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NGOs' role in improving girl students' learning environment: perspectives from teacher mentors in NGO-supported public secondary schools

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Abstract

As development actors, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in expanding educational opportunities for girls, thereby making a significant contribution towards addressing gender disparities in education. In Tanzania, enrolment and progression rates in basic education are now nearly equivalent for both boys and girls, with girls' enrolment surpassing that of boys in certain education levels. However, the current challenge lies in ensuring that girls are able to achieve adequate retention and educational outcomes as merely enrolling them in schools is not sufficient to guarantee their education achievement. Drawing from the perspectives of teacher mentors, this paper examines the role of NGOs in improving learning environment for girl students which is considered to have substantial influence on girls' educational achievement. The study uses a qualitative approach and multiple-case study design. To obtain data, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 teacher mentors from 5 public secondary schools in the Dar es Salaam region of Tanzania. The findings indicate that NGOs play significant role in enhancing physical and psychosocial learning environments for girls. In addition to equipping schools with appropriate infrastructure and facilities to cater to girls' unique and sensitive needs, NGOs were found to undertake various measures to promote gender-responsive classroom practices and eradicate harmful gender stereotypes. To expedite realization of effective learning environments for girls, it is recommended that NGOs actively engage with local communities and other stakeholders to identify innovative and efficient strategies for addressing the challenges related to girls' learning environment.

Keywords Nongovernmental organisations · Girl students · Learning environment · Public secondary schools · Teacher mentors

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Introduction

Educational institutions such as schools are traditionally expected to provide learning environments that meet educational needs of children of both sexes (Action for Development 2010; Hermskerk et al. 2009). This include having access to adequate physical infrastructure with appropriate water and sanitation facilities, as well as teaching and learning practices that are responsive to gender considerations (Chapin and Warne 2020; UNESCO 2018). While substantial efforts have been made to improve the learning environment in public schools over the past few decades, evidence indicates that girls in most public schools continue to suffer from dilapidated and gender-unresponsive learning environments. For example, statistics provided by Global Education Monitoring report (2018) indicate that inadequate single-sex sanitation facilities exist in 22% of primary schools worldwide. At the same time, about 335 million girls attending primary and secondary schools globally do not have access to necessary facilities for menstrual hygiene (UNICEF 2019). This trend suggests that, despite notable progress made in achieving gender parity, inadequate and ineffective learning environments in public schools remain significant obstacles to the effective inclusion and retention of girls in the education system.

The responsibility for ensuring that girls have access to inclusive and equitable education, including safe and effective learning environments, is shared among various actors including governments, private sector and non-state actors, with NGOs playing a particularly important role. This was clearly stated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 when 189 governments and 4000 NGOs representatives agreed to carry out actions aimed at promoting rights of girl children (UN 1995). It was further reiterated in the Dakar Framework for Action of 2000, where governments, donor agencies and NGOs pledged to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, have access to complete and quality primary education (UNESCO 2000). The same goal was also reaffirmed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly in SDG4, which views both state and non-state education providers as important actors in the provision of gender sensitive, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments. Notice that, of the eight goals stated in the SDGs, goals five and ten specifically underscore effective inclusion of women in all spheres of life including education through adoption of effective policies and elimination of all forms of discrimination (UNESCO 2017). This prioritization of girls' education and the need for involvement of multiple actors indicate that, in addition to being on the global education agenda, educating girls continues to be regarded as a crucial milestone in achieving the EFA goals worldwide.

Recognizing the importance of expanding education opportunities for girls, many NGOs globally have taken an active role in addressing challenges underlying girls' exclusion and poor learning outcomes. While the causes and proposed solutions vary according to contexts, NGOs have implemented multiple strategies to address the problems. For example, in the Philippines, where the government has declared that gender parity is no longer a relevant target in its Education for

All (EFA) programming due to satisfactory growths in girls' enrolment, survival, and completion rates, NGOs have reportedly provided significant financial and material support to ensure that public schools effectively address the unique needs of girls through various coalitions such as E-Net (Raya and Castillo 2005). In the Asian countries of India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, studies similarly indicate that NGOs continue to play significant role in supporting government initiatives to address various challenges facing girls in schools (Falkowiska 2013; Reza 2022; Swainson 2006). Although success has yet to be fully achieved, evidence suggests that NGOs initiatives in these countries have been crucial in mitigating many challenges underlying girls' exclusion and poor learning outcomes.

