



Witchcraft Beliefs and Demonic Attacks as Barriers to Girls' Secondary Education in Rural Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examined how beliefs in witchcraft and fears of demonic attacks impede girls' secondary education in rural Tanzania. Guided by Malinowski's Theory of Magic and Liberal Feminist Theory, the research comprised semi-structured interviews with 36 participants—12 affected girls, 8 teachers, 12 parents, and 4 school heads—across four rural day secondary schools. Thematic analysis identified four key factors: entrenched cultural beliefs in witchcraft, limited religious engagement, menstrual challenges exacerbated by inadequate WASH facilities, and strained school-community relationships. While school staff and most students attributed the attacks to spiritual causes, most parents (8 of 12) believed the girls were feigning symptoms. The attacks severely disrupted schooling, reducing attendance and completion rates, with over 20 girls dropping out at one school between 2019 and 2021. Affected girls experienced fainting, anxiety, and shame, and many were forced into early marriage, violating Tanzania's Free Basic Education policy. The study concludes that these beliefs function as patriarchal control mechanisms, compounded by poverty and poor infrastructure. Recommendations include improving WASH facilities, fostering school-community dialogue, engaging religious and local leaders, providing trauma-informed counselling, and enforcing laws against early marriage and witchcraft-related offences.

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental means of poverty reduction, equipping individuals with the skills needed for employment, higher earnings, and sustained economic growth. It also advances human rights and gender equality, enabling all children to participate fully in society (UNESCO, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms access to high-quality education as a fundamental right (UNICEF, 1990). Despite these international frameworks, gender disparities in education persist, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where sociocultural and economic barriers continue to restrict girls' access to education (UNESCO, 2022). While the global number of out-of-school children decreased by 9 million, Sub-Saharan Africa's increased by 12 million (UNESCO, 2023). Girls and young women make up 48% of out-of-school youth worldwide, with nearly 30% in Sub-Saharan Africa

(UNESCO, 2023). These disparities often stem from cultural, economic, and religious factors. In Tanzania, despite the government's provision of free and compulsory primary and secondary education (URT, 2016), rural girls continue to face significant obstacles. Persistent beliefs in witchcraft further complicate efforts to reduce out-of-school rates, even as initiatives to promote gender equality in education progress.

Empirical studies identify belief in witchcraft as a significant cultural barrier, particularly in rural areas, where it disrupts girls' educational trajectories (UNICEF, 2021; Pelgrim, 2003; Wyk, 2004). In East Africa, including Tanzania, witchcraft is deeply embedded in cultural practices and is frequently cited to explain misfortunes such as illness, poverty, or academic failure (Gershman, 2022; Ngangah, 2020; Ndamba-Bandzouzi et al., 2014). These beliefs serve as mechanisms of social control, with customary norms often prioritising early marriage over girls' education (Makoye, 2013). Accusations of witchcraft disproportionately target vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020; Ndamba-Bandzouzi et al., 2014). In educational contexts, perceived demonic attacks, which manifest as physical or psychological disturbances, are believed to affect girls primarily. This phenomenon contributes to increased dropout rates and early marriage (Masanja, 2021; Teklemariam & Nyenze, 2002), thereby disrupting educational processes and school operations.

Although the Tanzanian Witchcraft Act of 2002 prohibits witchcraft, beliefs in witchcraft remain widespread, complicating efforts to advance girls' education (Mesaki, 2009). Previous research has examined witchcraft across African contexts, focusing on violence against individuals with albinism (Masanja, 2021; Uromi, 2014), legal frameworks (Mesaki, 2023), and child welfare (UNICEF, 2021). However, these studies primarily address the broader social implications of witchcraft and offer limited insight into its specific effects on girls' education. Notably, there is a lack of research investigating how educational stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and school leaders, perceive demonic attacks on girls in rural Tanzanian secondary schools. Addressing this gap is essential, as school community perceptions are critical to developing culturally sensitive interventions to support girls' education. This study therefore examines school community perceptions of demonic attacks on girls in secondary schools. By focusing on the lived experiences of those directly involved, the research aims to identify perceived causes of these attacks, their impact on girls' education, and the broader implications for girls' futures. The findings are intended to inform education officials and policymakers in reducing cultural barriers and advancing Tanzania's commitment to universal education. The following research questions guided the study: What are the perceived causes of demonic attacks on girls in secondary schools in District 'Z' of Tanzania? What are the perceived impacts of demonic attacks on girls in secondary schools in District 'Z' in Tanzania?

