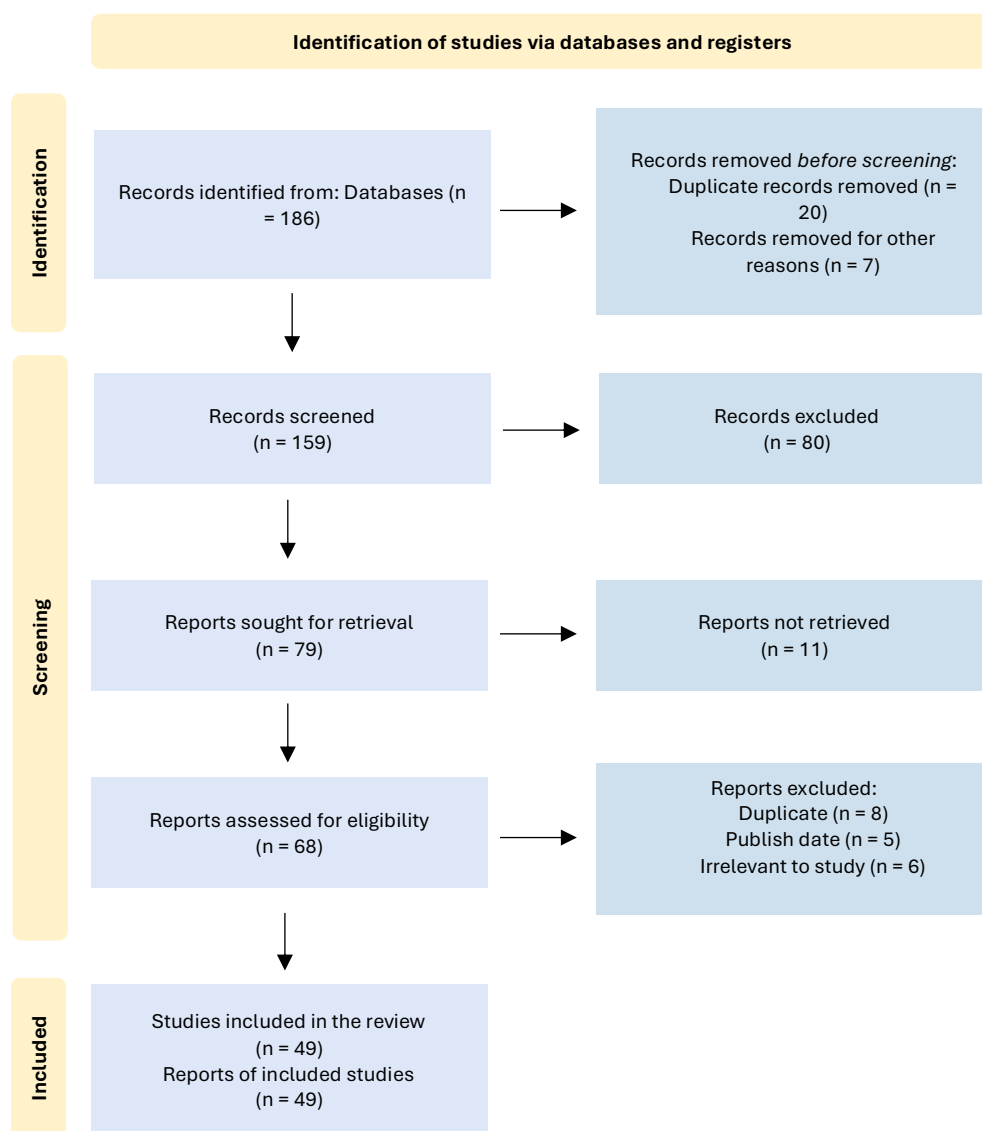
The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to improve transparency in identifying, screening, and selecting relevant sources (Perums, 2021). Initially, 186 records were identified through database searching. Before screening, 20 duplicate records and 7 irrelevant or incomplete records were removed, leaving 159 records for title and abstract screening. During title and abstract screening, 80 records were excluded because they did not directly address girls' education, empowerment, social work interventions, gender equality, or African educational contexts. Consequently, 79 reports were sought for full-text retrieval. Of these, 11 reports could not be retrieved due to restricted access, unavailable full texts, or inaccessible documents. Therefore, 68 full-text reports were assessed for eligibility. At the eligibility stage, 19 reports were excluded: 8 were overlapping or duplicate publications, 5 were outside the selected publication period, and 6 were not sufficiently relevant after full-text review. Following this process, 49 studies and reports met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final thematic analysis.

