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A comparative analysis of strategies to transform early childhood education curricula for gender equality and social inclusion across six SADC countries

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Abstract

Early childhood education (ECE) shapes gender identity and social inclusion from a child's earliest years, yet whether Southern African Development Community (SADC) curricula translate gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) commitments into classroom practice remains poorly understood. This article compares ECE curricula, teacher guidance materials and policy instruments across six SADC countries – Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Eswatini – drawing on a regional desk review commissioned by the TRANAC consortium and cross-referenced against eight studies across East and Southern Africa. Using a GESI curriculum assessment tool grounded in Sen's capability approach, Unterhalter's dimensions of educational equity, and Walker's list of capabilities, the analysis finds that all six countries have ratified international instruments, yet gender-responsive and disability-inclusive guidance remains largely implicit in curriculum frameworks, weakly reflected in teaching materials, and inconsistently delivered by inadequately trained educators. A policy-to-practice “pipeline leakage” pattern emerges, whereby GESI intent weakens from policy, to curriculum, to materials, to classroom practice. Cross-referencing against studies of Namibian ECE, continental gender-inclusion econometrics, gender in technical and vocational training, SADC-wide inclusive-education implementation, a Botswana multi-sectoral partnership, Southern African cultural-pedagogy reform, East African social-protection integration, and a continental synthesis of girls' and women's education shows this pattern recurring across levels, sectors, regions and methods. Findings are synthesised into a seven-pillar Regional GESI-Responsive Curriculum Transformation Framework, extended with a social-protection component, with staged immediate, medium-term and long-term reforms for governments, curriculum developers, teacher-training institutions and regional bodies.

1. Introduction

Early childhood is the period in which children first internalise ideas about gender, ability, language and belonging, and the curricula and pedagogical practices to which they are exposed play a disproportionate role in that process [1, 2]. Sustainable Development Goal 4 commits states to inclusive and equitable quality education, while Goal 5 commits states to gender equality; both are explicit that early learning environments are a legitimate and necessary site of intervention, since gender norms and disability stigma are formed and reinforced from the earliest years of schooling [1, 10]. At the regional level, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development obliges member states to eliminate gender stereotyping from curricula and teacher training [1, 11], while the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obliges states to pursue inclusive education from the earliest possible stage [1, 12].

Despite this dense architecture of commitments, comparative evidence on whether early childhood education (ECE) curricula in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region actually operationalise gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) principles has been limited. Most available evidence is single-country and, within ECE specifically, largely descriptive [2]. The most comprehensive attempt to close this gap to date is the regional study commissioned by the TRANAC consortium – comprising civil-society coalitions in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Malawi, Eswatini, Zambia and Mozambique – which developed and applied a common GESI curriculum assessment tool across the six countries [1]. That study forms the empirical core of the present article.

The urgency of closing this gap is underlined by the continental record on girls' and women's education more broadly. A five-country synthesis of case studies spanning each of the African Union's five regions found that, even where near-parity in primary enrolment has been achieved, completion, transition to secondary school, and progression into technical, vocational and higher education remain markedly unequal, and that the Gender Parity Index in African higher education has stagnated at approximately 0.68 since 2000 [9]. This continental pattern provides an important frame for the present analysis: it suggests that whatever policy-practice disconnect is identified within SADC ECE systems specifically is unlikely to be resolved by ECE-level reform alone, since it is embedded within a much longer educational pipeline in which gender and disability disparities compound at every subsequent transition point.

This article has two aims. First, it synthesises and re-presents the TRANAC/GESI regional study's five research objectives – curriculum content and pedagogy, gender norms and stereotypes, representation of vulnerable groups, policy alignment, and a regional transformation framework – as a single comparative analysis suitable for peer-reviewed publication. Second, it cross-references those findings against eight additional, independently authored studies covering Namibian ECE, macro-level gender inclusion and sustainable development in Africa, gender in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), implementation of inclusive education policy across SADC, a multi-sectoral education partnership in Botswana, cultural-pedagogy-based curriculum transformation across Southern Africa, social-protection and social-emotional-learning integration in East African ECE systems, and a continental synthesis of inclusive approaches to girls' and women's education [2–9]. The purpose of this cross-referencing is to establish whether the policy-practice disconnect identified within ECE in six countries is an isolated, sector-specific finding or part of a broader and more persistent regional and continental pattern that recurs across educational levels, sectors, geographies and methodological traditions.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The analysis adopts the three-part theoretical framework developed for the regional study: Amartya Sen's capability approach, Elaine Unterhalter's dimensions of educational equity and equality, and Melanie Walker's list of capabilities [1] (Table 1). Together these frameworks shift the analytical focus from formal access to education toward the substantive opportunities, freedoms and dignities that a curriculum affords different groups of children. This orientation is compatible with, and reinforced by, the ecological-systems and sociocultural theorising used in the parallel Namibian case study, which frames gender-responsive early learning as operating simultaneously at the level of the classroom (microsystem), the home-school interface (mesosystem), teacher education and curriculum authorities (exosystem), and national cultural norms (macrosystem) [2].