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Bronisław Malinowski's Theory of Magic and Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) to examine perceived demonic attacks on girls' education. These theories explain both cultural and systemic aspects of gender inequality in education. Malinowski's Theory of Magic (1948) suggests that when practical solutions are lacking, magic and witchcraft help people cope with anxiety and uncertainty (Chaudhry & Rafi, 2012). Chattopadhyay (2017) and Gershman (2022) note that demonic attacks are more than superstitions; they reflect community concerns about changing gender roles, particularly those that challenge early marriage and patriarchal authority. Malinowski's framework explains how

elders and community members use supernatural beliefs to push girls out of school and reinforce domestic roles. This study uses the theory to examine witchcraft accusations as a means of maintaining gender inequality in education in rural Tanzania, focusing on District Z. However, the theory does not fully address broader institutional causes of gender inequality because it assumes culture is static and focuses only on how beliefs form. To address these gaps, the study also uses

Liberal Feminist Theory.

Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT) argues that women are oppressed by biased policies and unfair systems, not by biology (Tong, 2009). LFT holds that gender-sensitive policies, affirmative action, and fair resource distribution are needed to address gender inequalities (Lorber, 2001; Tong, 2009). However, unfair and gender-insensitive policies continue to harm women in many areas. LFT notes that barriers such as customs favouring boys' education, resource shortages, gender stereotypes, and strict norms prevent girls from accessing education in rural Tanzania (Bhalalusesa & Mboya, 2003; Mascarenhas, 2007). This study uses LFT to examine institutional and systemic problems that block girls' education, helping to interpret data on policy gaps, the lack of legal help for victims of witchcraft accusations, and the urgent need for reforms to protect girls' right to education.

Combining LFT with Malinowski's Theory of Magic provides a broad framework for examining demonic attacks on girls' education in District Z. These attacks are both supernatural signs of gender inequality and mechanisms through which communities resist education. Malinowski's theory (1948) shows that witchcraft beliefs help maintain male-dominated norms by reinforcing traditional gender roles (Chaudhry & Rafi, 2012). LFT calls for reforms that tackle systemic problems through economic empowerment, legal protection, and the removal of non-biological barriers to education (Tong, 2009; Lorber, 2001). Using both theories enables a culturally informed approach to dismantling barriers to education. Malinowski's view places witchcraft within patriarchal power, aligning with Tong's (2009) idea of gender justice, while LFT treats these attacks as crimes that are prosecuted. Together, these theories address institutional problems and cultural attitudes to improve education and promote gender equality.

These theories shape how the study's findings are understood. Malinowski's perspective frames witchcraft accusations as a way for communities to express concerns about girls' education and shifting gender roles. LFT links girls' vulnerability to these attacks to weak legal rights and insufficient funding for rural schools. Together, the theories show how cultural beliefs, as Malinowski describes, support structural inequality, as LFT explains. Malinowski's theory helps interpret what elders and community members say about demonic attacks, revealing concerns about changing gender roles and how witchcraft keeps girls at home. LFT offers a way to examine how institutions, resources, and a lack of action on gender-based violence affect girls, school staff, and local leaders. This method ensures the results are viewed through a theoretical lens, not merely sorted by themes.

Methodology

Study approach and setting

This study employed a qualitative methodology to gather in-depth information regarding participants' perceptions of demonic attacks on girls in their daily lives (Yin, 2003). Utilising an interpretive phenomenological design, the research prioritised understanding participants' lived experiences and

the significance they attribute to these attacks. The approach also examined the frequency of such incidents and their impact on both cultural and educational contexts. District “Z” in Tanzania was selected as the study site because it exemplifies a broader regional issue concerning demonic attacks on girls. The Regional Education Officer (REO) reported notable declines in attendance, academic performance, and retention rates among girls in this district, trends attributed to the district’s distinctive cultural context and pervasive beliefs in witchcraft. Four rural day secondary schools within District “Z” were chosen based on the high incidence of reported cases and instances where teachers and school heads expressed reluctance to work due to concerns about witchcraft. These schools represented varying degrees of problem severity.

