

Gender Inequality in Education in Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

Gender inequality in education remains a persistent development issue across Indonesia, particularly in the eastern regions such as Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). This paper examines how cultural, structural, and policy-related factors interact to shape unequal access, participation, and outcomes between male and female students. Using a qualitative descriptive approach through document analysis of government reports, statistical data, and academic publications, the study identifies that early marriage, heavy domestic workloads, and patriarchal norms significantly restrict educational participation among girls. Despite the presence of national and regional gender mainstreaming policies, their implementation in Nagekeo has not yet achieved transformative results. The findings highlight that gender inequality in education is not merely an issue of access but also of power relations and social structures that continue to reproduce disparities. The study concludes that integrating gender-responsive budgeting, community awareness campaigns, and capacity building for local governments is essential to promote inclusive education and sustainable human development in eastern Indonesia.

Keywords: Gender inequality, education, Nagekeo, East Nusa Tenggara, gender mainstreaming, early marriage, human development.

INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone of human development and social transformation. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge, expand capabilities, and participate meaningfully in society. In the global development agenda, the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) underscore education as both a right and an instrument for achieving gender equality. Goal 4 calls for inclusive and quality education for all, while Goal 5 emphasizes eliminating gender-based discrimination in every sector, including education. Despite notable progress in expanding access to education in Indonesia, gender disparities persist especially in rural and underdeveloped regions such as East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). The case of Nagekeo Regency exemplifies the deep-rooted challenges faced by girls in accessing and completing formal education.

The persistence of gender inequality in education reflects a complex interaction of cultural norms, economic hardship, and institutional barriers. Patriarchal traditions continue to assign domestic responsibilities disproportionately to women and girls, limiting their time and capacity for schooling. Moreover, early marriage remains a widespread practice in Nagekeo, with approximately 14–15 percent of girls marrying before the age of 18, a rate significantly higher than the national average. Once married, girls are often forced to discontinue their studies, thereby reinforcing a cycle of limited educational attainment, low economic participation, and dependency on male family members. This situation illustrates how education, instead of serving as a social equalizer, can become an arena where structural inequalities are reproduced.

From a national perspective, Indonesia's education system has undergone significant reforms over the past two decades, particularly through the *Compulsory Education Program (Wajib Belajar 12 Tahun)* and the *Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (PUG)* within the education sector. These initiatives have contributed to the steady improvement of literacy rates and school participation at the primary level. However, regional disparities remain substantial. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2023) show that while the *Net Enrollment Rate (NER)* for junior high school is above 90% in most western provinces, it falls below 75% in several eastern provinces, including NTT. Such disparities are not merely statistical; they represent the unequal distribution of opportunities, where girls in rural and impoverished areas face systemic disadvantages that stem from geography, culture, and governance capacity. Nagekeo, as part of this broader regional context, reveals how local sociocultural dynamics intersect with national policy limitations, creating a persistent gender gap in educational outcomes.

At the global level, the discourse on gender equality in education has evolved from access-oriented frameworks toward more transformative approaches that emphasize empowerment and structural change. Theories such as *Gender and Development (GAD)* and *Social Reproduction* highlight that addressing gender inequality requires more than equal enrollment—it necessitates changing power relations and institutional practices that perpetuate discrimination. UNESCO's (2021) concept of *Gender-Transformative Education* echoes this approach, calling for curricula, pedagogy, and governance systems that challenge gender norms rather than reinforce them. In this light, Nagekeo's experience can be seen as a microcosm of broader development challenges in Indonesia, where policy intent often fails to reach communities due to entrenched social hierarchies and limited institutional responsiveness.

The problem examined in this study revolves around the limited access and participation of women in education, despite national commitments to gender equality. Various national policies such as the *Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (Pengarusutamaan Gender/PUG)* and *Education for All* initiatives have been implemented, yet the practical outcomes remain uneven across regions. In Nagekeo, policy implementation often stops at administrative compliance without meaningful integration of gender perspectives into program design and budgeting. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the manifestations and underlying causes of gender inequality in education within Nagekeo Regency and assess the effectiveness of local policies in promoting gender-responsive education governance.

