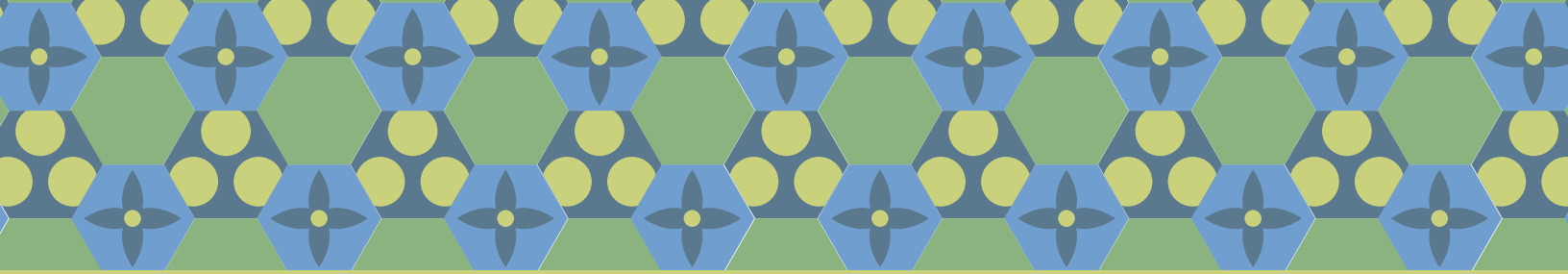


POLICY BRIEF

# Bridging policy and practice: Advancing gender-responsive pedagogies in Zimbabwe

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM

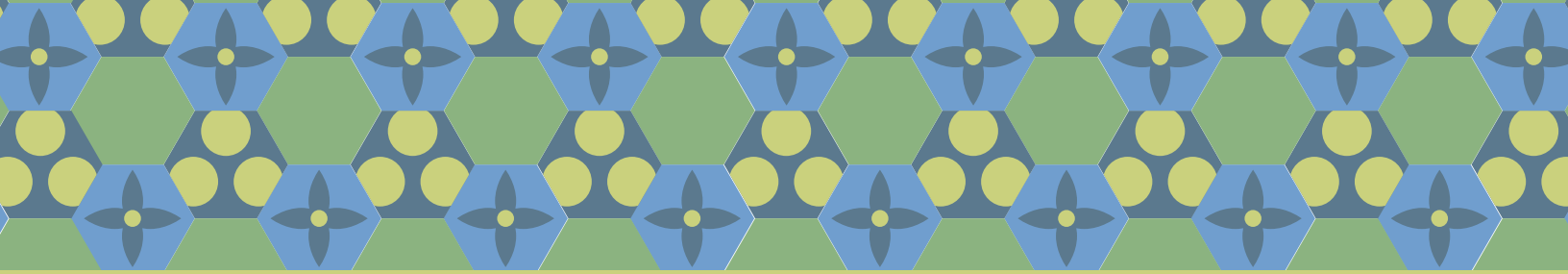




## Executive Summary

Zimbabwe has made strong commitments to gender equality in education through constitutional provisions, the amended Education Act of 2020, the National Gender Policy of 2025, and the adoption of Gender Responsive Education Sector Planning. Despite this, exclusion remains acute, with girls disproportionately dropping out due to pregnancy, early marriage, and socioeconomic pressures, while boys face constraints linked to early entry into the labor market and disengagement from literacy subjects. These challenges highlight the need to move beyond policy frameworks to practical gender-responsive classroom strategies that address the lived realities of learners. Teachers are central to this transformation, yet most lack systematic training in gender responsive pedagogy. With over 70% of Zimbabwe's 153,000 teachers based in rural schools, shortages of resources, high pupil-teacher ratios, and attrition exacerbate inequities. While frameworks such as the Continuous Professional Development Framework of 2020 and the draft Teaching Profession Council Bill provide enabling structures, implementation has been uneven and largely donor-driven.

This study employed a mixed methods approach, engaging 189 teachers, 18 school leaders, 29 parent groups, and six pupil groups across nine districts through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative analysis assessed correlations between training and teacher understanding, while qualitative insights explored classroom practices and systemic enablers or barriers to advancing gender-responsive pedagogies. Findings reveal that structure and continuous training in gender-responsive pedagogy are the key differentiators: 93% of trained teachers demonstrated operational understanding of GRP, reported applying strategies such as gender-neutral language, equitable task allocation in class, and



inclusive learning environments. In contrast, untrained teachers in GRP often held conceptual or incomplete understandings of gender-responsive pedagogy, relying on traditional methods and lacking confidence to challenge stereotypes. Systemic barriers, including fragmented funding, limited materials, and limited institutional ownership, further constrained consistent application.

Recommendations emphasize embedding GRP modules in pre-service teacher training programs, scaling structured in-service training through continuous professional development, strengthening mentorship and coaching of in-service teachers, ensuring inclusive curricular materials, and mobilizing communities to support gender equity. Addressing structural, relational, and mindset levels simultaneously is essential to transform classrooms into genuinely inclusive spaces that empower all learners.

# Introduction

Zimbabwe has demonstrated strong policy commitment to the sustainable development goals that call for inclusive, equitable, and quality learning opportunities for all (SDG 4 and 5). The Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013, the amended Education Act of 2020, and the National Gender Policy of 2025 provide a robust framework for equity and nondiscrimination. The country's adoption of Gender-Responsive Education Sector Planning in 2018 and the integration of gender considerations into its 2021-2025 Education Sector Strategic Plan reflects a deliberate effort to embed gender equality across the education system.

However, gender-based exclusion persists. Girls remain more likely than boys to drop out of secondary school due to financial pressures, food insecurity, and early marriage (CAMFED and Global Partnership for Education, 2023). Recent national data also showed more than 86% of these occurring in rural areas (Zimstar News, 2024). Many of these pregnancies stem from violence, exploitation, and socioeconomic vulnerability, making this exclusion a gender justice issue rather than a learning challenge.

Boys, meanwhile, are often pushed out of school by pressures to enter the labor market early, expectations to provide for households, and the lure of economic opportunities in neighboring countries, such as South Africa and Botswana, particularly in rural districts like Bulilima

(Moyo, Ncube, and Khupe, 2016). Boys' disengagement is also driven by factors, such as low perceived economic value of schooling and a preference for immediate income-generating activities, contributing to dropout and limiting their long-term opportunities.

While teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe increasingly introduce basic gender content, practical classroom-level implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy remains inconsistent. Most in-service teachers have not received formal GRP training, resulting in uneven gender sensitivity in classrooms. Research further indicates that despite Zimbabwe having a strong, progressive policy framework, the actual implementation of GRP is weakened by inadequate teacher training, entrenched societal gender biases, and institutional cultures that perpetuate inequality, all of which hinder the ability of teachers to apply gender-responsive methods effectively (Matope et al., 2025). As a result, many in-service teachers continue to lack structured GRP professional development, reinforcing classroom stereotypes and reducing learner engagement particularly for girls in STEM and boys in literacy and language subjects while simultaneously limiting the quality of learning environments (British Council, 2022).

**Research further indicates that despite Zimbabwe having a strong, progressive policy framework, the actual implementation of GRP is weakened by inadequate teacher training, entrenched societal gender biases, and institutional cultures that perpetuate inequality, all of which hinder the ability of teachers to apply gender-responsive methods effectively.**

Education exclusion carries long-term implications for health, economic empowerment, and civic participation. National gender-equity assessments in Zimbabwe show that inequitable access to education undermines broader social outcomes, contributing to disparities in health, economic opportunity, and social inclusion across the population (Gender Health Data, 2023). Even modest improvements in educational attainment significantly enhance women's empowerment outcomes such as reproductive autonomy, household decision-making power, and reduced exposure to gender-based violence highlighting the critical importance of addressing gender-related barriers within the education system (Yu et al., 2025). Without addressing these persistent gender barriers, pressures on Zimbabwe's education system will intensify as the school-age population continues to grow, deepening existing inequalities and constraining national development efforts (British Council, 2022).