#### 3.3. Data Extraction, Quality Appraisal, and Thematic Analysis

A standardised extraction matrix was used to record key information from each included source, including author details, year of publication, geographical context, study focus, methodological design, main findings, and relevance to social work interventions. The quality of the included sources was assessed by considering methodological clarity, credibility of publication outlet, relevance to the research questions, and contribution to the study's thematic focus (Shaheen, Shaheen, Ramadan, Hefnawy, Ramadan, Ibrahim & Flouty, 2023). The selected sources were analysed using thematic analysis. First, all included sources were read carefully to identify recurring ideas related to girls' education, empowerment, social work practice, and gender inequality. Initial codes were then generated around key issues such as early marriage, poverty, gender-based violence, discriminatory cultural norms, counselling, mentorship, peer support, resilience-building, policy reform, and school-community collaboration.

The coding process combined deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, the analysis was guided by the study objectives, research questions, feminist theory, and the strengths-based perspective. Inductively, additional codes were developed from repeated patterns found across the selected sources. Related codes were then grouped into broader themes, which resulted in eight major themes: social workers' roles in policy reform; empowerment strategies; sociocultural and economic barriers; family and community support; collaboration with schools and educational institutions; counselling, mentorship, and peer support; the impact of social work interventions on educational success; and perceptions of social workers' roles. To enhance trustworthiness, the themes were checked against the research questions and reviewed sources to ensure consistency, relevance, and adequate evidence. However, because the study relied exclusively on secondary data, the

findings reflect patterns in the available literature rather than direct empirical accounts from girls, families, teachers, or social workers.



**Figure 2:** PRISMA Flow Chart

#### 4. Findings

The findings of this study are structured around eight interrelated themes derived from the systematic review and analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports. These themes reflect dominant patterns, debates, and evidence within the scholarship on social work and girls' education, rather than primary participant narratives. Collectively, they illuminate the documented roles of social workers in policy reform, empowerment and resilience-building, and the provision of psychosocial support. At the same time, they highlight widely reported sociocultural and economic barriers that continue to restrict girls' educational access and participation across African contexts.

Additionally, the findings emphasise the significance of family and community support, intersectoral collaboration with schools, and the reported contribution of social work interventions to educational outcomes. They also draw attention to prevailing perceptions of social workers' roles within communities, particularly in contexts where social workers are viewed either as advocates for change or as external actors challenging established cultural practices. Therefore, the themes provide a coherent analytical framework for understanding how social work interventions are positioned to support girls' educational success, empowerment, and retention within diverse African settings.

##### 4.1. Theme 1: Social Workers' Roles in Policy Reform

The reviewed literature identifies policy advocacy as a central role through which social workers contribute to improving girls' educational opportunities and empowerment in African countries. Existing policy frameworks often remain insufficiently responsive to the needs of girls, particularly in relation to early marriage, gender-based violence, poverty, and limited educational access. Because social workers engage directly with girls, families, schools, and communities, they are well-positioned to identify policy gaps and translate community-level experiences into advocacy priorities (Yu, 2018). Moreover, their understanding of social systems enables them to develop policy recommendations that reflect girls' lived realities and address barriers beyond the individual level (Krumer-Nevo & Komem, 2015).

A recurring pattern in the literature is that social workers support evidence-informed policy reform through data collection, community engagement, and institutional collaboration. By gathering information on educational exclusion, financial hardship, gender-based violence, and school-related barriers, social workers can advocate for policies that are more closely aligned with the needs of girls (Nnama-Okechukwu, Nna-udosen, Kalu, Ugwu, Eneh, & Uzuegbu, 2025). Such advocacy may include support for legislation against forced marriage, gender-based violence, and educational exclusion, as well as policies promoting scholarships, financial assistance, and equal access to schooling (Chapin & Lewis, 2023).