The research addresses three key questions: What forms of gender inequality are evident in educational access, participation, and outcomes in Nagekeo? How do socio-cultural norms and economic conditions influence these disparities? And to what extent have local education policies incorporated gender mainstreaming principles effectively? By exploring these questions, the study seeks to uncover the dynamic interplay between structure, culture, and policy in shaping gendered educational experiences in Nagekeo.

The objective of this study is twofold: first, to describe empirically the patterns of gender inequality in education; and second, to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening gender-responsive policies at the local level. This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender and development by contextualizing global theories—such as *Gender and Development (GAD)*, *Social Reproduction*, and *Intersectionality*—within the specific socio-cultural realities of eastern Indonesia. The significance of this study lies in its potential to bridge the gap between policy intent

and local implementation, offering practical insights for local governments, schools, and civil society organizations. Achieving gender equality in education is not only a moral imperative but also a developmental necessity for reducing poverty, enhancing human capital, and achieving sustainable growth in regions such as Nagekeo.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender inequality in education has been widely studied from both global and local perspectives. At the global level, UNESCO (2020) asserts that achieving gender parity in education is fundamental to sustainable development. However, disparities persist in regions where poverty, cultural norms, and institutional weaknesses intersect. Stromquist (2015) emphasizes that education systems often mirror social hierarchies, perpetuating unequal power relations rather than challenging them. In Indonesia, research by KPPPA (2023) and Bappenas (2022) demonstrates that gender gaps are most visible in eastern provinces, where socio-economic and geographical barriers limit educational opportunities for women and girls.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws primarily from three perspectives: the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, Bourdieu's theory of Social Reproduction, and the concept of Intersectionality. The GAD framework, as proposed by Moser (1993), moves beyond viewing women merely as a vulnerable group and instead focuses on transforming social structures that create inequality. It emphasizes that gender equality cannot be achieved simply by increasing female participation but requires institutional and cultural transformation. In education, GAD calls for policies that challenge gender stereotypes, integrate gender analysis into planning and budgeting, and ensure that both girls and boys benefit equitably from educational resources.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of Social Reproduction explains how schools serve as instruments for perpetuating existing social hierarchies. Through concepts such as *habitus* and *cultural capital*, Bourdieu argues that individuals from dominant groups are more likely to succeed because the education system reflects their social norms and values. In patriarchal societies like Nagekeo, the *habitus* favors men by assigning them public roles while confining women to domestic spaces. Thus, girls' education becomes undervalued, and family decisions about schooling are influenced by gendered expectations.

Finally, Crenshaw's (1989) Intersectionality theory adds an important layer by highlighting that gender inequality intersects with other forms of marginalization, such as poverty, geography, and ethnicity. In NTT, women face multiple disadvantages due to their rural location, limited access to infrastructure, and entrenched gender norms. This intersectional perspective helps explain why generic education policies often fail to address the specific challenges faced by women in marginalized regions. By combining these three theoretical approaches, the study adopts a multidimensional framework for analyzing gender inequality in education as both a structural and cultural phenomenon.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using documentary analysis, which is particularly effective for understanding complex social phenomena by systematically reviewing

existing written materials such as government reports, academic studies, and statistical data. As explained by Bowen (2009), documentary analysis allows the researcher to identify, evaluate, and interpret documents in order to generate contextual and conceptual insights. The study is focused on Nagekeo Regency, East Nusa Tenggara—an area characterized by significant gender disparities in education and persistent cultural norms that influence female participation in schooling.

1. Data Sources and Scope

Data sources were drawn from a wide range of official publications and academic research. Primary sources included documents from the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoECRT), the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA), and international agencies such as UNESCO, UNDP, and UN Women. Local government documents, including the *Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) Nagekeo 2021–2026*, the *Education Profile of East Nusa Tenggara Province*, and annual education reports from the Nagekeo District Education Office, were also examined. To enhance academic rigor, the study also incorporated journal articles and conference papers discussing gender inequality and education in Indonesia and other developing regions. These secondary sources were used to triangulate findings, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in multiple, credible perspectives.