In response to these gender-based constraints, in 2017, Zimbabwe adopted a policy that promotes gender-responsive pedagogy in education planning, teaching, and learning. GRP<sup>1</sup> can be a powerful tool for transforming classrooms into inclusive spaces by strengthening teacher capacity and school-level support systems in support of equitable, gender-responsive educational practice (Forum for African Women Educationalists, 2019). When fully and effectively implemented, it can improve learning outcomes and strengthen resilience across education systems.

Despite strong policy commitments, GRP remains unevenly implemented in Zimbabwe, failing to reach all classrooms and leaving its impact fragmented. This policy brief aims to address this, examining Zimbabwe's journey toward GRP adoption in practice, identifying critical gaps, and proposing actionable strategies to accelerate progress toward gender-equitable education, ensuring that every classroom becomes a safe, inclusive, and empowering space for all learners.



Photo credit: Richard Juilliart/Shutterstock

1 GRP in this context refers to an approach that pays attention to the specific learning needs of girls and boys, embracing gender-responsive approaches in the processes of lesson planning, teaching, classroom management, and performance evaluation.

# Context

To understand Zimbabwe’s GRP journey, it is key to first examine the role of teachers and teacher training within the education system, the policies and frameworks that shape their practice, and the systemic challenges that influence how gender responsive pedagogy is implemented. This context sets the stage for understanding both the opportunities and barriers to translating commitments into classroom change.

## ZIMBABWE’S TEACHERS

Teachers are central to Zimbabwe’s education system, with approximately 153,453 teachers distributed across three levels: 16,742 in Early Childhood Education (ECE), 88,413 in primary, and 48,298 in secondary education (MoPSE, 2024b). Most teachers (70%) work in rural areas, where they are more likely to experience shortages of resources, higher pupil-teacher ratios, and limited access to professional development opportunities.

Teacher shortages are a persistent challenge for the Zimbabwean education system, particularly in ECD, STEM learning, and rural schools due to economic hardships, retirement, and low motivation. Teacher attrition remains a concern, adding to the impact on teacher-pupil ratios especially in rural communities.

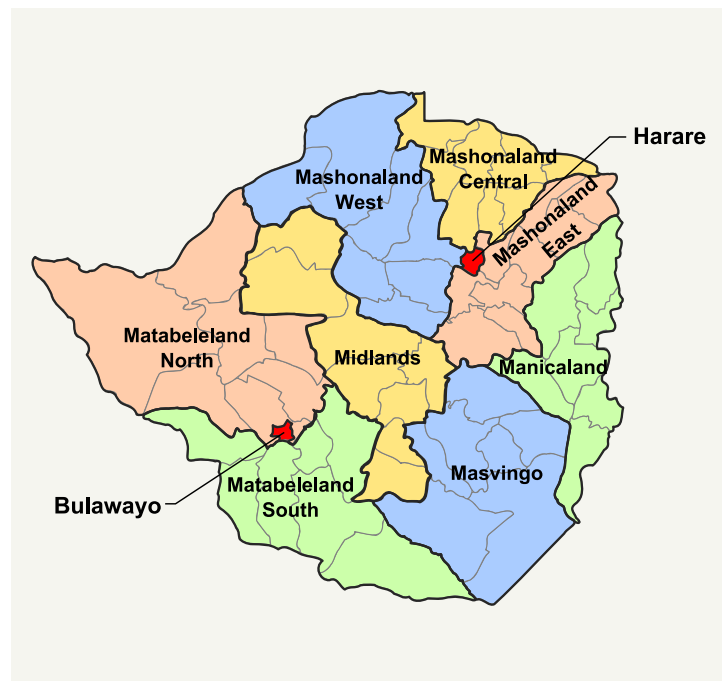
## GENDER-RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY FROM POLICY TO IMPLEMENTATION

Zimbabwe’s teachers are situated within an education sector that has progressively embraced gender equality in and through education through policies such as the National Gender Policy (2025), the Education Amendment Act (2020), The National Development Strategy 1 (2021-2025) and the Continuous Professional Development Framework for Teachers and Teacher Supervisors (2020)—see Appendix A for more. These frameworks are meant to guarantee nondiscriminatory access and quality learning, protect pregnant learners, and institutionalize

ongoing teacher professional development. The draft Teaching Profession Council Bill seeks to standardize teacher qualifications and professional ethics, creating an enabling environment for GRP (Dube-Matutu, 2024).

To support teachers in bringing these commitments to practice, in 2017 Zimbabwe began using the GRP toolkit developed by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in 2005 and updated in 2018 to train teachers across Africa (see Box 1). In 2019, after adopting Gender-Responsive Education Sector Planning, Zimbabwe adopted GRP as part of its education strategy, incorporating it into teacher training and education planning.

GRP in formal teacher preparation has been limited.



Teacher preparation primarily follows two pathways: three-year diploma programs at teacher training colleges and four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programs at universities. While these programs provide strong foundations in pedagogy, the integration of gender-responsive pedagogy systematically is limited. Diploma programs emphasize lesson planning and classroom management but lack dedicated modules on gender equality or strategies to challenge stereotypes. Similarly, B.Ed. programs offer advanced pedagogy but only focus on high-level integration of gender and inclusion frameworks. Practical teaching experiences often replicate traditional norms, reinforcing gendered expectations rather than dismantling them (Sheehy, 2024).

In-service training on GRP has mainly been delivered through short-term workshops organized by MoPSE and education partners (see Box 1). These initiatives focus on

gender-sensitive pedagogy and safeguarding practices. In-service teachers appreciate exposure to GRP, but continuous professional development remains scarce and unevenly distributed, concentrated in only a few districts, leaving many teachers without access to GRP-supportive training (British Council, 2022).

In sum, despite progressive policies and commitments, implementation of GRP in Zimbabwe to date has been uneven. Initial rollout was largely donor-driven, with higher uptake in peri-urban schools. Rural areas have faced resource constraints, and systemic barriers such as fragmented funding, a lack of gender-sensitive materials, and weak institutional ownership (FAWEZI, 2019). Coaching and mentorship have proven critical for translating policy into practice, yet these supports have also been limited (EDT, 2024).