Participant Recruitment and Data Saturation

The study used purposive sampling to select 36 participants. The sample comprised 12 female students who frequently experienced demonic attacks (three from each of the four schools, primarily from Forms Two, Three, and Four where cases were most prevalent), 8 class teachers, 12 parents of affected girls, and 4 school heads. The selection prioritised individuals directly involved in the phenomenon: teachers contributed classroom observations, parents provided perspectives on their children’s experiences, and female students represented the primary victims.

A systematic recruitment process minimised power imbalance. After approval from the District and Regional Education Officers, the researcher contacted school heads directly. Teachers, school heads, and parents helped obtain consent and invite participants. School heads identified teachers and students who had frequent experiences of demonic attacks. This approach ensured voluntary participation, free from institutional coercion. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached after the 28th interview (Saunders et al., 2018). Researchers reviewed each interview for emergent information, and the final eight interviews (29–36) confirmed comprehensive coverage of all themes.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews at the schools, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Sessions were scheduled to accommodate participants’ availability and maintain focus, enabling detailed, meaningful responses (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were conducted in Swahili, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Creswell’s (2013) six-step process. The researcher first transcribed, translated, and systematically organised the data. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the data to become familiar with it. The researcher identified key segments through open coding, then grouped them into broader categories and principal themes through axial coding. These themes were refined and finalised. Findings were presented using participant quotations to accurately illustrate the phenomenon (Yin, 2003).

Trustworthiness, Rigour, and Researcher Reflexivity.

To enhance credibility and dependability, the study followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness guidelines for qualitative research and took steps to minimise researcher bias. Member checking ensured that the findings reflected participants’ experiences. The study shared summary transcripts and early findings with six participants (two teachers, two parents, and two students), who verified accuracy and clarified unclear points. The study incorporated their feedback into the final analysis.

The researcher held regular peer debriefing sessions with two independent qualitative research experts who were not involved in the study. These experts reviewed the interview guides, discussed new codes, and examined the assumptions underpinning the analysis. This process provided external validation and helped reduce bias.

Because topics like witchcraft and demonic attacks are sensitive, researcher bias needed to be reduced. The researcher remained objective by ensuring personal views and feelings did not affect the findings, interviews, or data analysis. By noting and putting aside any preconceptions, the study stayed focused on what participants shared.

Ethical Issues in the Research Protocol

Ethical issues were a top priority to protect participants from possible harm, since discussing witchcraft beliefs and demonic attacks could lead to cultural stigma, emotional distress, or community conflict (Bryman, 2004). Cohen et al. (2011) note that ethical issues can come up at any stage of research and depend on the topic, context, methods, and data. Participants were informed of possible risks and benefits, and the research emphasised voluntary participation for vulnerable female students whose education was affected.

The Institutional Research Ethics Committee approved the study. A university-issued letter of introduction facilitated data collection. The researcher provided the letter to the Regional Education Officer (REO), who forwarded it to the District Education Officer (DEO) to request a research permit and introduce the study to schools. The study communicated ethical considerations, including consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, before and during data collection to ensure transparency and fairness. Participants received an information sheet and consent form to make informed, voluntary decisions without coercion (Flick, 2009). Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The researcher took special precautions for female students under 18; they required written parental consent before seeking student assent. The information sheets detailed the researcher's background, study objectives, possible risks and benefits (such as emotional impact), participant roles, and confidentiality measures. The researcher securely stored all completed forms, as informed consent is fundamental to ethical research and upholds participants' autonomy (Cohen et al., 2011).

The researcher ensured participants' anonymity by using pseudonyms and codes (for example, FS-1 for Female Student one, P-2 for Parent two, HoS-2 for Head of School two). The district and schools were labelled as 'Z' and 'A/B/C/D' to protect participants from possible community judgment and stigma related to witchcraft and demonic attacks (Kumar, 2005). All digital and paper data were kept secure with passwords and locked storage, only accessible to the main researcher. Participants were told they would get a summary report after the study ended.

Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the perceived influence of demonic attacks on girls' secondary education in District 'Z', Tanzania, involving two research questions: (1) what are the perceived causes of demonic attacks on girls in secondary schools in rural Tanzania? Moreover, (2) what are the perceived impacts of these attacks on female students and schools? The researcher collected the data from the participants through semi-structured interviews with 36 participants: 4 school heads, 8 teachers, 12 parents, and 12 female students who reported experiencing demonic attacks. Thematic analysis identified themes, presented below with findings supported by participant quotations.