2. Analytical Framework

The analysis process followed three primary stages, adapted from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014):

a. Data Reduction

This initial stage involved the systematic selection and condensation of information relevant to gender inequality in education. Documents were screened to identify data that addressed key themes such as access to education, participation rates, educational outcomes, and policy frameworks. Non-relevant or repetitive data were excluded to focus the analysis on core gender-related issues. Data reduction was not merely an act of elimination, but also a process of conceptualization identifying patterns, contradictions, and emerging categories that shaped the direction of further analysis.

b. Data Display

The second stage involved organizing the reduced data into thematic matrices and visual displays that allowed relationships between categories to become apparent. Themes were grouped into conceptual clusters such as “structural barriers,” “cultural influences,” and “policy responses.” By structuring the data visually, the researcher was able to observe the interplay between factors influencing gender inequality—linking macro-level policies with micro-level community practices. This stage also enabled comparisons between national and local data, providing a clearer understanding of contextual variations in Nagekeo.

c. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

In the final stage, theoretical interpretation was applied to synthesize findings. The patterns and relationships identified during data display were interpreted through the lenses of Gender and Development (GAD) and Intersectionality. This step involved iterative comparison between

empirical findings and theoretical propositions, ensuring that interpretations were both contextually grounded and conceptually robust. Verification was achieved through continuous reflection and cross-checking of data sources, thereby enhancing the validity and credibility of conclusions.

3. Operational Steps

To operationalize the above framework, the study followed five interrelated analytical steps that guided the research process from document identification to final synthesis:

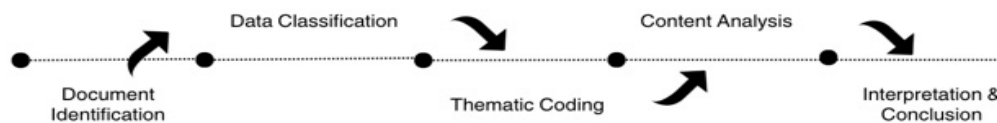


Figure 1. Operational Steps

a. Document Identification

This step involved systematically locating relevant materials and reports from national databases, government repositories, and academic journals. Each document was assessed for authenticity, relevance, and reliability. Preference was given to official and peer-reviewed sources to ensure data quality.

b. Data Classification

The collected materials were categorized into thematic domains such as *access to education*, *participation and retention*, *educational outcomes*, and *policy responses*. This classification enabled a structured comparison across different data types (statistical, narrative, and policy-oriented).

c. Thematic Coding

Using a qualitative coding framework, key phrases, concepts, and recurring narratives were extracted from the documents. Codes were assigned to highlight relationships between variables—such as the link between early marriage and dropout rates, or between gender norms and policy effectiveness. Coding was done manually and iteratively to preserve contextual meaning.

d. Content Analysis

The coded data were subjected to qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), which focused on identifying latent meanings and policy implications embedded in the documents. This analytical approach allowed the researcher to uncover how policy language, implementation structures, and cultural narratives collectively shape gender inequality in education.

e. Synthesis and Interpretation

The final analytical step integrated findings from multiple themes within broader theoretical frameworks. The *Gender and Development (GAD)* perspective helped contextualize institutional barriers and policy inefficiencies, while *Intersectionality Theory* (Crenshaw, 1989) illuminated how gender interacts with poverty, geography, and social class to produce layered disadvantages for girls in rural Nagekeo. The synthesis emphasized that gender disparities in education cannot

be explained by a single variable but are the outcome of intersecting structural, cultural, and institutional forces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that gender inequality in education in Nagekeo manifests across three dimensions: access, participation, and outcomes. In terms of access, boys and girls attend primary school at almost equal rates; however, the gap widens at the junior and senior secondary levels. The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) for boys at the junior level reaches 78.2 percent, compared to only 71.4 percent for girls, while at the senior level the gap increases to 68.5 percent for boys and 59.2 percent for girls (BPS, 2022). These disparities are driven largely by socio-cultural and economic constraints. Families often prioritize boys' education because they are expected to become future breadwinners, while girls are expected to marry early and support household duties.