#### BOX 1

##### Examples of programs supporting teachers to implement GRP in practice in Zimbabwe

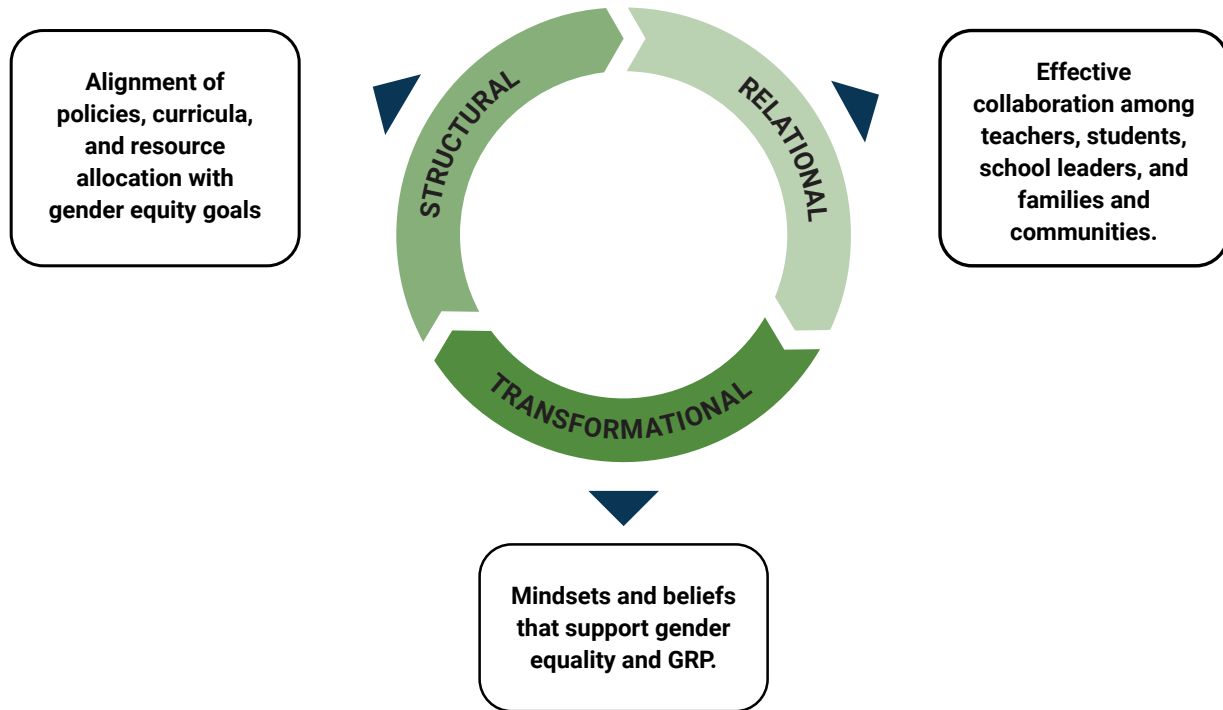
- **Teacher Effectiveness and Equitable Access for all children (TEACH):** Teachers trained under this program funded by the U.K. government have introduced gender-sensitive lesson planning and classroom seating arrangements to ensure equal participation of boys and girls (EDT, 2024). The TEACH program aims to strengthen teacher effectiveness through professional development, coaching, and teacher learning communities. Operating in 42 out of 72 districts, between 2022 and 2025, TEACH reached over 70,000 teachers and 5,800 school leaders, indirectly benefiting about one million learners.
- **Gender Responsive Pedagogy Toolkit:** In three districts (Chitungwiza, Epworth Mabvuku Tafara and Highglen), teachers use this guide developed in 2018 by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), UNICEF, UNGEI, and UNESCO IICBA to adapt language in textbooks and classroom discussions, seeking to avoid gender stereotypes and promote inclusive dialogue.
- **Transforming Adolescent Girls' Opportunities (TAGO):** A total of 34 schools participate in this STEM project, implemented by FAWE Zimbabwe in partnership with the MoPSE and UNICEF Zimbabwe in Epworth and Hopley suburbs. TAGO fosters gender-responsive pedagogy in STEM subjects and implements peer-support groups for girls, encouraging confidence and participation in STEM learning areas (FAWEZI, 2025).

### THE NEED FOR A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Teachers’ beliefs and practices determine whether classrooms empower all learners or perpetuate inequality (Levin and Wadmany, 2016). These beliefs do not operate in isolation; they are shaped and reinforced by the wider education system. Policies, leadership, community norms, and available resources all influence how teachers interpret and apply GRP. Evidence shows that trained teachers struggle to sustain inclusive practices, as fragmented support and entrenched stereotypes can

undermine classroom change (UNESCO, 2019; FAWA, 2018). Understanding how teachers interpret and apply GRP and the enablers and barriers they face is critical for designing interventions that work on a scale. Achieving gender-responsive education requires coordinated action across the entire system. Policies, teacher support, leadership, and community norms must reinforce one another for GRP to take root. A systemic perspective on transformation must consider factors at three interconnected levels: structural, relational, and mindsets.

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Systemic analysis for the implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy**



Source: Author.

In sum, despite progressive policies and pilot initiatives, we still lack a clear understanding of how teachers themselves interpret, experience, and apply gender responsive pedagogy in their daily practice, and how teachers’ practices intersect with structure, relations, and mindsets across the education system. Much of the evidence to date has focused on policy frameworks or donor-driven projects, leaving a gap in teacher-level perspectives that

are critical for sustainable change. This study is therefore necessary to capture teachers’ voices, document the barriers and enablers they encounter, and generate grounded insights that can inform more effective training, support, and systemic reforms. By asking teachers directly what they think and experience, we can move beyond policy commitments to practical strategies that transform classrooms into genuinely inclusive spaces.

# Methodology

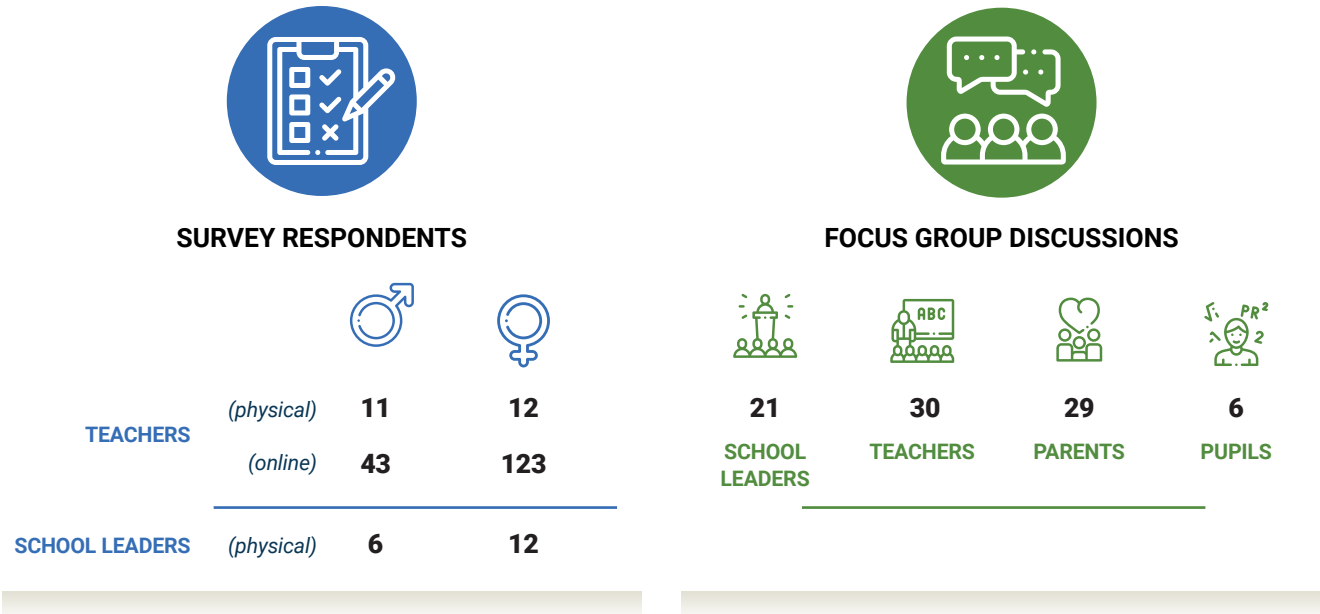
This brief explores the implementation of GRP in Zimbabwe’s primary and secondary schools guided by three questions:

1. How do teachers understand gender-responsive pedagogy in Zimbabwe?
2. How are teachers implementing gender-responsive pedagogy in classrooms?

3. What individual, relational, and systemic factors enable or hinder the application of gender-responsive pedagogies in classrooms?