Girl students' education and NGOs interventions in Tanzania

Like other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzania has achieved significant progress towards gender parity in education particularly since the inception of the Universal primary education, and more recently, the implementation of fee-free basic education programme (Hakielimu 2019). According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology enrolment and progression rates in basic education in the country are nearly equivalent for both boys and girls, with girls' enrolment surpassing that of boys in certain education levels (URT 2021a). Nevertheless, the challenge to girls' education appears to have shifted to ensuring that girls achieve retention and adequate learning outcomes. For example, in the year 2015 alone, an alarming number of more than 69,000 girls dropped out of school due to a variety of factors (URT 2016). Meanwhile, girls have continued to lag behind in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, as evidenced by their low uptake and poor performance in these areas (Dalton et al. 2019). When compared against other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, these gender gaps are significant and require immediate interventions if Tanzania is to make progress towards achieving gender equality under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Several studies conducted in the country have identified inadequate and ineffective learning environments as key factors contributing to girls' low retention rates and poor learning outcomes. According to a study by HakiElimu organization (2019), many girl students, particularly those studying at public schools, lack appropriate infrastructure and learning facilities to meet their unique needs. Moreover, they have limited access to basic sanitary and hygiene services and products, such as clean sanitary facilities and menstrual hygiene products. Similarly, in studies conducted by Human Rights Watch (2017), Iddy (2021) and Nkata et al. (2021) girls were reported as facing physical and sexual harassment as well as various forms of discriminatory practices and humiliation, including forced pregnancy testing. Although the government has taken steps to address some of these challenges, such as reversing its heavily criticised decision to ban pregnant schoolgirls from continuing their education in public schools, evidence suggests that girls in many public schools have continued to face inadequate and ineffective learning environments

despite government interventions (Human Rights Watch 2022). As a result of these conditions, many girls have found it hard to keep in pace with boys in both retention and learning outcomes despite higher enrolment rates.

As in other developing countries, one of the main reasons for the introduction of NGOs in Tanzania has been to complement government's provision of social services, including basic education (Ndumbaro and Kiondo 2007). Since their inception in the mid-1980s, NGOs have made significant efforts to promote educational developments in the country. There is ample evidence that such efforts are having a significant impact on education sector. For instance, a 2021 report by the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children shows that more than sixty one Tanzania Billion Shillings is provided by NGOs annually to support implementation of various projects on education, such as development of school infrastructure and provision of instructional materials including textbooks (URT 2021b). Numerous studies have investigated the effectiveness of such NGOs interventions in improving education access and quality in the country. Among these, Chengula (2019), Kassanga and Lekule (2021), and Moses (2020) have specifically focused on girls. However, limited research exists on how NGOs interventions contribute to improved learning environment for girl students. Addressing this gap is thus important in identifying effective approaches and guiding policy decisions that aim at improving girls' retention and education outcomes.

Therefore, this research draws on the unique perspectives of teacher mentors in public secondary schools to examine the role of NGOs in improving learning environment for girl students. Specifically, the study seeks to address three objectives as follows:

1. To examine the contribution of NGOs in improving physical learning environment for girl students.
2. To examine the role of NGOs in promoting gender-responsive classroom practices
3. To explore the contribution of NGOs in eradicating harmful gender stereotypes.

Methods

Approach and design

This study was a qualitative inquiry that aimed at obtaining diverse perspectives of teacher mentors on the role of NGOs towards improving learning environment of girl students in public secondary schools. Qualitative approach was thus adopted as it was deemed well-suited for collecting in-depth information and developing themes from insights and experiences of participants. Through the approach, participants were able to provide information flexibly and in a conversational manner. This enabled the researchers to probe and ask for clarifications which helped to ensure accuracy and richness of the data. Consistent with qualitative approach, the study utilised a multiple-case study design. To ensure a thorough understanding of the topic, five public secondary schools located in the Kinondoni Municipal council of Dar es Salaam region in Tanzania, were selected as focal cases for investigation. The

decision to include multiple cases was influenced by the recognition that evidence derived from a diverse set of cases tends to yield stronger and more reliable findings compared to those derived from a single case study (Creswell 2014; Cohen et al. 2018).