A third point of convergence comes from a parallel theoretical account of ECE curriculum transformation in Southern Africa, which grounds reform in Ubuntugogy and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), treating storytelling, play, language and community participation as the principal mediating tools through which culturally embedded, socially situated learning occurs [7]. This account maps closely onto Walker's capability of respect and cultural affiliation and Unterhalter's “equity from below,” and indicates that GESI-responsive curriculum reform in the region cannot be meaningfully separated from the parallel decolonial and cultural-pedagogy agenda already under discussion in the ECE literature. The convergence of three independently constructed theoretical frameworks on the same conclusion – that curriculum reform must act simultaneously

on classroom practice, the systems that shape it, and the cultural knowledge base it draws upon – further strengthens confidence in the analytical approach taken here.

Table 1
Theoretical framework applied in the comparative analysis

Theoretical framework	Core principle	Application in this analysis
Sen's capability approach	Evaluates the real opportunities (capabilities) a curriculum affords, not physical access alone	Assesses whether ECE curricula give all children genuine learning opportunities regardless of sex, disability, language or location
Unterhalter's dimensions of educational equity	Distinguishes equity from above (policy), from the middle (resource distribution) and from below (learner agency)	Structures the policy-curriculum-practice comparison used throughout the analysis
Walker's list of capabilities	Specifies indicators such as equal participation, bodily integrity, resources and respect	Provides classroom-level indicators for participation, safety, facilities and dignified treatment
Ubuntugogy and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)	Frames learning as socially mediated through cultural tools, storytelling, play and community participation	Grounds the cross-referencing of cultural-pedagogy evidence with the capability-based curriculum comparison

3. Materials and Methods

This article is a comparative research synthesis rather than a primary data collection exercise. Its principal source is the TRANAC/GESI regional study, which employed a mixed-methods comparative design combining systematic desk review of national ECE curriculum frameworks, teachers' guides, learner materials and policy documents; the development of a six-dimension, five-point Cross-Country GESI Curriculum Assessment Tool (gender equality, disability inclusion, linguistic diversity, cultural responsiveness, teacher GESI capacity, and curriculum explicitness); qualitative coding of curriculum materials for explicit and implicit gender norms; and policy alignment analysis against the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the UNESCO Tashkent Declaration [1].

To test the generalisability of the regional study's findings, eight additional studies were purposively identified and cross-referenced (Table 2): a qualitative document review of Namibian ECE policy and curriculum [2]; a Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) and Ordinary Least Squares panel analysis of gender inclusion and the Sustainable Development Index across 42 African countries between 2000 and 2019 [3]; a pan-African literature review of gender issues in TVET [4]; a PRISMA-ScR scoping review of inclusive-education policy implementation across 14 SADC countries [5]; a descriptive case study of a multi-sectoral, community-based education partnership in Botswana [6]; a PRISMA-guided systematic review of 79 sources on cultural pedagogy and curriculum transformation in Southern African ECE [7]; a longitudinal, mixed-methods document review of teacher-professional-learning and social-protection programmes in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania [8]; and a five-country continental synthesis of case studies on inclusive approaches to girls' and women's education [9]. These sources were selected because each addresses a distinct educational level, sector, geography or analytical method, allowing triangulation of the central claim that policy commitments to gender equality and inclusion across Africa are not reliably translated into practice.