To capture a comprehensive picture of teachers’ experiences with gender-responsive pedagogy, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data collected from a total of 189 teachers, 18 school leaders, six groups of pupils, and 29 groups of parents in two urban and seven rural districts (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Research participants



Note: Average participants per focus group discussion: 6-8.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity in geographical location, school type, and training exposure. School representation mirrored national distribution, approximately 70% primary and 30% secondary schools. Regarding training, 103 teachers and 10 school leaders had received prior GRP training through the TEACH program and three teachers and 3 school leaders through FAWEZI, while 80 teachers and five school leaders had no prior training.

Quantitative findings revealed patterns and prevalence, while qualitative insights explained underlying reasons and contextual nuances, together offering a holistic view of GRP implementation in Zimbabwean classrooms. The design further enabled triangulation of findings and addressed limitations associated with single-method studies. Data collection took place between July and September 2025 through physical and online surveys, in-person focus group discussions, and desk review of policy documents and TEACH program reports.

The quantitative component examined demographic variables (sex, years of experience, location) and allowed for correlation with teachers' understanding and application of GRP. Statistical analysis was conducted to assess the effect of in-service training and demographic factors

on GRP understanding. Understanding was assessed through open-ended questions asking teachers to define GRP and identify its elements. The application was assessed through examples of lesson planning, task allocation, and interaction patterns through focus group discussions.

The qualitative component explored teachers' interpretations of GRP, classroom practices, and structural, relational, and transformational factors shaping implementation. FGDs also captured perspectives from school leaders and parents on capacity and commitment.

## LIMITATIONS

While the mixed-methods design strengthened the analysis, several limitations were noted. First, self-reported data may introduce bias, as respondents could advance perceived expectations rather than actual practices. Second, sampling was purposive, which limits generalizability beyond the selected provinces and districts. Third, online survey responses may have excluded participants with limited internet access, potentially underrepresenting rural voices. Finally, the study focused on teachers and school leaders, with limited direct classroom observation, which constrains the ability to validate reported practices.



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# Findings

A consistent theme across all data sources is that teacher understanding influences classroom practice, which is central to advancing gender-responsive pedagogy. Evidence from teacher surveys, focus groups, and school leader assessments also shows that formal training strongly influences teachers’ understanding and classroom practice. Yet systemic barriers limit consistent access to training and constrain GRP implementation. Teacher capacity to implement GRP is not an individual capability issue, but a systemic one.

This section first explores teachers’ understandings and practice of GRP and then outlines the structural, relational, and transformational factors that support or constrain these. Strengthening these interconnected

layers, while addressing the lived realities of teachers and learners, is essential for scaling inclusive, gender-responsive education.

## TEACHERS’ UNDERSTANDING OF GRP

Teachers in this study demonstrated three broad types of understanding about GRP: conceptual, operational, and incomplete (see Table 3). Operational understandings of GRP make explicit links to classroom practices, while conceptual understandings remain at the abstract level of societal goals, and limited understandings perpetuate discriminatory gender norms. These variations in teacher understanding were found to profoundly shape the application of GRP as reported by teachers in this study.

**TABLE 3.**  
**Characterizing teacher understandings of GRP**

| OPERATIONAL  | CONCEPTUAL   | INCOMPLETE   |
|--|--|--|
| <p>“Addresses gender-specific needs and challenges by recognizing and challenging stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory practices in teaching and learning environments.”</p> <p>“Promotes inclusive and equitable classroom practices, ensuring all pupils, regardless of gender identity feel respected, supported, and empowered to participate fully.”</p> <p>“Incorporates gender-sensitive teaching methods and curriculum planning, using pupil-centered approaches that value diverse experiences and perspectives based on gender.”</p> | <p>“Creating a society where individuals of all genders feel valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully.”</p> | <p>“Approaches that only focus on the vulnerable sex for inclusivity.”</p> |

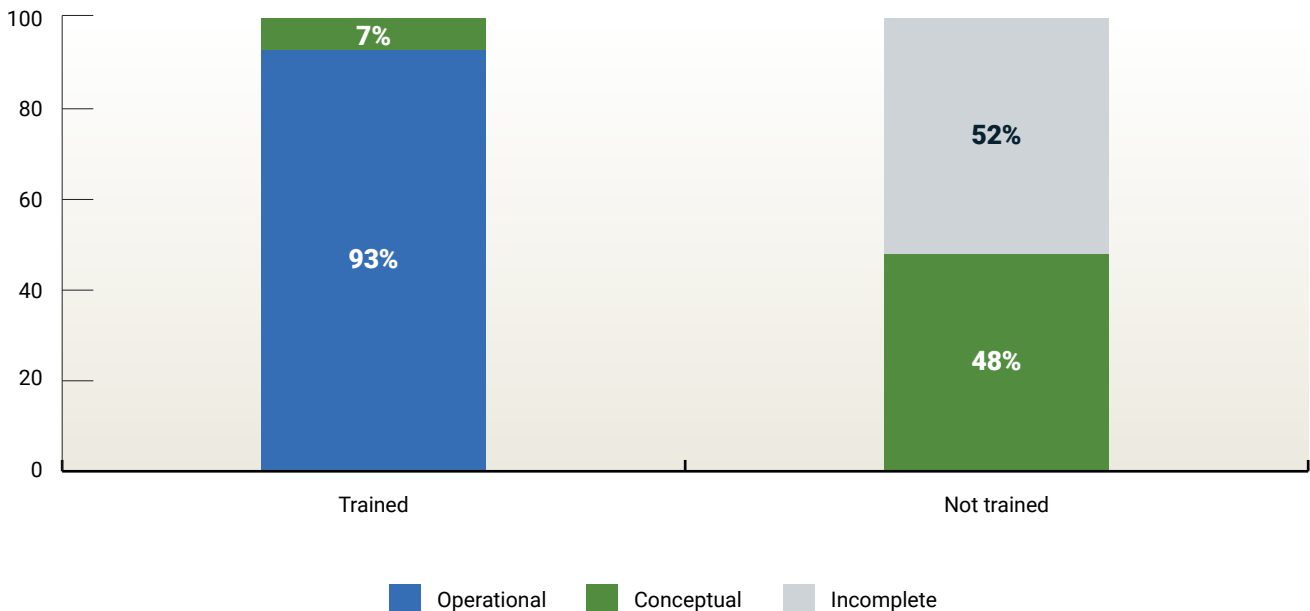
In surveys, 57% of sampled teachers provided definitions aligned with core GRP principles, such as addressing gender-specific learning needs and integrating gender-sensitive strategies in lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment. Teachers with an operational understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy defined it as an approach that guides teaching practices, lesson planning, classroom management, and performance evaluation. They explained that GRP is about actively seeking to address gender-specific needs, challenge stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory practices, as highlighted in Table 3. Their definitions further focused on the use of gender-responsive teaching methods to create inclusive and equitable learning environments, and pupil-centered curriculum planning that valued diverse gender experiences.

In contrast, 43% of the sampled teachers offered vague or general understandings that lacked pedagogical focus. Teachers with a conceptual understanding of GRP did not link it to actionable classroom strategies. Teachers with an incomplete understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy often interpreted girls' low confidence or participation as a lack of ability, suggesting "quiet girls" were "slow learners."

This variation in teachers' understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy also illuminated the transformative role of structured training in shifting understanding of GRP from abstract to practical classroom strategies. A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between demographic variables (sex, years of experience, and location) and teachers' understanding of gender-responsive pedagogy. The results indicated that none of these demographic factors were significantly correlated with teachers' understanding of gender responsive pedagogy. The main differentiator for teachers' understanding of GRP was found to be training.