Perceived Causes of Demonic Attacks on Girls

Participants identified four perceived causes of demonic attacks: cultural beliefs in witchcraft, neglect of religious practices, menstruation-related vulnerabilities, and poor relationship between school leadership and the community.

Cultural Beliefs in Witchcraft

All teachers (8/8), all heads of schools (4/4), and most students (10/12) reported perceiving demonic attacks through cultural beliefs in witchcraft, though only 4/12 parents shared this view. Participants described traditional ceremonies, such as *ngoma za kupunga majini* (drums of waving demons), as settings where girls unknowingly acquire demonic spirits from witches. A parent explained:

My daughter frequently attended traditional dances, organised to please magicians with blood offerings. She likely acquired demons there, as they transfer between people. I realised she was possessed when teachers reported her disruptive behaviour and absences. (P-2 from school C)

A student verified that *I was fine until my grandmother forced me to attend night ceremonies. I believe I acquired demons through those ceremonies, praising evil spirits.* (F-S3 from school A).

Participants further perceived that witchcraft, often inherited, aims to harm others. They perceived that witchcraft is passed from elders to youth to torture and transfer demons, especially through dances. If grandparents are witches, they reported passing it to their children and grandchildren. Teachers and heads of schools additionally highlighted community motives, such as jealousy or poverty, causing attacks that force girls to drop out and marry early, which was associated with their culture. A head of school remarked: *"Some community members, envious of girls' academic success, use demons to ensure they drop out and marry, targeting only girls."* (Hos-2 from school B).

A teacher added:

In rural areas, some poor community members want others to remain poor. They attack girls with demons to stop their education, creating challenges for us teachers. Also, some parents, due to poverty, do not want their daughters to continue their education. As a result, they attack them with demons to drop out of school and force them to marry early for dowry (T-6 from school B)

However, 8/12 parents disagreed with those who claimed that witchcraft caused the girls' alleged demonic attacks at school. They argued that the supernatural claims were unfounded, insisting that the girls were pretending to be possessed by a demonic attack. One parent noted:

Let us be truthful. I do not think there is witchcraft or demonic possession involved in this area. The girls may be just acting out for attention, and it is irresponsible for the community to feed into this mass hysteria instead of addressing what is actually going on with these children, as some of them dislike studies. (P6 from-B)

Neglect of Religious Practices

Another theme that emerged was neglect of religious practices. Most of the participants (9/12 parents, 4/8 teachers, 5/12 students, and 2/4 heads of schools) perceived that girls who neglected religious practices were more vulnerable to demonic attacks. A student noted:

Prayer protects us from demonic attacks. Those who pray are less likely to be attacked. We have observed that students who sustain consistent prayer practices demonstrate greater emotional strength. Prayer protects us and makes us less vulnerable to spiritual oppression. In contrast, those who neglect their prayer life appear more vulnerable to such disturbances. Prayer is not simply a ritual; it is our strongest weapon against evil forces that may seek to harm girls. (F-S from school C)

Furthermore, a teacher added;

Without prayer and religious practice, girls leave themselves vulnerable to spiritual harm, as faith serves as a safeguard against demons sent through witchcraft. When a student neglects her spiritual routines, she effectively lowers her protection, creating a vulnerability that negative forces can easily exploit. In the classroom, I have observed that girls who actively participate in daily devotions and engage with scripture show noticeable peace and emotional strength. (T-4 from school B).

A head of school emphasised:

In this context, where witchcraft beliefs are strong, regular prayer and faith in God are necessary; without them, girls and any other person are more vulnerable to supernatural threats that interfere with their education (HoS-3 from school C).

Similarly, a parent shared: *We teach our daughters that ignoring prayers invites demons; consistent religious practice protects them from harm and allows them to focus on schooling.* (P-5 from school A).

Menstruation-Related Vulnerabilities

Most parents (10 out of 12) linked the alleged demonic attacks to menstruation, explicitly stating that poor menstrual hygiene creates a vulnerability that attracts evil spirits.

One parent elaborated on this belief, stating:

If a girl does not manage her menstruation properly and develops an odour, she risks a demonic attack. It is a known spiritual reality that many girls exhibit strange, possessed behaviours during their periods. This happens because demons are naturally drawn to the odour of menstrual blood and the spiritual impurity associated with poor hygiene. When a girl is not clean, she essentially invites these evil entities. (P-12 from school C)

On the other hand, only a few teachers, school heads, and students agreed with this view. They suggested that some girls pretend to be possessed to avoid embarrassment caused by menstrual accidents, which occur because there are insufficient sanitary pads, private spaces, or water.