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 teacher mentors who were purposely selected from the population of public secondary schools teachers. The selection of the teacher mentors was based on their recognized role in mentoring and provision of psychosocial support to students (Simões and Alarcão 2014). It was also informed by the fact that in NGOs-supported schools teacher mentors tend to work very closely with school administration and other education stakeholders including NGOs to identify and address different challenges facing girls in school environment (CAMFED 2020). Therefore, given their duties and extensive involvement with NGOs, the views and insights of teacher mentors were considered uniquely important in highlighting the activities and the role NGOs perform towards improvement of learning environment for girl students in public secondary schools.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Upon securing research approvals from the University of Dar es Salaam and relevant local authorities, data collection process began. Data were collected through in-depth interviews which were conducted by the principal researcher. The interview sessions with each teacher mentor were held for about one hour during which the researcher employed a semi-structured interview guide to facilitate the discussion. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore teacher mentors' perspectives on the role of NGOs in improving the learning environment for girl students. Probing questions were used to encourage teacher mentors to elaborate on their responses and provide more detailed information. Following the data collection process, interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Thematic approach was then used to identify common themes and patterns of meaning within the data. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of teacher mentors and research sites, alphabetical letters were used to represent schools. Teacher mentors were assigned numerical identifiers.

Findings and discussion

Contribution of NGOs in improving physical learning environment for girl students

This objective sought to gather diverse perspectives from teacher mentors on how NGOs contribute to improved physical learning environment for girl students. The analysis of data from in-depth interviews revealed that NGOs made important

contributions towards improvement of sanitation facilities, such as construction of separate toilet blocks for girls. They also repaired dilapidated female toilets, including making sure that they have doors with functioning locks as well as plastic bins for the disposal of pads and other waste materials. In some schools, teacher mentors reported that NGOs provided financial support for the construction of private rooms for girl students to tend to their private needs, including changing menstrual pads and addressing other hygienic needs. One teacher mentor shared an example of NGOs' contribution towards sanitation facilities, stating the following:

> We receive various contributions from NGOs. For example, just last year one NGO provided funds for the construction of a new toilet block for female students. Prior to the construction of the new block, the school had only one toilet block for girls which was not enough due to the large number of girls in the school. After the officials from the NGO visited our school and observed the situation, they decided to build an additional toilet block for girls. As a result, many girls now feel more comfortable using the toilets, as they no longer have to wait in queues for their turn (Teacher mentor 2, School E).

Another teacher mentor spoke about the contribution of NGOs in the construction of special rooms for girls, as follows:

> NGOs have provided our school with some excellent ideas regarding improvement of the school infrastructure. I remember one NGO suggested that the school should construct special rooms for girls to attend to their private needs. Unfortunately, the school did not have enough funds to undertake such a project at the time. However, the NGO generously provided us with a small fund to get the project started. Although we were ultimately able to complete the project using other financial resources, we would not have succeeded without the idea and financial support from the NGO (Teacher mentor 1, School A).

From the foregoing anecdotes, it is evident that the contributions made by NGOs are instrumental in facilitating girls' access to adequate sanitary and hygiene facilities, thereby enhancing their comfort within the school environment. Similar findings are reported by Birdthistle et al. (2011) who also found that the availability of a sufficient number of well-maintained sanitation facilities, including separate toilets, contributes significantly to girls comfort and sense of safety in school. Moreover, existing literature highlights the detrimental effects of substandard and inadequate sanitation facilities on girls' well-being. Among other things, it has been documented that inadequate and poor quality of such facilities as toilets not only poses physical risks to female students but also engender feelings of shame and embarrassment which can lead them to perceive school environment as dangerous and stressful (Grossi et al. 2016). Such negative perceptions of the school environment as unsafe and stressful can subsequently lead to limited attendance, increased dropout rates, and compromised learning outcomes among girls. Therefore, by improving the quality of sanitation facilities and hygiene services, NGOs are addressing the challenges of limited attendance, dropout rates, and poor learning outcomes, all of which have been associated with inadequate sanitation facilities in schools.