Table 2
Studies synthesised in this comparative analysis

Source	Geographic scope / method	Educational level or sector	Primary contribution to this synthesis
Mudiwa, Darara & Machanzi [1] (TRANAC/GESI regional study)	Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Eswatini; mixed-methods desk review	Early childhood education	Primary evidence base; six-dimension GESI curriculum assessment tool; pipeline-leakage model
Immanuel & Gontes [2]	Namibia; qualitative thematic document review	Early childhood education	Single-country corroboration of implicit-gender-guidance finding; ecological/sociocultural theorising
Tchamyou & Edoh [3]	42 African countries, 2000–2019; GMM/OLS panel econometrics	Macro-economic / labour market	Tests whether gender inclusion converts into development gains, and under what conditions
Bray-Collins, Andrade & Wanjiru [4]	Pan-African literature review	Technical and vocational education and training	Evidence that unaddressed early gender norms persist into adolescent and adult skills training
Mbazi, Okwaput, Nato & Emong [5]	14 SADC countries, 42 studies; PRISMA-ScR scoping review	Primary and inclusive education	Confirms that the implementation gap identified in ECE recurs across the schooling system
Balisi, Moses, Madisa & Molosiwa [6]	Botswana; descriptive case study	Community-based, non-formal education	Illustrates a multi-sectoral governance model capable of narrowing the policy-practice gap
Chikuvadze, Mutseekwa, Makuvire & Zuva [7]	Southern Africa; PRISMA-guided systematic review of 79 sources	Early childhood education	Corroborates curriculum-fragmentation and colonial-legacy findings; adds Ubuntugogy/CHAT theoretical grounding and a cultural-pedagogy transformation model
Wango [8]	Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania; longitudinal, mixed-methods document review (SESEA and F4L programmes)	Early childhood and primary education	Cross-regional corroboration of gender-responsive pedagogy gains and teacher-development gaps; introduces social-protection integration as a complementary lever
AU/CIEFFA [9]	Algeria, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Zambia; five-country comparative case-study synthesis	Primary through tertiary and adult education	Provides continental baseline gender-parity data and policy-framework context (CESA 16–25, Agenda 2063, Dakar Framework) against which SADC-specific findings can be situated

This synthesis inherits the limitations of its constituent studies. The regional study relies on documentary sources rather than direct classroom observation, and evidence availability is uneven across the six countries, with Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Eswatini comparatively well documented and Mozambique and Lesotho relying more heavily on grey literature from UNICEF, the World Bank and non-governmental organisations [1]. The eight cross-referenced studies differ in publication date, geographic scope, educational level and

methodological tradition, so their findings are treated as corroborating or contrasting evidence rather than as directly commensurable data points.

4. Results

4.1 Curriculum content, structure and pedagogical orientation

All six countries have adopted, in principle, child-centred, play-based ECE curricula that emphasise holistic development across physical, cognitive, social-emotional and language domains [1]. The institutional arrangements through which this principle is delivered, however, diverge sharply (Table 3). Zimbabwe and Zambia operate more formalised, state-integrated structures – Zimbabwe's Infant School Module under the 2024–2030 Heritage-Based Curriculum, and Zambia's 2024 ECE Syllabi – while Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Eswatini rely predominantly on community-managed, volunteer-dependent provision such as Lesotho's home bases, Malawi's Community-Based Childcare Centres, Mozambique's Escolinhas Comunitarias, and Eswatini's Neighbourhood Care Points and Kagogo Centres [1]. Reported ECE budget shares range from roughly 16% in Zimbabwe's consolidated ECD-primary allocation down to 1.8% in Eswatini, with several countries reporting allocations well below the 10% of the education budget recommended in the UNESCO Tashkent Declaration [1].

Table 3
Financial allocations and structural parameters of ECE across six SADC countries

Country	ECE budget share	Dominant delivery mechanism	Governing curriculum instrument
Zimbabwe	~ 16%	State-integrated Infant School Module	Heritage-Based Curriculum, 2024–2030
Zambia	Low (unspecified)	ECE centres feeding into primary schools	2024 ECE Syllabi with Universal Design for Learning guidance
Lesotho	4.8%	Reception classes and community home bases	Integrated Curriculum, 2009
Malawi	5% (target 10%)	Community-Based Childcare Centres and private nurseries	Integrated ECD Syllabus
Mozambique	Low (unspecified)	Community pre-schools (Escolinhas Comunitarias)	SNE Law, 2018, with transversal gender-relations theme
Eswatini	1.8%	Neighbourhood Care Points and Kagogo Centres	No single documented national syllabus

State-integrated structures bring standardisation but do not, on their own, guarantee GESI-responsive practice: Zimbabwe's Infant School Module reports teacher-learner ratios exceeding 50:1 in some classes, undermining any curriculum's capacity to deliver individualised, inclusive pedagogy [1]. Conversely, community-based models expand access in rural and low-income areas but suffer from high caregiver turnover, minimal formal training, and inconsistent pedagogical guidance [1]. A structurally similar pattern is reported for Namibia, where the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2007) and the 3–4-years curriculum framework promote inclusive, learner-centred principles but provide no explicit guidance on challenging gender stereotypes, leaving gender responsiveness dependent on individual educators' interpretation [2]. The

recurrence of this exact configuration – strong general principles, weak operational guidance – in a seventh country outside the original six-country sample supports treating it as a regional rather than a country-specific feature.

This structural divergence mirrors a broader diagnosis offered by a systematic review of 79 sources on ECE curriculum transformation across Southern Africa, which finds that curriculum fragmentation in the region is rooted in colonial legacies and perpetuated by siloed governance across education, health and social-welfare ministries, donor-driven curricula that are often poorly aligned with national priorities, and teacher-training programmes that remain anchored in Western instructional models with limited attention to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) [7]. Read alongside the present analysis, this suggests that the community-managed, donor-dependent delivery mechanisms observed in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Eswatini are not simply resourcing gaps but symptoms of the same historically rooted institutional fragmentation identified at a regional scale [1, 7].