A student explained:

Some girls pretend to be possessed during their periods to hide accidental menstrual stains. A severe shortage of sanitary pads and basic facilities, such as water, leaves them ashamed and fearful of peer judgement, especially from boys. By pretending to be possessed, girls redirect attention from their stained uniform to a spiritual crisis.

This behaviour is essentially a coping strategy rooted in poverty, shame, and a lack of menstrual hygiene resources, not in supernatural causes (F-S from school D).

A head of school added:

Girls avoid shame from boys when they discover that they have dirtied their skirts due to menstruation. The only way to avoid the shame is to pretend they are unconscious, as if attacked by demons; as a result, female teachers carry them out of the class. (HoS- 2 from school B)

Tensions between School Leadership and parents (Community)

All participants reported that misunderstandings between school leadership and the community contribute to demonic attacks. A parent noted:

Some school leaders disrespect village leaders, so witches use demons to make schools unsafe, even placing medicine in girls' toilets to cause chaos to discipline school leadership. (P-11 from school D).

Another parent added:

Some school leaders treat parents like intruders, ignoring our vital role in the school community, which, unfortunately, prompts some to harm the school. Whenever we try to visit, raise concerns, or participate in our children's education, we are met with hostility, turned away at the gates, or addressed with contempt. The administration treats us as troublemakers rather than partners who know our children's spiritual, emotional, and cultural backgrounds better than anyone. (P-5 from school B).

Parents perceive the school as theirs, and when school leaders ignore or exclude them, they respond in various ways. One response is to cause the school to struggle with cases of girls experiencing demonic attacks, which takes up much of the school's time and attention. However, school heads counter that they respect, welcome, and engage the community, but they face resistance from parents who favour early marriage for their children. A head of school stated:

We respect, welcome, and engage parents in our community; our doors are always open to their children's education. However, the resistance and misunderstanding we face stem not from a lack of communication but from a deep-rooted cultural conflict. We frequently quarrel with parents who prioritise early marriage for their daughters over academic advancement. Unfortunately, this conflict has intensified to the point that some parents deliberately attack these girls with demons as a tactic to achieve their goals (HoS-1 from school A).

Parents accuse school leaders of disrespect and exclusion, while school heads perceive parents as resisting girls' education. This indicates a lack of trust and cooperation. The belief that witches use demons to punish school leaders by targeting girls highlights how the community can use witchcraft beliefs to assert community power over outsiders such as school staff.

Perceived Impacts of Demonic Attacks on Female Students

The second objective was to investigate the impact of demonic attacks on secondary school girls in District 'Z'. The study identified four key impacts: interference with school timetables, reduced

attendance and completion rates, and physical and psychological disturbances. These effects highlight the significant disruption caused by perceived demonic attacks.

Interference with School Timetables

Most teachers (6/8), students (10/12), and school heads (3/4) reported that demonic attacks disrupted classroom activities, whereas only 4/12 parents noted this impact. A teacher noted:

When these girls are attacked, they suddenly shout and violently destroy classroom property, forcing me to stop teaching immediately. The physical danger is truly terrifying. Ultimately, the school administration cannot handle this persistent daily chaos, leaving us all feeling helpless and frustrated. (T-8 from school 2)

A head of school added:

The nature of these attacks varies considerably. Some girls yell uncontrollably, cry, or even bite others, suddenly becoming unnaturally powerful. Meanwhile, others fall completely unconscious for several hours at a time. This unpredictable and severe behaviour effectively halts all academic and administrative activities across the entire school campus. (HoS-2 from school B)

A girl student narrated:

During a sudden attack, the affected girls screamed loudly and violently threw desks across the room. We all had to evacuate the classroom immediately out of fear. This terrifying incident completely stopped our lessons for the entire day, leaving us far behind in our daily studies. (F-S-7 from school C)

A parent noted:

My daughter came home very upset, saying her class was severely disrupted by girls who were attacked by demons. She explained that another girl sometimes shouted and rolled on the floor uncontrollably. Because of this disruption, teachers could not continue teaching, which negatively affected all students' academic progress and daily learning. (P-3 from school A)

Participants also noted that closing schools for 2–3 days during attacks to calm the situation disrupted the school timetable.