Another way in which NGOs contributed to improving the physical learning environment for girl students was through the installation and repair of water infrastructure in schools. According to teacher mentors, the provision of running water by NGOs was crucial for girls as it facilitated effective menstrual hygiene management and improved their overall well-being. It also made toilet usage and cleanliness less challenging. Although they acknowledged that the government exercised great efforts to ensure access to water services in schools, teacher mentors noted that much of the water infrastructure installed by the government frequently breaks down and becomes unusable due to a lack of regular maintenance. Describing the contribution of NGOs towards repair of water infrastructure, one teacher mentor disclosed the following:

> NGOs have done a lot of work to ensure that girls have access to all the necessary services including water. In our school, we already had water services, but we faced problems with the water infrastructure. Some of the water taps were broken, and there was low water pressure, which sometimes prevented the water from reaching the girls' toilets. This caused the girls to spend too much time there. The NGOs helped us solve these issues and even provided us with water tanks (Teacher mentor 1, School E).

In the context of resource limitations faced by governments in many developing countries when addressing water-related challenges in public schools, this finding highlight the significant role played by NGOs in ensuring the availability of water services. This initiative holds particular importance for girls as it enables them to learn more effectively by increasing the amount of time they spend in the classroom. Moreover, there is ample research evidence which indicate that better water facilities leads to clean and hygienic school environment which enhances students learning and retention (Sharma and Adhikari 2022; Trinies et al. 2016). This implies that by ensuring availability of functioning water infrastructure, NGOs contribute to creating conducive learning environment that supports educational outcomes of girl students.

The study also found that NGOs played a critical role in improving the physical learning environment for girls by supporting construction, repair and furnishing of learning facilities including classrooms, laboratories, and libraries. While these facilities were found to be equally beneficial to both male and female students, teacher mentors believed that they were particularly helpful for female students, who often suffered more due to inadequate learning facilities. Citing overcrowded classrooms and shortages of classroom furniture as common problems that disproportionately affect female students, teacher mentors were of the view that girls were susceptible to the negative consequences of these challenges compared to boys. Therefore, as a result of the support provided by NGOs, they argued that the difficulties girls were facing in accessing learning facilities were mitigated. The following statement made by a teacher mentor illustrates this view:

> NGOs have helped us to build classrooms and have provided us with furniture. When they do so, they target both girls and boys, but I believe it benefits girls more. Boys can usually manage to study in difficult circumstances, but girls

cannot. For example, in situations where there is shortage of chairs, it is girls who will suffer as they are unable to compete with boys for seating. Similarly, in overcrowded classrooms, girls may find it difficult to find places to sit while boys can sit in almost any available space (Teacher mentor 1, School B).

In connection with the construction and repair of learning facilities, teacher mentors reported that NGOs established and utilised school-based committees to assess the quality of school learning facilities and identify necessary repairs and upgrades. An example of committees that were frequently mentioned by the teacher mentors were the Planning for School Excellence (PSE) Committees which were implemented by Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) NGO across multiple secondary schools under their sponsorship. Drawing together the school leadership, teachers, students, parents and local community, the committees were reported as highly effective in identifying and addressing various challenges girls face in accessing effective learning environment. Elucidating on the work performed by the committee towards improvement of learning facilities, one teacher mentor noted as follows:

The PSE committee does a lot of work to ensure that existing learning facilities are conducive to the learning of girls. Whenever the committee meets, one or two students are usually invited to report on the condition of learning facilities and suggest any improvements that need to be done. The girls' recommendations are then addressed by the school with the help of the NGO and parents (Teacher mentor 2, School D).

In line with this finding, literature confirms that girls often face greater challenges due to inadequate learning facilities compared to boys. In the case of overcrowded classrooms, Ojonubah's (2015) study revealed that girls' academic performance, particularly for girls in tertiary institutions and secondary schools, suffers significantly when they are exposed to large-sized classes. This is because due their feminine nature, girls are often incapable of competing with boys for limited resources as well as cope with the problems arising from overcrowding. Thus, by providing support towards improvement of learning facilities, NGOs contribute to creating an environment that is more conducive to girls' learning which helps in reducing gender disparities. As for the utilization of PSE committees by NGOs to identify and address challenges related to learning facilities, the finding resonates with ample literature that emphasizes the importance of community engagement and participation in addressing the challenges of inadequate learning environment, particularly in underprivileged communities (Lauwo and Mkulu 2021; Russell 2009). This collaborative approach not only promotes a sense of ownership and shared responsibility but also ensures that the perspectives and experiences of all stakeholders are taken into account for development of sustainable and impactful solutions.