4.2 Implicit and explicit gender norms, stereotypes and exclusionary elements

Applying the Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) framework's four domains – classroom environment and materials, classroom management and organisation, teaching and learning practices, and relationships with parents and community – none of the six national curricula was found to address all four systematically [1, 14]. Country-level evidence illustrates the mechanisms involved. In Zimbabwe, values-based pedagogy organised around Unhu/Ubuntu risks reinforcing patriarchal family structures in storytelling and modelling activities unless curriculum guides provide explicit counter-stereotyping direction [1]. In Zambia, domestic expectations steer girls toward caregiving play and boys toward leadership roles, consistent with a grade 12 completion gap of 31.6% for girls against 40.4% for boys and female representation in STEM courses of only 25% [1]. In Lesotho, the absence of standardised learning materials in 65% of centres leads facilitators to substitute home-made toys that mirror gendered domestic and pastoral divisions of labour [1]. In Malawi, high turnover among untrained volunteer caregivers undermines continuity in challenging gender stereotypes in play and storytelling [1]. In Mozambique, gender relations are treated as an informative rather than transformative transversal theme, leaving classroom practice largely gender-neutral in name but not in effect [1]. In Eswatini, early separate socialisation channels girls toward humanities and domestic care and boys toward science and physical play, a pattern compounded by the absence of a documented national curriculum [1]. Notably, Eswatini milestone data also show boys underperforming girls in early literacy and numeracy (14% versus 23%, and 16% versus 25%, respectively), indicating that a two-sided GESI lens addressing under-performance in both sexes is required rather than a girls-only framing [1].

This pattern is consistent with, and extends, findings from Namibia, where teachers' limited application of gender-responsive pedagogy has been linked directly to the reproduction of gender inequality in the classroom [2]. It is also consistent with evidence that gender-biased content is not confined to early childhood: a multi-country content analysis of children's books across 34 countries, including several SADC states, found consistent under-representation and stereotyping of female characters, while a Zambian textbook analysis found 73.9% of illustrative examples featured male characters [1].

A structurally similar, two-sided pattern of gender-responsive progress coexisting with residual bias is reported for early-grade systems in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, where longitudinal teacher-development data show that between 80% and 88% of teachers actively practise mixed-gender seating and gender-inclusive language, yet 37–44% of student teachers report the absence of formal grievance procedures for discrimination, and educators in mathematics and science continued to exhibit unconscious biases that favoured boys [8]. This corroborates the finding, from the six-country SADC desk review, that gender-responsive practice can advance substantially in some domains – representation, seating, language – while remaining largely unaddressed in others, such as STEM subject bias and formal accountability mechanisms [1]. A continental baseline further situates these findings: as recently as the mid-2010s, the Gender Parity Index in technical and vocational education stood at just 0.2 in Tanzania, and only 34% of Algerian girls who completed secondary education progressed into TVET despite comprising 60% of secondary enrolment, indicating that occupational gender segregation documented at the ECE-to-TVET pipeline is a long-standing, pan-African phenomenon rather than one confined to the six SADC countries studied here [9].

The consequences of this early, uncorrected patterning are visible later in the education and training system. The pan-African TVET literature review finds pronounced occupational segregation by gender, with women outnumbered five to one by men in Burkina Faso's industrial trades and two-thirds of male TVET enrolment in Uganda concentrated in construction, motor-vehicle maintenance and carpentry against two-thirds of female enrolment in cooking, beauty and business studies [4]. The same review documents a pervasive “atmosphere of masculinity” in TVET institutions, marked by the near-absence of female instructors, unconscious bias among trainers of both sexes, and curriculum content and case studies that privilege a male perspective [4]. Read alongside the ECE-level findings, this suggests continuity rather than coincidence: norms that are left unchallenged in early play and storytelling appear to re-emerge as occupational segregation and institutional culture more than a decade later.

4.3 Representation and support for children with disabilities, linguistic minorities and vulnerable groups

All six countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and adopted inclusive-education policies drawing on the Salamanca Framework, yet children with disabilities, linguistic minorities and rural, low-income populations continue to experience compounded exclusion [1]. In Zambia, only 2% of ECE centres meet basic accessibility standards despite the 2016 Early Learning and Development Standards providing detailed guidance for adapting activities for children with visual and hearing impairments [1]. In Lesotho, national ECE coverage of 35.2% masks a stark urban-rural divide (48% against 22% enrolment), and 60% of centres lack clean water, sanitation and learning resources [1]. In Eswatini, an estimated 52% of school-age children with disabilities are entirely out of school, and girls with functional disabilities experience rates of sexual and physical violence twice as high as their non-disabled peers [1]. In Mozambique, a stark intersectional literacy gap is documented, with 49% of men with disabilities able to read and write compared with only 17% of women with disabilities [1]. In Malawi, only 25% of Community-Based Childcare Centres have access to essential water and sanitation facilities [1] (Table 4).