A head of school explained:

I have been forced to close the school several times when these sudden attacks left the entire environment chaotic and unsafe. The students are too afraid to attend classes under these conditions, making it impossible for us to maintain normal daily learning. (HoS-4 from school D)

A parent noted:

I made the difficult decision to transfer my daughter to another school in a completely different district to safeguard her education and avoid the constant, severe

disruptions caused by these alleged demonic attacks. Her safety, peace of mind, and academic progress are my absolute top priorities. (P-10 from school D)

Reduced School Attendance and Completion Rates

Many participants (6/8 teachers; 8/12 students; 9/12 parents; 2/4 heads of school) noted that demonic attacks led to absenteeism and dropouts. A head of school reported: From 2019 to 2021, over 20 girls dropped out of my school due to demonic attacks. Some, after recovery, chose marriage over returning to school. (HoS-1 from school A).

A teacher highlighted:

Some girls were sent home for treatment after demonic attacks. When they returned to school, they were pregnant, as families discourage education. Two girls were suspended for pregnancy after such incidents. (T-8 from school 4).

This was supported by a student who shared: *After a demon attacked me, I missed weeks of school and eventually stopped attending because my family said it was unsafe* (F-S-9 from school C). A parent also noted: *My daughter dropped out after a demon attack; we sent her for traditional healing, but then she got married instead of going back to school* (P-7 from school C).

Physical and Psychological Disturbances

All Participants perceived that unconsciousness, weakness, anxiety, and shame were impacts encountered by girls who were attacked by demons. A head of school stated:

During the attacks, the girls being attacked cry uncontrollably, yell, and violently throw stones around the school grounds. This chaotic behaviour frightens everyone, harms students and staff, and damages school property. (HoS-3 from school C)

A student shared:

These alleged demonic attacks always leave me feeling worried and insecure, which is affecting my daily academic studies. I always feel physically weak and exhausted for several days after recovering from these spiritual attacks. (F-S from school A)

A teacher noted:

Our village hospital found no physical medical issues, so we sent the affected girls back home for traditional spiritual treatment. Unfortunately, when they returned to the school, they appeared physically weak, emotionally fragile, and shy about their experiences. (T-5 from school A)

A student added:

I struggle to concentrate in class, always worrying about possible demonic attacks happening at any moment. I sometimes consider dropping out of school to escape this overwhelming fear. Thankfully, my parents consistently encourage me to stay and complete my secondary school education. (F-S from school C)

Discussion

The data indicate that witchcraft is perceived as the primary cause of demonic attacks, often linked to community jealousy or poverty, which leads girls to drop out and marry early. Participants' findings differ. Teachers, school heads, and students perceived witchcraft as the cause of demonic attacks on girls, whereas most parents (8/12) disagreed, believing that girls were pretending. These findings reflect participants' differing interests in girls' education. School staff and students experience direct disruption and accept cultural explanations, while parents deny witchcraft to avoid blame or rationalise the situation, often claiming the attacks are pretend. These differences may stem from parents who impose witchcraft on girls to have them drop out of school for early marriage due to poverty. These findings are supported by Makoye (2013), who found that socio-economic reasons such as early marriage and bride prices take priority over girls' education due to poverty. These beliefs relate to socio-economic stagnation and the region's legal framework. The Tanzanian Marriage Act of 1971, which permits marriage at age 15 (URT, 2016), creates an environment where girls' education is undervalued. Consequently, the Act may reinforce witchcraft beliefs, which function as an instrument to enforce early marriage, directly interacting with academic factors by providing a culturally acceptable justification for pulling girls out of school.

Malinowski's Theory of Magic (1948) supports the finding that beliefs in witchcraft provide social control amid uncertainties, such as poverty and jealousy (Chaudhry & Rafi, 2012; Gershman, 2022). Rituals such as ngoma za kupunga majini, as observed in this study, serve as protection against the challenges girls' education poses to established gender roles (Ngangah, 2020). From the perspective of LFT, witchcraft is interpreted as a patriarchal instrument used to oppress girls' education and enforce male-dominated societal norms (Lorber, 2001). Girls in grandparental care are reported to be particularly vulnerable, as these beliefs are passed down intergenerationally (Masanja, 2015). These findings demonstrate that witchcraft beliefs in rural Tanzania are not merely theoretical superstitions but functional socio-economic mechanisms used to regulate girls' education and may reinforce male-dominated norms. This points to the need for sensitive interventions that address both stereotypes and legal barriers, such as the Marriage Act (UNESCO, 2023). The Witchcraft Act [Cap. 18], 2023, sec. 5(1), mandates that any person convicted of committing an offence under this Act with the specific intent to cause death, disease, injury, or misfortune to a person, animal, community, or property shall be sentenced to a minimum of seven years in prison (Government of Tanzania, 2023). Despite the Act, witchcraft beliefs persist.