Role of NGOs in promoting gender-responsive classroom practices

In this objective, perspectives of teacher mentors were gathered to examine the role of NGOs in promoting gender-responsive classroom practices. The evidence from the analysis of in-depth interviews indicated that NGOs actively facilitated

the adoption and implementation of gender-responsive learning practices. This was achieved through provision of various capacity building programmes including workshops, seminars and mentoring which were designed to equip teachers with a variety of skills including organisation of gender responsive classroom setups, development of positive teacher–students relationships and management of gender responsive teaching practices. These are discussed in three subsections that follow:

Organisation of gender responsive classroom setups

Through NGOs capacity building, particularly workshops and seminars, it was found that teachers had received training that helped them to organise classroom setups that facilitated active involvement of girl students in the learning process. Before undergoing capacity-building initiatives, teacher mentors reported that a significant number of teachers showed limited regard for classroom setup. Responsibilities associated with arranging the classroom were often delegated to class teachers or left entirely in the hands of the students themselves. As a result of this practice, majority of classrooms lacked gender-mixed seating arrangements. This discouraged many girls from speaking and engaging effectively in the learning process due to feelings of shyness and inferiority. However, after receiving training from NGOs, it was reported that teachers began to take more active role in organising classroom setups that enhanced participation of girl students. The following remarks from one teacher mentor illustrate:

> Classroom organization is something that many teachers are not interested in. It is up to class teachers or students themselves to decide where to sit and who to sit with. This often results in a lack of gender diversity as boys and girls tended to isolate themselves from each other. The training provided by NGO emphasized that this practice was not conducive to girls' learning. It also taught us about various strategies we can implement to ensure that classroom seating arrangements encourage girls' participation (Teacher mentor 1, School D).

This finding clearly demonstrates the significance of capacity building initiatives provided by NGOs in promoting gender-responsive classroom setups, which are crucial for facilitating active engagement and positive learning environment for girls. The lack of interest among teachers in organisation of classroom setups mirrors the neglect of this crucial aspect highlighted in prior studies (Gremmen et al. 2016; Hardiansyah and Rasia 2022). In line with the literature, it appears that teachers are aware of the significance of organizing classroom setups. However, they lack the necessary skills to effectively engage in this crucial task which leads to its neglect. This means that the emphasis placed by the NGOs on gender-responsive classroom setups is an important initiative in equipping teachers with the skills to improve girls' engagement and active participation.

Developing positive teacher–student relationships

This was another set of skills that was imparted by the capacity building programmes provided by NGOs. The study revealed that as a result of mentorship programs implemented by NGOs, there was a notable shift in teachers' attitudes towards teacher-student relationships. Previously perceived as obstacles to effective learning, these relationships were now recognized as essential tools for fostering students' commitment and interest. While teacher-student relationships are heavily emphasized during teachers' pre-service training, teacher mentors noted that many teachers struggle to develop these relationships in practice. Instead, they exhibit hostile and authoritarian behaviour which create communication barriers, particularly for girl students who may feel intimidated or hesitant to approach them. According to the teacher mentors, capacity-building provided by NGOs played a crucial role in reshaping this attitude by emphasizing the significance of fostering friendly teacher-student relationships. The following was explained by one teacher mentor during interviews:

> As teachers, we all have different ways of treating and relating to our students. Unfortunately, some of us can be harsh and hostile at times, which can be detrimental to girls, especially those who may be dealing with sensitive issues and require assistance from their teachers. However, through the mentorship provided by NGOs, we have learned about the negative impact of such behaviour, and the importance of being approachable and supportive towards our students (Teacher mentor 2, School B).

Considering the significance of teacher-student relationships in fostering positive learning environment for girls, the presence of teachers who exhibit hostile and harsh behaviour towards their students underscores a troubling concern. Such behaviour not only disrupts the learning process but also has a particularly adverse impact on how girls perceive and interact with their teachers and peers. As studies have consistently shown, girls can be more sensitive to negative interactions causing them to experience behavioural as well as psychological challenges, such as decreased self-esteem, increased anxiety, and diminished academic motivation (Alshebl 2021; Rashidi and Naderi 2012). This suggests that mentorship programmes provided by NGOs are essential in creating positive and supportive teacher-student relationship where girls can feel comfortable interacting and seeking guidance from their teachers.