Collaboration with NGOs, advocacy groups, international organisations, schools, and government institutions further strengthens social workers' policy role. These partnerships enable coordinated advocacy, resource sharing, and more comprehensive responses to girls' educational marginalisation (Bedu-Addo, Amisi, Goldman, David-Gnahoui, & Pabari, 2020). However, the effectiveness of policy advocacy depends on whether social workers are recognised as legitimate contributors to educational and gender policy processes (Chapin & Lewis, 2023). From a strengths-based perspective, this role is not limited to identifying barriers; it also involves mobilising community resources, local leadership, and protective support systems to strengthen gender-responsive educational reform (Dale, Maki & Nitia, 2021).

#### **4.2. Theme 2: Empowerment Strategies: Building Self-Esteem and Resilience**

The second theme highlights empowerment as a central outcome of social work involvement in girls' education. The reviewed literature shows that empowerment strategies focus on strengthening girls' confidence, self-worth, decision-making capacity, resilience, and awareness of their rights. These strategies are important because girls' educational participation is often restricted not only by external barriers but also by the psychological effects of marginalisation, discrimination, early marriage, poverty, and limited social support. Social workers contribute to empowerment by helping girls recognise their value, develop confidence, and build the skills needed to navigate educational and social challenges. Such strategies may include leadership development, self-advocacy, life skills training, confidence-building, and rights awareness. These forms of support enable girls to exercise greater control over their educational pathways and future aspirations (Unroe, Barnett, & Payne-Purvis, 2016). As girls develop self-worth and decision-making skills, they become better positioned to confront social and educational challenges (Lo-oh & Atemnkeng, 2019).

Resilience-building also emerges as a key dimension of empowerment. Girls facing economic hardship, gender discrimination, family pressure, and limited institutional support require coping strategies that help them remain engaged in education. Social workers support this process through goal setting, emotional regulation, problem-solving, peer learning, and future planning (Msimango, 2020). Additionally, mentorship and peer support strengthen girls' motivation by connecting them with role models and supportive networks that reduce isolation and encourage educational persistence (Kinati, Baker, Temple, Najjar, & Mulema, 2022; Lo-oh & Atemnkeng, 2019). Therefore, empowerment-oriented social work practice should be understood as both personal and social. It strengthens girls' self-esteem and resilience while also helping them recognise that many of the barriers they face are linked to wider gendered and structural inequalities. This makes empowerment not only a matter of individual confidence but also a pathway toward educational participation, agency, and long-term social change.

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Barriers to Girls' Education: Sociocultural and Economic Factors**

The reviewed literature consistently identifies sociocultural and economic barriers as mutually reinforcing factors that restrict girls' education across African contexts. Sociocultural barriers include early marriage, gender-based violence, traditional gender stereotyping, and expectations that girls should prioritise domestic responsibilities over schooling. In many communities, these norms limit girls' educational participation and reduce their long-term opportunities for empowerment (Munzhelele et al., 2025). Therefore, educational exclusion cannot be understood only as a matter of school availability; rather, it is shaped by wider social norms, family expectations, and gendered assumptions about girls' roles.

Economic hardship further intensifies these barriers. School fees, uniforms, transportation, books, and other educational costs often prevent girls from accessing or remaining in school. In resource-constrained households, families may prioritise boys' education because boys are perceived as more likely to provide future economic returns (Walker, Pearce, Boe, & Lawson, 2019). Consequently, girls' education becomes vulnerable to poverty, unequal household resource allocation, and gendered economic expectations. Social workers address these barriers through awareness-raising, family engagement, advocacy to reduce school costs, and support mechanisms that promote girls' continued education.