Trained teachers were significantly more likely to hold an operational (practice-oriented) understanding of GRP, while those without training were more likely to hold conceptual or incomplete views, which may limit effective classroom application (see Figure 2). Importantly, none of the 100 untrained teachers sampled demonstrated an operational grasp of GRP, underscoring the role of training in turning abstract or partial understanding into actionable classroom pedagogy.

Figure 2. Teachers' understanding of GRP by training status



Source: Teacher's survey.

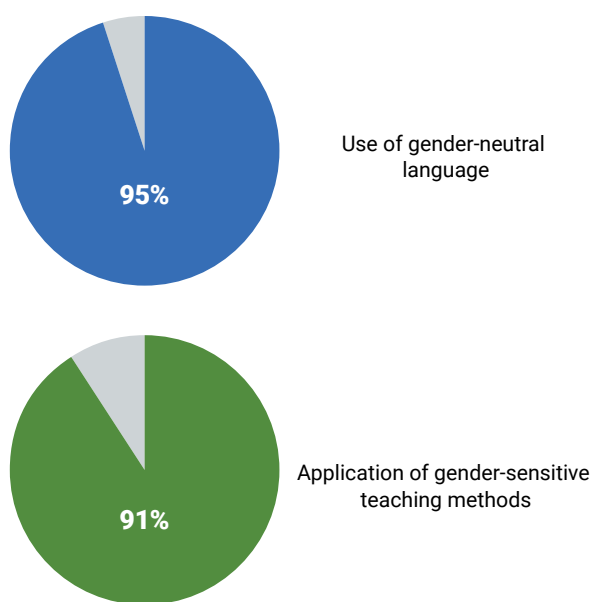
## APPLICATION OF GRP IN CLASSROOM PRACTICE

Formal training also influenced teacher reports of confidence with and application of GRP methods, with teachers who had received structured GRP training reporting greater confidence and consistency in applying inclusive strategies.

### A. GRP practices among trained teachers

The great majority of trained teachers expressed feeling completely confident using gender-neutral language during classroom teaching, with only one in ten teachers expressing a lack of confidence in using GRP. These trained teachers described clear GRP strategies such as rotating leadership roles, using gender-neutral language, and allocating tasks equitably. Analysis of teacher surveys indicates that more than nine out of ten trained teachers reported using gender-neutral language and applying gender-sensitive teaching methods in classrooms (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Teacher reported GRP practices in classrooms



Source: Teacher's survey.

During focus group discussions, trained teachers shared practical classroom actions: "We encourage pupils to express their feelings equally and avoid sexist language such as 'haikona kuita semusikana' (don't behave like a girl)." Another teacher shared: "In drama, girls can also play a leading role. In class presentations, all sexes take turns to present." In focus group discussions, parents corroborated: "Teachers are involving both boys and girls in all activities. For example, long back, boys used to bring toy cars and girls dolls, but these days toys are for both boys and girls."

Survey data revealed that teachers who received in-service GRP training reported applying gender-responsive teaching through the following practices:

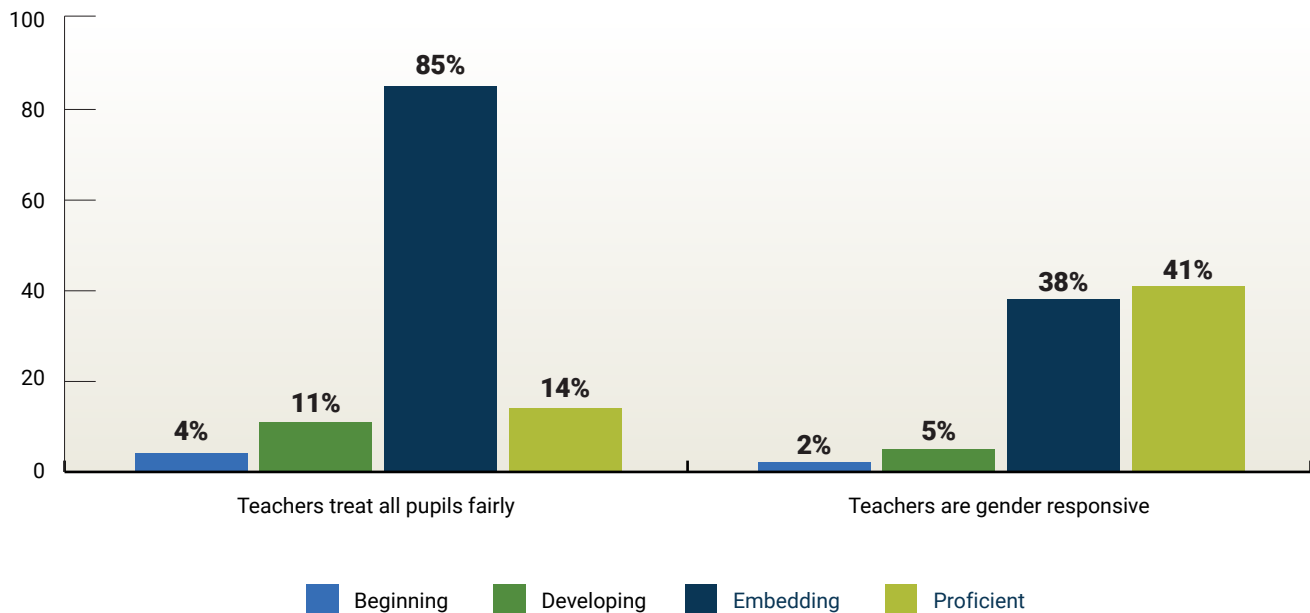
- **Equal allocation of activities, roles, and responsibilities.** GRP-trained teachers reported structuring tasks such as sweeping, cleaning, and gardening so that they were shared equally, with some teachers describing how they alternate duties between boys and girls to normalize the idea that all tasks are suitable for everyone. Some teachers, for example, reported ensuring that dramatization activities allow girls to take on traditionally male roles (e.g., engineers or builders). A trained teacher during a focus group discussion conducted at a school in Harare also shared, "In playing volleyball there will be both boys and girls in one team, but during the competition they play as girls or boys only. In drama, girls can also play a leading role. In class presentations, all sexes take turns to present." Furthermore, during focus group discussion, a grade four teacher in Rushinga noted: "I make sure that both girls and boys have equal chances to answer questions in class. If I notice that boys dominate discussions, I deliberately call on girls to share their views so that their voices are heard and valued." Corroborating teachers' sentiments, a form four learner in Nyanga shared: "When teachers use inclusive language and activities, I don't feel left out. It shows that everyone is important in learning."

- Use of inclusive language and materials.** GRP Trained Teachers highlighted that they seek to avoid gendered assumptions and stereotypes in teaching materials and discussions. One teacher explained that she deliberately reviews textbooks and classroom discussions to ensure she does not reinforce gender stereotypes, emphasizing the importance of using neutral examples and inclusive language to make all learners feel represented. During focus group discussions, an ECD B teacher in Mazowe shared, “I check storybooks and teaching materials to ensure they portray both boys and girls in active roles. If a text shows only boys playing sports, I add examples of girls participating too, so children grow up seeing equality as normal.”
- Creating safe and supportive environments.** GRP Trained Teachers said they try to foster an atmosphere where all learners feel valued and respected,

regardless of gender, to build their confidence and self-expression. Some teachers, for example, reported organizing group activities where learners collaborate on problem-solving tasks, ensuring that every learner has an opportunity to contribute, regardless of gender, by actively inviting quieter learners to share their ideas. The teachers also said they use positive reinforcement—such as praising effort and creativity—to build confidence and encourage self-expression.

