

## The Need for Gender Equity in Education in Kenya

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### Abstract

Kenya recognizes education as a basic human right. Like all human rights it is universal and inalienable. It is also seen as a private and socio-investment which is shared by individuals, their families, employees, governments and international agencies. It forms an integral part of development and strategy for wider development agenda. It involves the art and act of preparing people to create and recreate new working habits and values for the changing live in a dynamic environment (UNESCO, 2002). Education is a cornerstone for economic growth and socio-economic development and a principle means of improving the welfare of individuals. It is as a result of the importance education from a global perspective that the Kenya government recognized the need to provide education for all its citizenry and much more on the girl child and women as a tool for empowering them. The government's policy in education (ROK, 2002) through the Ministry of Education stresses the need for achievement of Education For All (EFA) as part of global initiative towards provision of education to all mankind. To realize this several improvements have been made literacy level in both male and female shows a gap but it is continuously being narrowed as national enrollment figures in schools is being camouflaged by regional variations. This paper identifies the need for gender equity in education process which is hampered by challenges and attempts to provide and propose positive actions to mitigate the situation.

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**Keywords:** education, equity, gender, challenges, strategies and positive actions

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### INTRODUCTION

Education according to Joseph Stalin 'is a weapon whose effect depends on who holds it in his hands and at whom it is aimed'. It is a basic human right, universal and inalienable just as it is both a product and a process. As a product education is an aggregate of what has been learnt and expressed in terms of abilities attitudes and behavior that s positive value to the society. While as process it is a continuous acquisition and accumulation of knowledge skills, values and ideals which enables one to play a productive role in the society. Like other nations Kenya has taken keen interest in education with her guiding philosophy being every Kenyan has the inalienable right no matter his/her socio-economic status to basic education (GOK, 1997:135).

It is because of this guiding principle that the goals of education were clearly stipulated that it should always realize and foster national unity, prepare and equip the youth with knowledge, skills, expertise, serve the needs for national development, provide full development of talents and personality, promote social justice morality, social obligation and responsibility and finally to foster positive attitude and consciousness towards a nation. There is a belief that education holds the key in promoting socio-economic progress. Its effect has spread since it is a means of providing qualified persons for the growing

economic and administrative institutions left behind by colonial government.

To address the challenges facing education at independence several commissions were founded such as (Ominde, 1964; Gachathi Report, 1976; Mackay report 1981; Kamunge 1988and Koech report, 2000 (ROK, 2012). Recent policy initiative geared towards improvement and access of education saw the introduction of economic recovery strategy for wealth and empowerment (ERS) 2003-2007. Similarly, this led to the adoption of sector wide approach programme planning (SWAP) to the provision of education. Through this process the government and development partners has developed Kenya Education Sector (KESSP) aimed at improving access equity, quality, retention and quality completion rates at primary and secondary level (MOEST:2007)

Among other developments was the declaration and implementation of free primary education (FPE) in 2003 which was in line with the Millennium Development Goal which aimed at achieving Universal Primary Education by all school going children by 2015. At secondary school level the government introduced disbursement of bursaries for the needy students, subsidization of secondary school fees under the Free Secondary Education (FSE) programme in ASAL areas. To extend the coverage in remote arid and semi arid regions bursaries,

scholarships and grants have been extended to these regions and to the informal settlements and slum areas.

At tertiary level, technical and vocational and entrepreneurship training institutions (TIVET) have been revitalized and more mid-level colleges brought in. Consequently, access to higher institution of learning has increased through the introduction of variety of certificates, diploma degrees, courses which can be one during the evening, weekend and parallel classes. Due to this enrolment has increased tremendously.

However, with the above achievement the education sector has been faced with a number of challenges which include the current education system in relation to the former. Others include inefficiency in utilization of resources to meet the educational needs and waste, poor administration structure, quality and relevance of the curriculum and cost of providing education.

As a strategy for human development it is a crucial vehicle for enhancing quality of life and is also considered by different stakeholders in the country as an important vehicle for socio-economic and political development. From a wider perspective it is seen as an act and art in which people are prepared to create and recreate new working habits and values for the changing live in a dynamic environment (UNESCO, 2003/4).

Through the acquisition of education doors towards broadened thinking and empowerment enables people to make informed decisions, nurture self confidence and even uplifts ones socio-economic status. It is therefore seen as a cornerstone for a countries economic growth and development and a principle means of improving an individual's welfare and through it one can increase ones capacity and that of the society. It helps to reduce poverty by increasing the value of efficiency of labor offered by the poor and by mitigating the population's health and nutritional consequences of poverty (IBRID/WB: 1990:8)

Based on their above importance both globally and nationally the government of Kenya through the Ministry of Education recognizes this as it even stresses in its vision on the achievement of Education for all (EFA) which is guided by the understanding that good education contributes significantly towards better employment opportunities through the expansion of income generating opportunities. This is in agreement with the government plans as articulated in the Economic Recovery Strategy Paper (Republic of Kenya, 2004).