#### **4.4. Theme 4: Families' and Communities' Roles in Supporting Girls' Education**

Family and community support emerged as a central condition for improving girls' enrolment, retention, and educational success. In many African contexts, girls' schooling is shaped not only by individual aspiration but also by family decisions, community norms, cultural expectations, and available local support systems. Communities may view girls' education as a collective responsibility that contributes to broader social development (Mathebula, 2023). Social workers engage families directly to increase understanding of the value of girls' education and to encourage practical support for daughters' academic development (Chavkin, 2017). This may include emotional support, access to learning materials, parental encouragement, and reconsideration of gendered assumptions that prioritise boys' education. At the community level, social workers collaborate with leaders, religious groups, local organisations, and other influential actors to create environments in which girls' education is respected and protected (Poole, Rife, Moore, & Pearson, 2016). Such engagement strengthens shared responsibility and helps reduce stigma, fear, and social discouragement surrounding girls' education.

#### **4.5. Theme 5: Collaboration with Schools and Educational Institutions**

Collaboration with schools and educational institutions is essential for creating safe, inclusive, and gender-responsive learning environments. Schools are key spaces where girls experience both opportunity and vulnerability; therefore, partnerships between social workers, teachers, administrators, and families are necessary to support girls' academic, emotional, and social well-being (Pretorius, 2020).

Within schools, social workers contribute to protective policies and practices that address violence, discrimination, harassment, bullying, early pregnancy, trauma, and family-related difficulties. Child protection measures, gender-sensitive

educational practices, and safe learning environments are particularly important for helping girls remain in school and focus on learning (Smyth & Katz, 2016; Muhammed, 2025). Social workers also serve as communication links among students, teachers, families, and communities. By supporting teachers in identifying signs of distress or vulnerability, they strengthen early intervention and improve schools' capacity to support girls and other at-risk learners (Tumelo, 2024; Palaghia, 2023).

#### **4.6. Theme 6: Social Work Interventions: Counselling, Mentorship, and Peer Support**

The reviewed literature highlights counselling, mentorship, and peer support as key social work interventions to promote girls' educational participation and psychosocial well-being. Counselling provides safe spaces for girls to discuss emotional distress, academic pressure, bullying, trauma, family difficulties, and personal aspirations (Sekgobela, 2025). Through individual or group counselling, social workers help girls develop coping strategies, emotional resilience, self-awareness, and decision-making skills that support educational persistence (Olaleye & Lekunze, 2024).

Mentorship also plays an important role by connecting girls with female role models who provide encouragement, practical guidance, and examples of educational success. These relationships help girls develop confidence, a sense of belonging, and future aspirations, particularly when they face social or structural barriers (Olaleye & Lekunze, 2024; Kayyali, 2024). Similarly, peer support networks reduce isolation by enabling girls to share experiences and coping strategies with others facing similar challenges. Together, counselling, mentorship, and peer support help girls maintain motivation, strengthen resilience, and continue pursuing their educational goals.

#### **4.7. Theme 7: Impact of Social Work Interventions on Educational Success**

Social work interventions are reported to contribute positively to girls' attendance, retention, academic participation, emotional well-being, and future aspirations. Educational success is commonly linked to academic performance, school completion, progression, and the ability to apply learning in future study or employment (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). Within this context, social workers support educational success by helping girls manage personal, social, and academic challenges that may otherwise lead to absenteeism or dropout.

Counselling, mentorship, psychosocial support, and advocacy strengthen girls' resilience and motivation, enabling them to remain engaged in education despite poverty, family pressure, discrimination, and emotional distress (López, Cárdenas, & González, 2021; Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2020). From a feminist perspective, these interventions are significant because they not only support individual academic success; they also help girls develop agency, self-determination, and critical awareness of structural inequalities such as early marriage, discriminatory family norms, gender-based violence, and exclusionary school practices (Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). Therefore, social work interventions contribute to educational success while also supporting broader empowerment and social transformation.

#### **4.8. Theme 8: Perceptions of Girls and Communities Regarding Social Workers' Roles**

The effectiveness of social work interventions is strongly influenced by how girls, families, and communities perceive social workers. In many African communities, social workers are viewed as advocates, support providers, and change agents who help improve girls' lives. However, resistance may occur where traditional beliefs, limited awareness of the profession, or misconceptions about social workers' responsibilities remain strong (Strier & Bershtling, 2016).