Most participants viewed girls as vulnerable to demonic attacks if they neglect religious rituals, such as daily prayers. These rituals are believed to provide psychological support and foster a sense of control over supernatural threats (Malinowski, 1978; Mbogo, 2017). Liberal Feminist Theory contends that this expectation imposes a gendered burden on girls by emphasising individual actions rather than addressing broader structural issues, such as poverty. This dynamic restricts girls' educational opportunities and perpetuates gender inequality (Ngangah, 2020). Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) and Machinga (2023) likewise observed that prayers are regarded as protective measures against evil. However, Togarasei (2022) cautions that prioritising prayer as the primary defence against spiritual attacks may obscure more significant barriers to girls' education. This study's findings indicate that attributing educational challenges to spiritual causes diverts attention from systemic failures. Therefore, schools should integrate gender equality into their curricula and provide psychological counselling (UNICEF, 2021).

The belief that neglecting religious rituals increases vulnerability to demonic attacks illustrates religion's role in societal self-protection. Malinowski's Theory of Magic (1948) holds that rituals provide individuals with a sense of control over supernatural threats, and in District 'Z', prayer is regarded as a primary protective practice (Malinowski, 1978). Research from East Africa shows that such beliefs can restrict girls' access to education (Kroesbergen-Kamps, 2020). The central challenge is reconciling religious practices with promoting gender equality and providing effective support for girls' education. UNICEF (2021) guidelines for building resilience recommend that schools collaborate with community leaders to incorporate gender equality into educational content and offer counselling services.

The data indicate divergent perceptions of menstruation. Most parents (10/12) believe that poor menstrual hygiene and odour spiritually attract demons. In contrast, teachers, school heads, and students report that girls may feign demonic attacks to conceal menstrual stains caused by a lack of sanitary pads. These perceptions are closely linked to poverty and inadequate Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities (Antwi-Agyei et al., 2017). Parental beliefs reflect cultural taboos, while the perspectives of students and teachers highlight that limited access to sanitary products compels girls to adopt coping strategies that disrupt their education. Existing literature suggests that such behaviours may serve as mechanisms to avoid stigma (Chaudhry & Rafi, 2012; Harries, 2012).

Additionally, LFT supports the argument that beliefs about menstruation and demonic attacks stem from patriarchal stigmatisation, which heightens risks for girls without essential resources such as sanitary pads (Antwi-Agyei et al., 2017). In contexts where girls' needs are neglected, this lack of autonomy perpetuates their marginalisation (Mascarenhas, 2007). These findings illustrate the intersection of supernatural beliefs and material deprivation, with demonic manifestations serving as strategic, albeit disruptive, responses to menstrual stigma and poverty. The evidence confirms that inadequate WASH facilities and mistrust related to witchcraft together increase absenteeism (Antwi-Agyei et al., 2017). Consequently, interventions should provide free sanitary pads and foster positive norms around menstruation to challenge prevailing stereotypes (UNESCO, 2022).

All participants acknowledged that misunderstandings between school leadership and the community contribute to reports of demonic attacks; however, their views on the underlying causes differed considerably. Parents asserted that school leaders disrespected and excluded them from school affairs, which, in their view, prompted witches to use demons as punishment against the school. Conversely, school heads maintained that they actively engaged with the community but faced significant resistance from parents who prioritised early marriage. As a result, these parents accused the school of employing demons.

This tension indicates a breakdown in the essential partnership between schools and communities, which is critical to educational success (Epstein, 2019). The conflict stems from competing socioeconomic objectives: the school's advocacy for modern education contrasts with the community's commitment to traditional practices, such as early marriage (UNICEF, 2021; Unterhalter, 2022). These dynamics foster a hostile environment, disrupt school operations, and place girls at the centre of the dispute. According to Malinowski's theory, such accusations function as magical remedies for perceived injustices, enabling parents to exert control and interfere with girls' education (Malinowski, 1978; Wyporska, 2013). From the perspective of Liberal Feminist Theory (LFT), this constitutes a patriarchal backlash against girls' education, in which resistance to male dominance

and traditional authority renders the school a target and girls are instrumentalised within the conflict (Tong, 2018).