The vision 2030 in its social pillar recognizes achievement of gender equity as a prerequisite for fast and sustainable economic growth and proposes changes in opportunity, empowerment, capabilities and vulnerabilities (ROK, 2007). In Kenya various strategies have been put in place to promote gender equality and empower women, since glaring gender gaps exist in access to and control of resources, economic opportunities, power and political roles. The interventions include provision of free primary education and free day secondary education that has accorded equal basic education opportunities to boys and girls, operationalization of Sessional Paper No.1 of the policy framework for education, training and research which will increase the proportion of women in teaching, administration, research at all levels of education, implementation of Affirmative action on admission of female students to public universities, allowing girls who drop out of primary and secondary schools due to pregnancies to re-enter and complete their education and for new recruitment and appointment in the public sector.

Lugg (2003) notes that this believes have profound effects on leadership in that the type of behavior and character traits we expect from leaders are associated with masculine norms. Hence, the established norms can result to women holding lower expectations for possible careers in administration. Education provides skills and competence which allows individuals to perform productive roles meaning that a more literate and skilled labor force is likely to yield more returns. It promotes social equity and acts as a strong link in poverty reduction, produces a more informed citizenry, empowers individuals and enables them to become proactive, gain control over their lives and even broaden the range of available options (UNESCO:2003).

Although it is not about knowledge alone but it imparts value, attitude as well as creative and emotional; development and an improvement of physical quality of life. Its role has also been emphasized in contributing to human resource development in today's globalization context hence playing a central role in production of individuals who are equipped with intellectual abilities and capacities needed for national development and regional advancement (Mama, 2003).

As a result, this heavy investment has been directed towards provision of education of every school going age child in order to eliminate poverty, ignorance and disease. This was done just after independence when the government adopted sessional paper no. 10-1965(African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya). Among other development strategies in relation to education and the need to realize universal access to basic education for all training was emphasized.

### **Gender Related Challenges in Education.**

It is noted that struggles for gender equality in all areas of development go back several decades during which time various commitments, conventions, declarations and plans of action have been drawn, ratified and to a certain extent, implemented. These include the instruments emerging out of the United Nations led conferences such as Mexico (1975), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) and also given prominence in the Millennium Development goals (2000) as well as the Education for All Framework for Action (Dakar 2000). Other initiatives have been undertaken towards achieving the education and gender goals. These include the UNICEF-led United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI), and the Africa Girls' Initiative (AGEI) (Mlama, 2005)

However roots of disparities are owed to various reasons ranging from communal, individual, unclear policy among other but which may vary from one set to another. This paper looks into few critical areas and which may not be application to other environments.

Parents in rural areas often have a lower level of education, and may attach less emphasis on schooling. The perceived lack of relevance of schooling may be enhanced by a rigid curriculum, often designed for a context (and sometimes culture) removed from that in rural areas. Rural schools rarely adapt the curriculum to make use of local examples, or to link the curriculum to local needs.

This includes handling of difference between male and female sexes in the instructional process, while these differences make life extremely fun and interesting they can also provide a challenging obstacle in academic achievement which in the long run results in 'gender gap'. Gender gap is attributed to its existence to everything from biological issues to discriminatory practices which affects in the long run their academic performance. This brings about achievement gap between boys and girls or groups of students.

During the colonial days many communities considered women's primary obligation as to farm land and produce food for the family consumption; this was to supplement the meager salary of their husbands as a result of the colonial patriarchal forms combined with the indigenous forms to create unequal opportunity structures between women and men in employment. As Marshall (2003) notes that it is the persistent of gender norms that deter women from entering school administration roles and impede their progress towards advancement.

The challenge in this case is the best way or means to be used to close this achievement gap. Some may include adopting color-blind policies and affirmative

action, making classes more heterogeneous, hiring teachers with advanced or subject specific degrees, using methodologies that are learner friendly and adoption individualized approach to teaching and learning.

The other challenge is the overuse of traditional methods of instructions where children learn facts and principles through repetition, memorization and focused instructions from the teachers. Cole (2004) observes that women are poorly represented in management level because of the social attitudes towards them. The remedy for this is for educators to adopt and use learner center approaches and even establish and develop child friendly environments, making the work environments to be enjoyable for both the teachers and the learners. This is in line with progressive educational philosophies by John Dewey who at the turn of the 20th century indicated a fall out of favor of traditional education and an introduction and use of student directed learning and other teaching methods which are new exciting and less threatening to the child self esteem.