Table 4
Comparative gender-responsive pedagogy, disability screening and language-of-instruction indicators

Country	Status of gender-responsive pedagogy	Disability screening in ECE	Mother-tongue / bilingual instruction
Zimbabwe	Conceptual, framed through Unhu/Ubuntu values	Limited; no age-appropriate screening	Sixteen constitutional languages recognised
Zambia	Piloted through the GRP4ECE toolkit	Absent locally; no dedicated screening tools	Policy exists; about 80% textbook shortage reported
Lesotho	Conceptual, embedded in the integrated learning-area model	Inadequate, especially in rural areas	Sesotho, transitioning to English
Malawi	Conceptual, framed as early stimulation	Absent; no ECD assessment tools	Chichewa, transitioning to English
Mozambique	Informative transversal theme, not transformative	Inadequate; split ministerial oversight	Bilingual instruction in Xichangana and Xirhonga
Eswatini	Effectively absent from ECE guidance	Absent; care points lack specialised aids	Siswati, transitioning to English

This pattern of partial progress and persistent resourcing gaps is also visible outside the SADC region. In Uganda, 80% of student teachers reported that their schools were becoming more disability-friendly, and educators described differentiated instruction and physical adaptations such as ramps and front-row seating for learners with hearing impairment; nevertheless, the same teachers identified an absence of specialised resources, assessment instruments and dedicated professional development as the principal constraint on sustaining these practices [8], a constraint that closely parallels the disability-screening gaps documented in Zambia, Mozambique and Eswatini in this analysis [1]. At a continental level, gender disparities compound with these disability and resourcing gaps particularly for the poorest and most rural learners: national primary completion in Côte d'Ivoire has historically left four in ten children unable to complete the cycle, with girls the more likely to drop out, and literacy rates for women in some Central African contexts remain more than twenty percentage points below those for men [9]. These findings reinforce, at a wider geographic scale, the conclusion that exclusion in SADC ECE systems is compounded rather than singular, following intersecting lines of gender, disability, language, geography and poverty [1, 5].

These findings are corroborated, at a larger scale and a different educational level, by a scoping review of 42 studies spanning 14 SADC countries, which identifies an almost identical set of implementation barriers to inclusive education in primary and secondary schools: inadequate instructional materials, inaccessible infrastructure, rigid and content-laden curricula, insufficiently trained teachers, and negative attitudes among teachers and administrators toward disability and inclusion [5]. That review further finds that these barriers actively exclude learners with special needs by limiting participation, generating social and psychological isolation, and, in several countries, resulting in poorly designed policies that are more theoretical than contextually grounded [5]. The convergence between an ECE-focused, six-country desk review and a primary/secondary-focused, 14-country scoping review, produced independently and using different methods, indicates that the disability-inclusion gap identified in this analysis is systemic to SADC education systems rather than confined to early learning.

A related safeguarding concern emerges from the TVET literature: female TVET students report the highest lifetime prevalence of gender-based violence of any student population studied, some 30% higher than female university students, attributable in part to unsafe facilities, inadequate separate sanitation, and the absence of female staff and mentors [4]. Read alongside Walker's bodily-integrity capability, this suggests that the safeguarding and dignity gaps documented at the ECE level in this analysis are not remedied as children progress through the system, and may instead compound by the time girls and young women reach vocational training.

4.4 Alignment between ECE curricula and national, regional and global GESI frameworks

Examining coherence between ECE curriculum content and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNESCO Tashkent Declaration reveals a pattern of formal compliance combined with de facto implementation gaps, described in the regional study as a “pipeline leakage” model: GESI integration is strong at the policy level, moderate at the curriculum-framework level, weak in teaching and learning materials, and weakest in classroom practice [1]. Country-level evidence illustrates specific mechanisms of leakage. Zimbabwe's National Gender Policy provides ten pillars but a budget of approximately US$150 million, described as far below the amount required [1]. Zambia's Directorate of ECE mandate for annual monitoring of teacher preparedness and GESI compliance is not consistently enforced, and no GESI indicators are integrated into national assessment frameworks [1]. Lesotho's Ministry of Education and Training allocated only 0.08% of its budget to ECE in the 2024/25 fiscal year, down from 0.14% three years earlier, leaving the sector reliant on donors for 78.44% of its capital budget [1]. Malawi has not signed the revised 2016 SADC Protocol amendment [1]. Mozambique's ECE sector is split between two ministries, preventing systematic rollout of GESI-transformative pedagogy [1]. Eswatini's unwritten customary law and traditional governance structures conflict with constitutional protections, restricting, for example, women's land rights despite constitutional guarantees of equal access [1].