Managing gender responsive teaching

The study indicated that NGOs capacity building programmes enhanced teachers' understanding of various aspects related to gender responsive teaching. In particular teacher mentors reported that the programmes enabled them to better understand the specific needs of boys and girls in the learning process. It also equipped them with the necessary skills to address behaviours that may hinder girls' active participation in the classroom, including challenges related to confidence and shyness. Based on their teaching experiences, teacher mentors argued that in certain conditions, such as

when facing unfamiliar topics or feeling a lack of support, girls may prefer to remain passive and not involve themselves in classroom activities. However, the training provided by NGOs offered teachers a range of strategies that could be employed to address the passivity and lack of involvement observed among female students. Sharing some of the strategies emphasized during NGO workshop, one teacher mentor noted:

> We all agreed that involving girls in classroom discussions is one of the major challenges that teachers face when teaching gender-mixed classes. Some teachers suggested that acknowledging girls' efforts, such as praising them when they respond to questions, is an effective way to increase their participation. However, one teacher emphasized that providing girls with leadership positions, particularly in group works, is another effective way to encourage their active participation (Teacher mentor 1, School C).

This finding highlights the importance of NGOs' capacity building programs in developing effective strategies to address gender disparities in girls' participation and engagement. Concerns related to girls' limited involvement have been the subject of many previous studies which have shown that girls frequently refrain from participating in discussions due to such factors as shyness, lack of confidence, or the fear of being perceived as unintelligent by their peers (Ahmed and Bousfiha 2018; Leraas et al. 2018). The suggestion to acknowledge girls' efforts, such as praising their contributions during classroom activities, aligns with extensive literature which underscores the significance of positive reinforcement in promoting active involvement and engagement (Soto 2014; Sun 2021). This indicates that there is an ongoing requirement for capacity building interventions by NGOs in order to generate more practical suggestions and techniques that can promote girls participation.

Contribution of NGOs in eradicating harmful gender stereotypes

Given the effect of gender stereotypes in creating hostile and discriminatory environment for girls, this objective aimed to gather perspectives of teacher mentors on diverse initiatives implemented by NGOs to eradicate harmful gender stereotypes in schools. Several initiatives undertaken by NGOs were identified, including the following:

Operation of gender sensitization clubs

The study indicated that NGOs established and operated gender sensitization clubs in order to address issues related to gender stereotypes. In addition to raising awareness about gender issues, the clubs were reported to sensitize girls to challenge discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes. They were also found to foster a sense of empowerment and encourage girls to take an active role in school affairs. Highlighting the significance of the clubs for girls, teacher mentors noted that the clubs had profound impact on girls' self-esteem and were able to positively influence their perception of gender roles and expectations. While some girls initially believed that

certain tasks and subjects were exclusively reserved for boys, their perceptions were reportedly transformed as a result of the workshops and mentoring organized by the clubs. Describing activities performed gender clubs, one teacher mentor narrated:

> The Sikio na Bega club is one of the clubs operated by NGOs. The club educates girls about important gender issues including ways to deal with gender discrimination. It also empowers girls by teaching them about their equal position in society and fostering the belief that they can achieve their dreams through strength and determination. As a result of the club's activities, many girls have been inspired to take up science subjects (Teacher mentor 1, School E).

Another teacher mentor also provided insights on the NGOs-supported club, stating the following:

> The school has one club called Young Life, which was established by an NGO about three years ago. Every Wednesday, an official from the NGO visits the school to talk to students about issues facing youth, including gender stereotypes faced by girls and ways in which they can avoid them (Teacher mentor 2, School B).

The foregoing quotes suggest that gender clubs presents a significant initiative implemented by NGOs to address harmful gender stereotypes. This finding aligns with numerous empirical studies that indicate the positive impact of gender clubs in enhancing girls' understanding and confidence to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes which may cause discriminatory learning environment (Marcus and Page 2016; Parkes and Heslop 2011, 2013). Consistent with literature, the advantages of using students' gender clubs in addressing gender stereotypes are manifold. The operation of these clubs within school settings, for example, enables a more focused and targeted approach to specifically tackle stereotypes faced by girls in their particular school. Moreover, by engaging both boys and girls in these initiatives, the clubs contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of gender dynamics which helps to create supportive environment (Marcus et al. 2017). Therefore, this finding makes it clear that NGOs club initiative plays a pivotal role in challenging harmful gender stereotypes and fostering safe and inclusive learning environment for girls.