Early marriage remains a major factor contributing to school dropout among girls. According to the 2021 Susenas survey, 14.8 percent of girls in Nagekeo marry before age 18. Once married, most leave school permanently, resulting in lost educational opportunities and long-term economic vulnerability. This reflects what Bourdieu (1986) describes as *social reproduction* a process through which existing social hierarchies are maintained across generations through cultural and institutional mechanisms.

Participation and retention rates further illustrate gendered challenges. The dropout rate for female students at the junior level is 4.8 percent, twice that of males (2.1 percent). At the senior level, the female dropout rate reaches 7.2 percent compared to 3.6 percent for males (BPS, 2023). Economic hardship is a key factor; however, qualitative evidence suggests that cultural expectations play a stronger role. In many households, girls are responsible for caregiving and domestic chores, leaving limited time for study. This unequal division of labor aligns with Moser's (1993) argument that gender roles, deeply embedded in social structures, shape women's participation in development.

Geographical barriers also exacerbate inequalities. Many girls in remote villages must travel long distances often several kilometers to reach schools located in sub-district centers. Parents fear for their safety, particularly in areas with poor infrastructure and limited transportation. Consequently, they prefer to keep their daughters at home. This demonstrates how physical space interacts with gender and class, as highlighted in Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

The outcomes of education also reveal gendered consequences. The Gender Development Index (GDI) in Nagekeo is 89.76, lower than the national average of 92.14 (BPS, 2023). Women with limited education are predominantly engaged in informal, low-paying jobs in agriculture, trade, and domestic services. Only a small proportion hold leadership positions of 15 senior high schools in the regency, only two are led by women. Similarly, female representation in village government remains below 10 percent. These indicators demonstrate that educational inequality perpetuates broader socio-economic disparities.

Policy analysis shows that although Nagekeo's RPJMD (2021–2026) includes commitments to gender equality, implementation remains partial. Gender-responsive budgeting is not systematically

applied, and data disaggregated by sex are incomplete. Programs such as *Program Indonesia Pintar (PIP)*, designed to support poor students, often fail to reach remote areas due to administrative barriers. Local governments have initiated awareness programs through the Women Empowerment Office (DP3A), but such initiatives are limited in scope and funding.

Despite these limitations, positive steps are emerging. Collaboration with religious leaders and local women's groups has started to address early marriage and promote girls' education. However, sustainable progress requires institutional transformation. As Walby (2005) argues, gender mainstreaming must move beyond symbolic inclusion toward restructuring institutions to ensure equality in decision-making, budgeting, and service delivery. In summary, gender inequality in education in Nagekeo is not simply a matter of individual choice or economic limitation. It is embedded in the socio-cultural and institutional fabric of society. Addressing it requires an integrated approach that combines education policy reform, gender-sensitive community engagement, and targeted investment in infrastructure and social support systems.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concludes that gender inequality in education in Nagekeo Regency stems from a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Patriarchal norms assign domestic responsibilities to girls, limiting their educational opportunities, while early marriage continues to curtail their access to higher education. Structural barriers such as inadequate infrastructure and limited gender-responsive budgeting further exacerbate disparities. Although national and regional frameworks for gender equality exist, their local implementation remains administrative rather than transformative.

To address these challenges, several recommendations are proposed. First, strengthen institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming by establishing active Gender Focal Points within local education offices and ensuring that all education programs undergo gender analysis. Second, expand access for girls through the construction of additional schools in remote areas, provision of safe transportation, and establishment of community-based dormitories. Third, integrate community awareness programs targeting parents, traditional leaders, and youth to challenge patriarchal norms and discourage early marriage. Fourth, promote women's economic empowerment through vocational training and entrepreneurship initiatives linked to educational participation. Fifth, develop a comprehensive gender-disaggregated education database to support evidence-based policymaking. Finally, foster multi-actor collaboration among local governments, civil society, and international partners to ensure sustainability of gender-responsive education initiatives.

Achieving gender equality in education in Nagekeo and similar regions is essential for advancing human development, reducing poverty, and promoting social justice. The challenge lies not only in providing access but also in transforming cultural norms and institutional practices that reproduce inequality. As Indonesia moves toward inclusive and sustainable development, the empowerment of women and girls through education must remain at the core of national and local policy priorities.

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