This governance-level finding resonates with macro-econometric evidence on gender inclusion and sustainable development across 42 African countries: government effectiveness is positively and significantly associated with the Sustainable Development Index across most model specifications, while the effect of gender inclusion itself on sustainable development is conditional on income group – positive and significant for middle-income countries but negative and statistically insignificant for low-income countries [3]. The implication for ECE policy is that curriculum-level gender reform, without complementary investment in governance capacity, financing and economic opportunity, is unlikely to translate into the development gains that gender-equality policies anticipate, particularly in the lower-income contexts that predominate among the six countries studied here.

The governance fragmentation identified within SADC ECE systems is consistent with findings from the wider Southern African literature, which attributes curriculum fragmentation in part to the persistence of siloed ministerial responsibility for education, health and social welfare, and to donor-designed programmes that do not always align with national reform priorities [7]. It is also consistent with evidence from East African systems, where social-protection measures intended to complement early learning – school feeding, health screening and social-service referrals – were found to operate as parallel programmes rather than being systematically embedded within core ECE service delivery, limiting their reach to the most vulnerable children despite demonstrated gains in attendance and readiness to learn where such integration was achieved [8]. This

suggests that the seven-pillar transformation framework's disability-inclusion and coordination pillars (see Section 5.3) would benefit from an explicit social-protection integration component, an element not separately identified in the original six-country GESI study [1]. At the continental policy level, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25) and Agenda 2063 both commit African Union member states to accelerating gender parity and equity in education, with CESA 16–25 specifying five dedicated action areas for at-risk gender groups; the persistence of the pipeline-leakage pattern identified in this analysis, a decade into that continental strategy, indicates that the aspiration-implementation gap in SADC ECE is not for want of continental policy architecture but of resourced, monitored implementation [9].

A contrasting, more positive example of closing the policy-practice gap comes from a multi-sectoral education partnership in Botswana, in which a regional psychosocial-support curriculum for caregivers of orphaned and vulnerable children was jointly designed by a United Nations agency and a regional non-governmental network, quality-assured by a university, delivered through a national open university with lowered entry requirements and intensified learner support, and sponsored by a combination of government, private-sector and non-governmental funding [6]. This governance model – explicit division of labour across curriculum development, quality assurance, delivery, monitoring and financing among multiple sectors – offers a concrete institutional template for the coordination and monitoring pillars that the regional GESI-responsive framework identifies as currently weakest across the six ECE systems studied [1, 6].

4.5 Cross-country comparative synthesis

Considered together, the six-country evidence base indicates a region in which formal policy architecture for gender equality and inclusion is comparatively strong and broadly harmonised with international norms, while curriculum-level operationalisation, teaching materials, and classroom practice display cumulative and compounding weaknesses. The average public budget allocation to ECE across the six countries is estimated at 2.3% of total education spending, against an estimated 7:1 economic return on investment in high-quality early childhood programmes, an asymmetry the regional study characterises as the central structural constraint on transformation [1]. Cross-referencing this evidence against studies conducted in different countries, sectors, educational levels and time periods – Namibia's ECE sector [2], continental labour markets [3], TVET institutions [4], primary and secondary inclusive education across 14 SADC states [5], a non-formal, community-based programme in Botswana [6], a 79-source systematic review of curriculum transformation across Southern Africa [7], a longitudinal teacher-development study across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania [8], and a five-country continental synthesis of girls' and women's education spanning the decade prior to the TRANAC/GESI study [9] – does not surface any contradictory finding. Instead, each additional source reproduces some version of the same policy-practice disconnect, while the Botswana case and the East African social-protection evidence additionally demonstrate that the gap is not inevitable where deliberate multi-sectoral coordination and integration are established [6, 8].

5. Discussion

5.1 A cathedral with a polished dome and cracked foundations

The regional study characterises the SADC ECE landscape through the metaphor of a cathedral with a polished dome but cracked foundations: the dome represents progressive national and regional policy frameworks, and

the pillars represent the advocacy capacity of civil-society coalitions such as ZINECDA, ZANEC and NECDOL, while the cracked foundations represent underfunded classrooms, reliance on unpaid and untrained volunteer caregivers, absent specialised materials, and customary practices that conflict with constitutional protections [1]. This analysis finds that the metaphor extends coherently beyond ECE. The TVET review documents an equivalent structure – continental policy commitments under Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals sitting atop institutions that reproduce, rather than transform, patriarchal gender regimes [4]. The SADC-wide inclusive-education scoping review documents the same structure for primary and secondary schooling [5]. The macro-econometric evidence suggests the structural cracks extend into the labour market itself, where the returns to gender inclusion depend on complementary governance and economic conditions that many low-income SADC states currently lack [3].