Provision of gender sensitization and awareness materials

This was another initiative that was reported to be undertaken by NGOs. According to teacher mentors NGOs provide students with a variety of gender sensitization and awareness materials in form of magazines, workbooks, pamphlets and brochures in order to enhance their attitudes and understanding of gender issues including how to overcome academic and behavioural stereotypes. Citing FEMA magazines and CAMFED My Better World workbooks, teacher mentors stated that, among other things, the materials were important in eradicating harmful gender stereotypes among students as they challenged discrimination towards girls and cultural norms

that discourage girls from engaging in certain school activities or pursuing certain career paths. One teacher mentor explained the following with regards to the benefits girls obtain from NGO gender sensitization materials:

> FEMA magazines are delivered to our school several times a year. These magazines are excellent resources for inspiring students as they feature stories of other students' experiences and successes. Many students, especially girls, can relate to these magazines as they describe how other girls have overcome social and cultural barriers that may have previously prevented them from pursuing their studies (Teacher mentor 2, School A).

Another teacher mentor narrated the following with regards to CAMFED My Better World workbooks:

> These books teach girls about self-awareness and self-worth. They teach them that, like boys, they can be whoever they want to be. Therefore, they do not have to be afraid or give up their dreams because of their gender. The NGO officials encourage teachers to refer to them even during lesson preparation as there are many things there that can be linked to classroom lessons (Teacher mentor 2, School C).

These statements indicate that teacher mentors viewed gender sensitization and awareness materials from NGOs as important tools in addressing gender stereotypes particularly ones that diminish girls' self-worth and self-esteem. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes the role of such materials in promoting gender equality and empowering individuals to challenge societal norms and expectations (Dash et al. 2008). They further underscore the significance of incorporating gender sensitization concepts into educational curricula and practices as a means to foster a gender-equitable mindset and inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion

To ensure high retention rates and adequate learning outcomes, girls need access to learning environments that are gender-sensitive, inclusive, and that meet their specific educational needs. Drawing on teacher mentor insights, the present study has identified the role NGOs play to facilitate improvement of girl students learning environment. This include provision of material and technical assistance to support improvement of school physical infrastructure, provision of capacity of building programmes to promote adoption of gender-responsive classroom practices and undertaking of different initiatives including operation of gender clubs and provision of gender sensitization materials aimed at eradicating harmful gender stereotypes contributing to unfavourable learning environment for girls. Based on these findings, the study concludes that NGOs play a vital role in supporting and enhancing the learning environment for girls, thereby contributing to their retention and education outcomes.

Implications for policy and practice

Policy makers and educators have frequently attempted to address the challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups such as girls in accessing quality education. However, these initiatives often fail to consider the valuable input provided by non-state actors, including NGOs. The findings of this study align with prior research indicating the crucial role NGOs play in improving education for marginalized populations. In light of these findings, it is crucial for policy-makers and educators to actively involve and collaborate with NGOs in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of education initiatives. This includes engaging NGOs in policy discussions, seeking their input and expertise, and leveraging their networks and resources. By fostering partnerships with NGOs, policy makers and educators can tap into their innovative approaches, grassroots-based knowledge, and experience in working with marginalized populations such as girls. On the other hand, NGOs need to actively engage with local communities and other stakeholders to identify innovative and efficient strategies for addressing the challenges related to girls' learning environment. In this regard, NGOs should carry out extensive consultations with different members of community including parents to identify environmental challenges facing girls at schools and develop locally relevant interventions. This collaborative approach can lead to more inclusive and effective strategies to address the barriers and challenges facing girls' learning environment, ultimately contributing to greater educational equity and quality.

Data availability The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This study was approved by the School of Education at the University of Dar es Salaam (Ref. No: AB3/12(B)). The research was conducted in line with the University's guidelines applicable when human participants are involved.

Informed consent Informed consent was sought from all participants for participation in the study.

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