School leaders reinforced the sense that most teachers trained on GRP consistently embedded practices that ensure fair treatment of all pupils (see Figure 4). Most school heads rated trained teachers in their schools as embedding and proficient when it comes to being gender-responsive during classroom teaching.

Figure 4. School leader assessment of trained teachers’ GRP practice



Source: School leaders survey.

## **B. GRP practices among teachers without access to training**

Teachers in the study who had not participated in GRP training reported attempts to advance inclusivity but appeared to lack confidence and structured approaches to do so. 25% of the teachers without access to training reported willingness to apply gender-responsive pedagogy but lacked scripts or manuals with guidelines. During focus group discussions, for example, one teacher shared: “We try to encourage quiet learners to participate, but we don’t have clear guidelines or resources.” Teacher survey data analysis indicated that untrained teachers most often reported relying on traditional, teacher-centered methods and rarely incorporated strategies that sought to actively engage boys and girls equally. When asked what practices they used, many pointed to basic classroom management and lesson delivery without deliberate attention to gender dynamics.

Focus group discussions with teachers highlighted that it is harder for untrained teachers because they lack resources and peer support, making them hesitant to challenge entrenched norms or adapt lessons for inclusiveness. This gap highlights the need for systematic training to ensure consistent application of GRP principles.

## **FACTORS ENABLING OR HINDERING IMPLEMENTATION**

This research points to specific systemic factors that enable or challenge classroom implementation of GRP that are linked to structures, relationships, and beliefs.

### **C. Structural level: Policies, resources, school leadership support, and training**

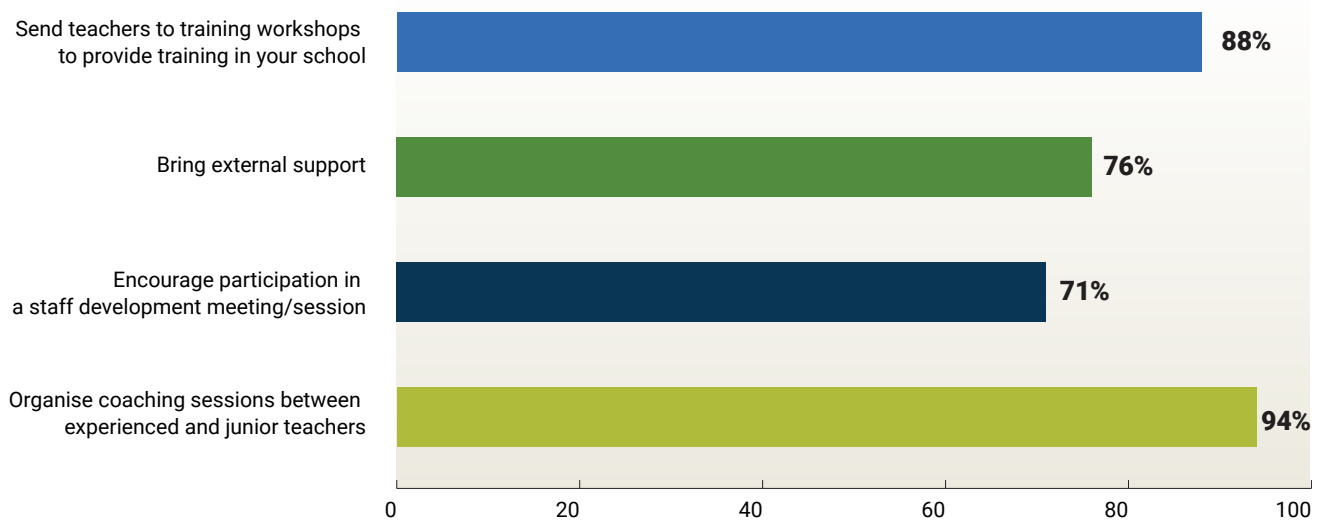
Policy instruments not only lay out policy goals, but also set expectations for practice, potentially enhancing (or reducing) the application of gender-responsive pedagogy during classroom teaching. Teachers in this study pointed to the importance of Secretary’s Circular

21 of 2024 that mandates learner profiling and inclusive planning, saying this has enabled teachers to design personalized learning experiences. This was corroborated by a grade three teacher in Mbare/Hatfield district during focus group discussions, who shared, “Learner profiling guided by Circular 21 of 2024 helps me plan lessons that respond to individual needs. I use learner profiles to create tasks that reflect diverse interests. This way, both boys and girls feel represented and engaged, breaking down stereotypes from the earliest stages of learning.”

The availability of gender-responsive curricular and teaching materials also played a critical role. Teachers reported using pictures or illustrations that depict both sexes doing a variety of tasks to help learners build confidence as they see themselves represented in the content. Pupils seconded this, expressing that when the curriculum incorporates diverse perspectives and inclusive teaching materials, they feel acknowledged and valued. This points to the importance of these types of GRP resources in enabling GRP practice that fosters a sense of belonging and ensures that no learner feels excluded or marginalized.

School leaders supported the implementation of GRP by organizing staff development sessions. In surveys, school heads reported efforts to actively foster gender-responsive pedagogy by prioritizing internal capacity building through various ways (see Figure 5). In both schools that are formally part of GRP training and those that are not, the most common approaches identified by school leaders to support GRP included organizing coaching sessions between experienced and junior teachers and sending teachers to training workshops. Bringing in external support and encouraging participation in staff development meetings were also widely practiced. However, school leaders highlighted that while staff development sessions were common, they were predominantly focused on examination management, teacher professional standards, and syllabus interpretation, with limited attention to GRP.

**FIGURE 5.**  
**Ways school leaders support teachers in implementing GRP in classrooms**



Source: School leaders' survey, 2025.

As described above, teacher training was a key enabler of operational understandings and active practice of GRP. Teachers who had participated in either TEACH and FAWEZI in-service training sessions showed higher levels of confidence to apply GRP by transforming gender equity from theory into practice, enabling them to actively challenge bias and create inclusive classrooms. Teachers reported that training sessions helped them see gender equity not as an abstract policy goal, but as a practical and achievable classroom reality. During discussions, teachers maintained that because of GRP training, they had become more intentional in engaging all learners. A teacher in Rushinga district shared: "I teach boys and girls with the knowledge and understanding that no one should be treated as inferior or harmed in any way, and that boys and girls are equal in all respects."

However, access to GRP training remains limited. More than half of teachers in this study (53%) lacked formal GRP training. Moreover, in terms of initial preparation, teachers highlighted that GRP is largely treated as a

cross-cutting theme rather than a core focus in teacher training colleges. With respect to in-service training, school leaders cited limited financial resources to acquire essential teaching and focus group discussions revealed that while FAWEZI and TEACH trainings were described as transformative, there was limited follow-up support and monitoring after training, making it difficult to sustain changes in classroom practice.

Resource constraints were also said to limit access to adequate GRP learning materials, especially those tailored for learners with special needs. In surveys, 30% of teachers cited resource constraints as a barrier to GRP implementation. As a result, many classrooms lack the tools necessary to support diverse learning needs. As one teacher teaching ECD B class in Beitbridge district noted during discussions, "Sometimes I want to apply what I learned, but with 60 learners and no textbooks relevant to GRP, it feels impossible." These insights underscore the need for systemic investment in training, resources, and sustained support.

#### D. Relational level: Leadership, community engagement, and social norms

According to study participants, relational dynamics within schools and communities significantly shape GRP implementation.

Supportive school leadership can foster inclusive cultures and support GRP implementation through coaching and collaborative learning. In a focus group discussion, a school leader in Epworth Mabvuku Tafara District shared, “As a school leader, I make it a priority to coach my teachers on gender-responsive practices, encouraging them to reflect on their classroom strategies and share successes during staff meetings so we build an inclusive culture together.”