The cultural-pedagogy literature on Southern African ECE offers a complementary architectural image: it characterises the region's curricula as retaining epistemological assumptions inherited from colonial structures beneath post-independence reform rhetoric, with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, storytelling, communal practice and mother-tongue instruction remaining insufficiently institutionalised relative to Western pedagogical norms [7]. The continental gender-parity record reinforces the durability of these cracks: the Gender Parity Index in African higher education improved during the 1990s but has stagnated at approximately 0.68 since 2000, and out-of-school numbers for children of primary-school age in sub-Saharan Africa were estimated at 30 million as recently as 2013 [9]. Read together, these sources suggest that the cracked foundations identified within SADC ECE are neither recent nor sector-specific, but the current manifestation of a much longer-standing continental pattern.

5.2 Teacher development as the most promising point of intervention

Across the sources reviewed, the single most consistent recommendation is that curriculum text alone cannot drive transformation; the most effective lever identified is investment in teacher and caregiver capacity, delivered alongside curriculum guidance and quality learning materials [1]. Pilot evidence from the GRP4ECE model, developed by VVOB and FAWE with ministries in Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia and endorsed by the African Union and UNESCO-IICBA, demonstrates measurable improvement in teachers' and school leaders' understanding of gender concepts and reductions in stereotyped classroom practice within a single academic year [1, 14]. This is consistent with the TVET literature's finding that the presence of trained, gender-aware instructors and mentors is the strongest predictor of women's persistence and success in non-traditional fields [4], and with the inclusive-education scoping review's finding that teachers' insufficient knowledge and skills, and negative attitudes toward inclusion, are among the most frequently cited implementation barriers across SADC [5].

This conclusion is reinforced by longitudinal evidence from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, where sustained, context-specific teacher professional learning combined with regular in-class mentorship was associated with measurable gains in foundational literacy and numeracy – the proportion of children unable to read a single word fell from 77.2% to 32.1% following integrated social-emotional-learning and social-protection interventions – while teachers who lacked follow-up mentorship reported that even well-designed training produced no lasting change in classroom practice [8]. It is also consistent with the finding that teacher professional-development programmes across Southern Africa have relied predominantly on Western training models with

limited attention to Indigenous Knowledge Systems or culturally responsive pedagogy, reproducing at the level of teacher preparation the same disconnect between policy intent and classroom practice identified throughout this analysis [7].

5.3 A regional GESI-responsive curriculum transformation framework

Building on this evidence, the regional study proposes a seven-pillar transformation framework: (1) curriculum reform with explicit GESI learning outcomes; (2) teacher development through gender-responsive pedagogy training; (3) inclusive learning-materials development; (4) disability-inclusion infrastructure and support; (5) mother-tongue instruction and linguistic diversity; (6) monitoring and evaluation systems with GESI audit tools; and (7) strengthened regional coordination through SADC structures [1]. This analysis proposes that pillars six and seven – monitoring, evaluation and multi-sectoral coordination – are the weakest across all six countries studied, and that the Botswana multi-sectoral partnership offers a transferable institutional template: an explicit division of responsibility for curriculum design, quality assurance, delivery, and financing across government, university, United Nations and civil-society actors, coordinated through a single regional consortium structure [6]. Applied to ECE, this would mean formalising the role already played informally by the TRANAC consortium and its constituent national coalitions, giving them a defined mandate for the standardised GESI audit, monitoring report, and accountability functions envisaged in pillars six and seven [1].

This analysis further proposes that the seven pillars would be strengthened by an explicit social-protection integration component – school nutrition, health screening and social-service referral, embedded within core ECE delivery rather than run as parallel programming – following evidence that such integration measurably improves attendance and reduces toxic-stress-related learning barriers among the most vulnerable children when it is systematically rather than sporadically delivered [8]. Independent recommendations from a continental synthesis of girls' and women's education additionally reinforce pillars two, three and six, calling for expanded gender-friendly physical infrastructure and school-feeding programmes, systematic pre- and in-service training of teachers in gender sensitivity and guidance and counselling, and nationwide community-awareness campaigns on the importance of girls' education, each of which maps directly onto the teacher-development, materials and coordination pillars proposed here [9].