Empirical data indicate that the perceived attacks have serious and complex effects, including disrupting school schedules, causing physical and psychological issues such as unconsciousness, anxiety, and shame, and leading to school closures and significantly lower attendance. One school head noted that more than 20 girls dropped out between 2019 and 2021 due to these attacks, with many subsequently entering early marriages. While everyone agreed on the severity of the impact, opinions differed on the underlying causes.

The physical and psychological trauma, combined with the loss of instructional time, creates an environment in which girls and their families view education as unsafe or useless. This directly leads to absenteeism and eventual dropout (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network [NDPC/N], 2017). The interplay with social and economic factors is evident: once girls drop out, the lack of alternative opportunities and the cultural acceptance of early marriage (facilitated by the Marriage Act) ensure they do not return to education.

Malinowski views these impacts as the enforcement of social order through harmful magic, which compels girls into early marriage to preserve traditional social structures (Malinowski, 1978; Mesaki, 2009). Literature supports the view that attributing these incidents to demonic forces severely undermines girls' education (Igwe, 2016). LFT regards these outcomes as manifestations of deep-rooted gender disparities; the physical and psychological symptoms reflect systemic oppression and male-centric narratives that divert attention from addressing poverty (Lober, 2001). These findings provide empirical evidence of the educational and psychological effects of supernatural beliefs. They show that cultural phenomena can cause measurable setbacks in education, including dropouts and school closures that predominantly affect girls and exacerbate disparities in schooling (UNESCO, 2023). The literature recommends interventions such as school counselling, mentorship, and scholarships to support girls and promote equity, thereby supporting preventive approaches (UNICEF, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicate that cultural beliefs, economic barriers, and gender norms significantly influence the prevalence of demonic attacks on girls' secondary education in District 'Z', Tanzania. These incidents are linked to local witchcraft practices, such as ngoma za kupunga majini, and highlight broader issues of social inequality, resource scarcity, and male dominance.

The study demonstrates that poverty and cultural norms pose significant risks for girls during menstruation. Insufficient Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities and a lack of sanitary pads compel girls to adopt extreme coping strategies, such as feigning demonic possession to conceal menstrual stains. The research further identifies a deterioration in school-community relations, as conflicts arise when traditional practices, including early marriage, clash with initiatives to promote modern education. Witchcraft accusations are frequently used as a form of resistance. In this context, demonic attacks represent a patriarchal and magical backlash against girls' educational progress. These challenges lead to psychological trauma, disrupted education, and increased dropout rates among girls. Dominant cultural norms often prevent girls who leave school from returning, thereby directly undermining Tanzania's Free Basic Education policy.

Malinowski interprets these findings as magical responses to anxiety, poverty, and inequality. Feminist theory holds that such beliefs reinforce male-dominated norms. The study concludes that addressing 'demonic attacks' on girls' education requires recognising them as urgent social and educational crises, rather than treating them solely as cultural or spiritual phenomena. These challenges are fundamentally rooted in poverty, socio-cultural factors, inadequate infrastructure, and gender inequality. Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations aim to mitigate the impact of perceived demonic attacks and safeguard girls' secondary education in District 'Z' and similar contexts:

Governments and non-governmental organisations should improve menstrual hygiene and WASH facilities by providing free sanitary products, thereby reducing the need for risky coping strategies among girls. Education authorities should also establish and maintain private, gender-sensitive school facilities. School leaders should also strengthen community partnerships by facilitating dialogue with local and religious leaders and emphasising the need to prioritise girls' education over early marriage. School leaders and ward education officers should collaborate with religious leaders to actively oppose harmful supernatural practices that affect schools.

Trained counsellors should address trauma stemming from perceived supernatural attacks on students. Additionally, peer and adult mentoring programmes should be implemented to foster resilience among girls and to empower them to resist patriarchal pressures. Reframe respected elders as advocates for girls' education through community programmes, using their influence to shift witchcraft customs and facilitate discussions with parents, leaders, and educators to align goals and reduce reactive witchcraft. To ensure effective policy enforcement, local governments should impose strict penalties on those who facilitate early marriages. Teacher training programmes should include modules on culturally and gender-responsive pedagogy to support crisis management.

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