Teachers highlighted that when school leaders actively promote inclusivity and provide necessary support, it creates a culture where GRP can thrive. During focus group discussions, an ECD B teacher in Umzingwane shared: “Through our TICs support, we now meet monthly to reflect on how we integrate gender equity in play and storytelling. [The head of school’s] coaching has built a culture of collaboration that makes our classrooms more inclusive.” In addition to school leadership, participants

reported that the commitment of individual teachers, combined with teamwork among staff, ensured that inclusive education principles were consistently applied and reinforced across different learning contexts.

Outside of school, cultural and religious norms can both support and undermine progress on GRP. Parents in this study reported shifting societal norms, emphasizing that education should empower all children regardless of gender, signaling a cultural move toward equity and inclusion. As one parent in Beitbridge put it during focus group discussions: “When we teach boys and girls to learn side by side without bias, we teach society to value fairness.” Another parent in Nyanga shared: “As parents, we prefer enrolling our children in schools with mixed genders rather than single-sex schools because it teaches them equality and respect from an early age.”

Nonetheless, teachers and students reported that social norms can limit the implementation of GRP in schools. 35% of teachers maintained that traditional beliefs around assigning specific roles to boys and girls lead to resistance when schools attempt to challenge these norms. Teachers noted that perceptions of girls being weaker than boys often result in physically demanding tasks



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being reserved for boys, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting girls' opportunities. A teacher in Harare highlighted the influence of social institutions, stating, "Background at home pushes the narrative that females should submit to males." Similarly, a teacher in Beitbridge observed, "Some societies are still respecting superiority of males while undermining the value of women."

Teachers stated that pupils often replicate traditional gender norms that are modeled at home, reinforcing inequality between boys and girls. Teachers explained that when pupils observe women primarily as caregivers who remain silent during conflict and provide emotional support, while men are portrayed as decisionmakers, these patterns shape pupils' perceptions. Consequently, pupils internalize these roles and replicate them through their behavior in the classroom. One pupil shared during focus group discussions, "At home, we see women doing all the caring and men making the decisions, so in class we also think boys should lead and girls should help quietly."

Gendered uniforms were also identified as reinforcing stereotypes that GRP seeks to dismantle. Teachers reported that requiring girls to wear skirts or dresses perpetuates discriminatory gender norms by restricting movement and introducing shaming (girls being reminded to "sit properly" to avoid exposing underclothes, for example), which can undermine girls' confidence and engagement and lead to menstruation-related absenteeism—precisely the barriers that gender-responsive pedagogy seeks to dismantle. In sum, the teachers in this study highlighted that relational change requires both school-level leadership and community engagement to dismantle entrenched norms. As part of efforts to challenge the norms, for example, a form three teacher in Mutare shared, "On speech and prize giving day, I ensured pupils performed poetry and drama pieces that challenge stereotypes. The parents attended these performances, and it sparked conversations about respecting both girls and boys in everyday life."

## TRANSFORMATIONAL LEVEL: MINDSETS AND ATTITUDES

Transformational factors relate to shifts in mindsets and attitudes among teachers, learners, school and education leaders, and families. As discussed above, training sessions helped teachers move from viewing gender equity as an abstract goal to embracing it as a practical classroom reality. During focus group discussions, a deputy head in Mutare district shared, "We introduced collaborative learning circles where teachers exchange ideas on how to challenge stereotypes in lessons. This peer-to-peer coaching has created a supportive environment where inclusivity is no longer an add-on but part of our school identity." This was also supported by a teacher who noted: "I teach boys and girls with the knowledge and understanding that no one should be treated as inferior or harmed in any way and that boys and girls are equal in all respects." In addition, a grade four teacher in Chipinge district shared: "Before the training... , I believed boys were naturally more confident in class. Now I intentionally encourage girls to lead group discussions, and I see their confidence and participation growing every day."

Teachers have deliberately started peer learning circles where they share strategies to eliminate bias and review each other's classroom practices for inclusiveness. A grade six teacher in Mutare expressed in the survey, "We agreed as a team of teachers to stop saying 'boys are better at math', now we encourage every child equally and celebrate effort, not gender." Another grade 4 teacher in Makoni district corroborated, "During science projects, we pair boys and girls intentionally, so they learn to collaborate without assumptions."

Parents of learners in both primary and secondary schools reported during discussions that they observed positive mindset changes as a result of GRP implementation, noting increased confidence and cooperation among learners. A parent in Nyanga district noted: "My child used to be shy and reserved but is now active and clearly articulates how she feels." Primary school learners at junior level echoed these sentiments, stating they were treated fairly and given equal opportunities.

However, societal norms and unconscious biases persist, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting progress. Both male and female teachers' unconscious gender biases, particularly toward girls, often persist unnoticed in classroom practices, undermining efforts to implement gender-responsive pedagogy. Teachers acknowledged during discussions that they unconsciously reproduce practices they were exposed to as children. They said they more often praised girls for their clothing, appearance, and caring behaviors, while boys were complimented for their physical strength and were given more complex tasks in class. Teachers also reported sometimes unconsciously using gender-stereotyped language and compliments such as, "You boys danced very well, even better than girls." In fact, one of the teachers, when asked about gender differences in the classroom subtly perpetuated gender stereotypes, saying, "Boys are always naughtier than girls."

The findings of this study demonstrate that teachers' understandings of gender-responsive pedagogy in Zimbabwe are primarily the result of in-service training,

with these understandings influencing classroom practice. Trained teachers demonstrate more operational understandings of GRP and report consistently applying inclusive practices such as gender-neutral language, equitable task allocation, and deliberate efforts to challenge stereotypes, while teachers without access to training report having less confidence in GRP and relying on more traditional methods. The extent to which teachers are able to implement and sustain GRP practices depends on broader structural, relational, and transformational factors. Policies, resources, and school leadership provide the structural foundation; community engagement and social norms shape relational dynamics; and shifts in mindsets and attitudes reinforce transformational change. When these layers align, teachers are better able to embed GRP consistently, but gaps in training, resources, and cultural resistance hinder progress. Confidence, understanding, and skills gained through training are constrained by resource shortages, discriminatory social norms, and unconscious biases, showing that training alone cannot guarantee effective, sustained implementation of GRP.

# Recommendations for accelerating gender-responsive pedagogy implementation in Zimbabwe

Advancing gender-responsive pedagogy within Zimbabwe's education system requires a systemic approach that strengthens institutional structures, nurtures equitable relationships, and transforms long-standing mindsets. Effective implementation must be anchored within the mandates of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development (MHTESTD), the Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Yet these ministries operate within a wider ecosystem that includes teachers, school leaders, students, parents, religious and community leaders, and training institutions as well as nonformal actors, all of whom shape how pedagogy is understood and practiced. The government bodies provide the institutional backbone for this ecosystem, ensuring coherence, resources, and accountability, while the broader actors sustain the cultural and relational dimensions of change.

Achieving inclusive education and gender-responsive pedagogy requires systemic change that bridges the gap between policy and classroom practice. Based on the findings of this policy brief, the following recommendations are proposed under three interrelated dimensions of transformation:

## A. Structural transformation

» **Recommendation 1: Integrate GRP into pre-service curricula and mandatory in-service training programs. (MHTESTD, MoPSE)**

MHTESTD, which oversees teacher training colleges and universities, must integrate GRP throughout all pre-service teacher education programs to ensure graduates enter the teaching profession fully equipped for inclusive, gender-sensitive instruction. At the in-service level, MoPSE must institutionalize GRP within continuous professional development (CPD), making it compulsory for teachers, school leaders, and district supervisors.