Recommended reforms are staged across three timeframes. In the immediate term (0–12 months), priorities include a standardised six-country GESI audit of curricula, textbooks and materials using a common coding instrument; embedding GRP4ECE awareness modules into existing in-service teacher professional development; rapid assessment of infrastructure accessibility; and establishment of baseline enrolment data disaggregated by sex, disability status, geography and language of instruction [1]. In the medium term (one to three years), priorities include adopting a regional GRP4ECE-anchored curriculum framework contextualised per country; operationalising the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' full-inclusion standard through early screening, accessible infrastructure and individualised education plans; protecting sustained mother-tongue instruction; addressing gender gaps affecting both boys and girls; integrating Universal Design for Learning principles; eliminating gender bias in materials; professionalising the community-based ECE workforce; and piloting systematic linkage of school feeding and health screening to core ECE delivery, drawing on the East African social-protection evidence reviewed above [1, 8]. In the long term (three to five years and beyond), priorities include legislating at least one year of free, compulsory, inclusive pre-primary education with

financing moving toward the UNESCO-recommended 10% of the education budget; aligning all national ECD policies explicitly with the revised SADC Protocol, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal target 4.2; institutionalising diploma-level, gender- and inclusion-competent ECE teacher qualifications; establishing a biennial regional GESI-in-ECE monitoring report; and mobilising innovative domestic financing to reduce donor dependency [1].

6. Limitations

This article synthesises secondary, documentary evidence and does not present new primary data. It inherits the evidentiary asymmetry of its principal source, in which Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Eswatini are more thoroughly documented than Mozambique and Lesotho [1]. The eight cross-referenced studies differ in publication year, geographic scope, educational level and methodology, which limits direct statistical comparability and means that convergence across sources should be read as corroborating qualitative evidence rather than as a formal meta-analytic result. Neither this article nor its principal source includes direct classroom observation, so conclusions about day-to-day pedagogical practice necessarily rely on inference from policy documents, curriculum text, teacher-training records and secondary research.

Widening the evidence base to include a further three sources – a 79-source systematic review of Southern African ECE curriculum transformation [7], a longitudinal document review of East African teacher-development programmes [8], and a five-country continental synthesis of girls' and women's education spanning 2016 [9] – strengthens the case that the findings generalise beyond the original six countries and beyond ECE, but also widens the range of publication dates (2016–2026), geographic scope (from single countries to 42-country continental panels) and methodological traditions (systematic review, longitudinal mixed-methods, comparative case study, econometric panel analysis) synthesised in this article. As with the original five cross-referenced studies, these additional sources are treated as corroborating qualitative evidence rather than as directly commensurable data points.

7. Conclusion

Across six SADC countries, early childhood education curricula share a common, internationally aligned commitment to child-centred, play-based, inclusive learning, and all six countries have ratified the international and regional instruments that require gender-responsive, disability-inclusive early education. Yet the translation of that commitment into curriculum content, teaching and learning materials, teacher capacity and classroom practice remains systematically incomplete, following a pipeline-leakage pattern in which GESI intent weakens at each successive stage of implementation [1]. Cross-referencing this finding against independent evidence from Namibia, continental labour-market econometrics, technical and vocational education and training, a 14-country inclusive-education scoping review, a Botswana multi-sectoral partnership, a 79-source systematic review of curriculum transformation across Southern Africa, longitudinal teacher-development evidence from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and a five-country continental synthesis of girls' and women's education indicates that this pattern is not specific to early childhood education, nor to the six countries originally studied, nor to the SADC region alone, but reflects a broader and persistent continental challenge in translating gender-equality and social-inclusion policy into practice across the education system [2–9]. The evidence nonetheless identifies concrete, evaluated entry points for change, most notably teacher and caregiver development, deliberate multi-

sectoral coordination, and systematic integration of social protection with core ECE delivery, and provides a staged, seven-pillar framework through which governments, curriculum developers, teacher-training institutions, civil-society coalitions and regional bodies can act. Without such coordinated action, ECE systems in the SADC region risk reproducing the inequalities of gender, disability, language and geography that they are explicitly mandated to address; with it, early childhood education can become a genuine foundation for a more equitable and inclusive region.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors (Benjamin Mudiwa, Obert Darara, Marceline Kahlari, Shoeshoe Mofokeng, Steelu Phiri, Precious Mungambata, Nelisiwe Dlamini, Edith C M Ng'oma, Emmanuel Blessing Moyo, Gertrudes Noronha) declare that they have no competing interests in relation to the work described in this article.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This article is based entirely on secondary analysis of published policy documents, curriculum frameworks and previously published research; it did not involve the collection of primary data from human or animal subjects.

Consent to publish

Not applicable. This article does not contain any individual person's data in any form (including individual details, images or videos).

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Author Contribution

Authors A- J developed write ups for each country. Author A consolidated and reviewed the country submissions into one coherant manuscript. Authors A- J reviewed, edited and provided additional information to the manuscript.

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Data availability Statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article (as the policy documents, curriculum frameworks and peer-reviewed and grey-literature sources cited in the reference list, including the TRANAC/GESI regional study [1]).

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