Building trust is therefore essential. When girls and families observe the practical benefits of social work support, such as increased confidence, improved educational participation, and stronger psychosocial wellbeing, they are more likely to recognise social workers as valuable contributors to girls' development (Adams, 2017). Moreover, community acceptance can improve when social workers engage local leaders, parents, schools, religious groups, and community organisations through continuous awareness-raising and relationship-building (Lanham & Moore, 2024). As a result, positive perceptions of social workers can enhance the sustainability of interventions and support broader community commitment to girls' educational empowerment.

### **5. Discussion**

The findings show that social workers play a multidimensional role in supporting girls' education and empowerment across African countries. Their contribution extends beyond individual assistance and includes counselling, mentorship, family engagement, school collaboration, community mobilisation, and policy advocacy. However, the evidence also suggests that these interventions are most effective when they operate at multiple levels rather than focusing only on individual girls. This is important because girls' educational exclusion is shaped not only by personal circumstances but also by poverty, early marriage, discriminatory norms, unsafe school environments, and weak institutional support.

The findings also indicate that counselling and mentorship strengthen girls' confidence, resilience, and educational motivation. This aligns with the strengths-based perspective, which emphasises girls' capacities, aspirations, and coping resources. Nevertheless, individual empowerment alone is insufficient where structural barriers remain unchanged. Therefore, social work practice must combine psychosocial support with advocacy, community mobilisation, and policy engagement. This position is also consistent with feminist theory, which views girls' educational exclusion as a result of gendered power relations and wider social inequalities (Ngobeni & Sekgobela, 2025).

Family and community engagement emerged as central to girls' educational participation. In many contexts, decisions about girls' schooling are shaped by household resources, cultural expectations, and community norms. However, social workers may face resistance when challenging practices such as early marriage, male educational preference, or restrictive gender roles. Therefore, effective intervention requires a balance between rights-based advocacy and culturally responsive engagement. Similarly, collaboration with schools is essential for identifying girls at risk of dropout, responding to trauma, and strengthening safeguarding systems, although many educational systems still lack the capacity to formally integrate social workers into schools. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by showing that social workers support girls' education through both empowerment-oriented and structural interventions. The integration of feminist theory and the strengths-based

perspective provides a useful framework because it connects systemic critique with practical support. Therefore, social work practice should be understood as a bridge between individual empowerment, community transformation, and policy reform.

### 5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and desktop-based analysis. Therefore, it does not include direct empirical evidence from girls, families, teachers, community leaders, or social workers. Additionally, because the review focuses broadly on African countries, it may not fully capture country-specific differences in educational systems, cultural practices, policy environments, and social work structures. The use of English-language sources may also have excluded relevant studies published in other languages. Future research should include empirical, country-specific studies to examine how social work interventions operate across different African contexts. Comparative studies across rural and urban settings would also be useful for assessing how counselling, mentorship, family engagement, school-based social work, and community mobilisation influence girls' enrolment, retention, academic performance, and empowerment outcomes.

## 6. Conclusions

The study highlights the significant contribution of social workers to girls' education and empowerment in African countries. Through counselling, mentorship, advocacy, and community engagement, social workers help girls build confidence, resilience, and educational motivation while addressing barriers such as poverty, early marriage, gender inequality, and limited family or institutional support. Moreover, social workers contribute to creating supportive environments through partnerships with families, communities, schools, and policymakers. These efforts can improve girls' school retention, academic participation, and long-term empowerment. However, the success of such interventions depends on stronger institutional recognition, adequate resources, and sustained collaboration among educational, social, and community-based actors. Since this study relied on secondary sources, future research should include empirical and country-specific investigations to assess the direct impact of social work interventions on girls' enrolment, retention, academic performance, and empowerment outcomes. Overall, social work practice remains an important pathway for advancing gender equality, educational justice, and sustainable development across African societies.

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