To ensure the treatment of GRP as a cross-cutting component of teacher training and sufficient financing for essential materials, MoPSE and MHTESTD must work collaboratively to ensure that curriculum reforms, including the Heritage-Based Curriculum, are supported with structured GRP training and appropriate teaching resources. A nationally coherent Continuous Professional Development strategy jointly developed by the two ministries will help strengthen implementation by including clear timelines, monitoring and evaluation structures, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

Advancing gender-responsive pedagogy within Zimbabwe's education system requires a systemic approach that strengthens institutional structures, nurtures equitable relationships, and transforms long-standing mindsets.

» **Recommendation 2: Provide follow-up support to GRP training.** (MoPSE)

This would include practical classroom guides and structured monitoring to sustain classroom changes. MoPSE should integrate gender-disaggregated indicators into its monitoring, supervision, and inspection frameworks. Providing inclusive learning materials and practical GRP-HBC classroom guides will support teachers in applying equitable pedagogical approaches. School leadership and district supervision must reinforce GRP as a core professional expectation.

» **Recommendation 3: Ring-fence funding for GRP-integrated continuous professional development.** (Ministry of Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion, working closely with MoPSE)

Donor-funded initiatives should align with national priorities, while harmonization between MoPSE will ensure alignment between teacher education and classroom practice. The Teaching Professions Council Bill offers another critical opportunity, allowing MHTESTD to embed GRP competencies within teacher licensing and professional standards, with MoPSE ensuring compliance at the school level.

## B. Relational transformation

» **Recommendation 4: Mobilize communities, parents, school development committees, and traditional leaders to support gender-responsive teaching.** (MoPSE and the Ministry of Women's Affairs)

Community engagement is essential for building shared responsibility for gender equity. Framing GRP within culturally grounded values, particularly through alignment with the Heritage-Based Curriculum can foster community ownership and reduce resistance to gender-transformative practices.

## C. Mindset transformation

» **Recommendation 5: Transform teachers' mindsets through gender awareness trainings for effective GRP implementation.** (MoPSE, MoHTE, School leaders, teachers, and other education officials)

Mindset transformation is critical for sustaining GRP across Zimbabwe's education system. Teachers, school leaders, and education officials must internalize GRP as a core professional value. MoPSE and MoHTE should embed GRP throughout pre-service and in-service training programs to foster positive attitudes toward gender equity.

» **Recommendation 6: Provide targeted Continuous Professional Development for the middle tier.** (MoPSE)

A culture where GRP thrives is created when leaders actively promote inclusivity through coaching teachers, organizing collaborative reflection sessions, and prioritizing gender-responsive practices in staff meetings. Hence, to strengthen GRP implementation, leadership development initiatives must equip school heads, district officials, and teacher educators to model and champion gender equality. Transforming beliefs, attitudes, and expectations at the leadership level strengthens the entire school ecosystem. responsive practices in staff meetings.

# Conclusion

Zimbabwe has made commendable progress in embedding gender equality within its education policies, yet the gap between policy and classroom practice persists. Without structured teacher support, systemic coordination, and shifts in norms and beliefs, gender-responsive pedagogy will remain aspirational rather than transformative. As the school-age population grows and learning gaps widen, urgent action is needed to institutionalize GRP across teacher training, strengthen school-level implementation, and foster mindsets that challenge

stereotypes. By aligning structural reforms, relational partnerships, and cultural change, Zimbabwe can accelerate progress toward inclusive, equitable, and quality education, ensuring every classroom becomes a space where all learners thrive. Policymakers, education leaders, and partners must act now to embed GRP into every level of the education system, turning policy commitments into classroom realities that empower all learners and advance SDGs 4 and 5.



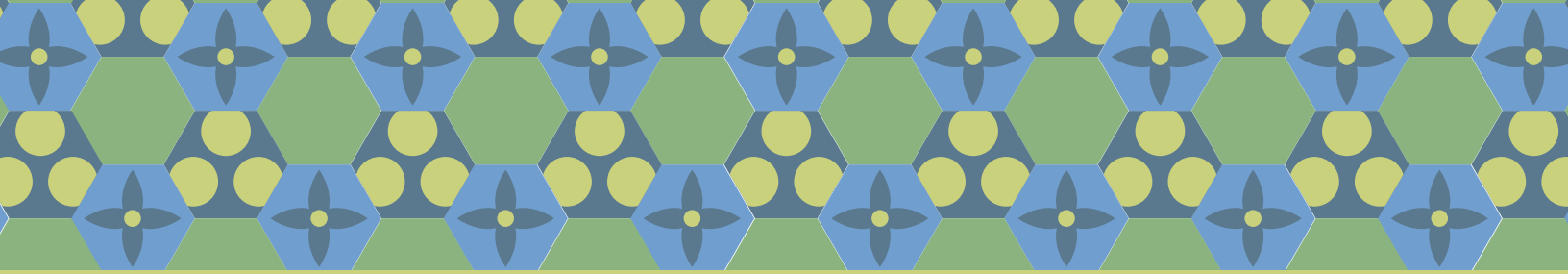
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# Appendix A. State-level policies and reforms to address gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy

| YEAR(S)   | POLICY/REFORM/PROGRAM   |
|-----------|---|
| 2013      | <a href="#">Constitution of Zimbabwe</a> : Section 27(2) states that the State must take measures to ensure that girls are afforded the same opportunities as boys to obtain education at all levels. Section 6(4) on languages states that the State must promote and advance the use of all languages used in Zimbabwe, including sign language, and must create conditions for the development of those languages.   |
| 2015      | Teacher Professional Standards (TPS): Introduced standards requiring teachers to demonstrate gender responsiveness and inclusive teaching strategies.   |
| 2016      | <a href="#">Disabled Person Act</a> : Promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination and ensuring their full participation in all aspects of society, including education. The Act supports the transformation of educational systems to accommodate diverse learners, ensuring equitable access to quality education for pupils with disabilities through mainstreaming, adapted infrastructure, and supportive policies. |
| 2015–2030 | <a href="#">Sustainable Development Goal 4</a> : Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.  |
| 2020      | <a href="#">Education Act</a> : Prohibited discrimination in school admission, suspension, or expulsion based on sex, gender, pregnancy, marital status, or social status.  |
| 2021–2025 | <a href="#">National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1)</a> : Prioritized gender mainstreaming across sectors, including education, with emphasis on equal opportunities and monitoring.   |
| 2024–2030 | <a href="#">Heritage-Based Curriculum (HBC)</a> : Mandated gender sensitivity, equity, and fairness in teaching and resource access.  |
| 2024–2030 | Safeguarding, Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion Strategy: Addressed gender stereotypes in subject choices, especially in STEM, and called for improved tracking.  |
| 2025      | <a href="#">National Gender Policy</a> : Advocated for gender mainstreaming across all sectors, promoting equal access and integration of gender in curriculum reform.  |
| Undated   | <a href="#">MoPSE Practical Inclusive Education Handbook</a> : Guided schools and teachers to implement inclusivity, equity, and gender sensitivity in daily practice, aligned with constitutional values.  |



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The Echidna Global Scholars Program at the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings seeks to catalyze and amplify the impact of local leaders working to advance gender equality in and through education across the Global South.

During a six-month fellowship, Echidna Global Scholars conduct individual research focused on improving learning opportunities and life outcomes for girls, young women, and gender non-conforming people, develop their leadership and evidence-based policy skills, build substantive knowledge on gender and global education issues, and expand their pathways for impact. Upon completion of the fellowship, scholars transition to the Echidna Alumni Network, a growing community of practice aimed at promoting their significant, sustained, and collective influence on gender-transformative education globally and locally.