Another challenge is the gender difference in cognitive abilities which has encouraged gender gap. Studies made have shown that girls do better in school than boys and they seem to get higher grades and complete high school at a higher rate than boys (Jacob, 2002). Many factors contribute to lower girl-child education participation in rural areas. On the demand side, rural children may be less interested in attending school. Furthermore, Lockheed et. Al., (1980) recognize that opportunity costs of attending schools in rural schools are often higher.

Another key challenge is on gender differences in choice of subjects especially in secondary schools where more than often science and math's are recognized as male dominated and which when allowed the girls future career are affected and this could be the reason why there is acute shortage of women in science engineering and technical fields (AAUW, 1992). To address this issue among others are; stakeholders need to address beginning from school to the ministry level, attitude changed from all those concerned, using single sets teaching groups and providing role models such as female science teachers in order to change the image of the subject, changing the teaching practices and style can counter the gender bias in subject areas and teacher bias in expectation and providing adequate infrastructure in the schools.

Another challenge is teacher characteristics and classroom environment which have been identified as contributors to this gender gap. Unfortunately, female reports passed over during classroom discussion are not encouraging. More often than not the messages passed may either be out of frustration in the part of

the teacher owed to students indifference on the subject. Such as situation may discourage the learners which Sadker & Sadker (1994) identifies to a state where students may feel stupid or develop negative attitude all together. On classroom environment, learner characteristics such as entry behavior determined by their background similarly have an influence. Naturally students whose entry behavior was not good owed to their background may find it difficult to cope. In this case the stakeholders who are the school administration and parents should ensure necessary requirements are provided that would assist the teachers and learners. Teachers need to make classroom environment more girl friendly by incorporating low level competition public drills and practice , high level of teacher involvement and attention, hands-on activities female role models same sex cooperative learning and communities.

The issue of enrolment in schools is another challenge. In some schools the number of students per class is higher than the recommended forty five (45) (MOE) viz-a- viz the number of teachers teaching them. This may be attributed to the introduction of both free primary and secondary education where enrollment have sky rocketed affecting the learning environment where congestion and struggle for few resources is the norm of the day. From this only few advantaged may benefit unlike those from disadvantaged background hence accelerating the gap. In order to address this vice the government has provided a ripe platform to reach the unreached with specific provision for the disadvantaged such laws that encourage parents to send their children to school, provide temporary or makeshift classrooms for migrant children and even those with special needs.

Another challenge is bringing children who have been out of school partly or have never attended school owing to circumstances that are beyond them. For example, in semi arid and slum areas found within cities or rural set ups, children are forced to undertake some activities like travelling long distance in search of water, child labor child prostitution or child begging. In such situations appropriate measures and support needs to be put in place in order to eliminate disparities in acquisition of education and to ensure that the global initiative Education For All (EFA) come to be realized. This call for equal participation by all those concerned that is the government, parents and communities who should collectively play an important role in ensuring child friendly education for each and every child today and tomorrow is provided.

Other social variables that affect attendance of school and performance in education include social classes, ethnic origin, cultural aspects on who should be provided with education either the girl-child or boy

child and other local issues do affect education very much (Arnot, et, al., 1998).

On the issue of gender disparity both boys and girls are equally affected and normally show disparity in attendance and enrollment. On the side of the girls cultural norms expected of a girl child is on household training in domestic chores in a normal working day and which to a large extent affect the performance especially for those in day schools (Adkins & Leonard, 1996). Again girls education is not valued since they are hoped to be married off hence be of benefit to the other family while boy's education is taken as important. One other cultural practice is child dependence as a source of labor in rural households' especially busy times of the agricultural year such as plough or harvest time. Normally Kenyan schools calendar is designed to follow rigid schedule both in terms of time of the day and term dates, and often expect children to be in school during busy periods in the agricultural calendar. The other cultural aspect that affects the performance of boys is the retention of old fashioned notion of male-headed family with mother and girls caring for children and which encouraged education to the boy child. Although in the recent past this attitude has changed but not across all the regions hence there is still low enrollment of girls in schools especially the ASAL/COAST regions of Kenya. A campaign needs to be done to sensitize the parents and the girl child on the importance of education.

Similarly from the boys; side high level of indiscipline have resulted into destruction of property, loss of study time, resource wastage and even loss of life time. Research done earlier shows that boys take pride in courting trouble and challenging authority as they are usually involved in rough behavior than girls. This anti social behavior comes about as they seek approval from their peers (Adkins & Leonard, 1996).

The issue of socialization of gender in school poses another challenge in provision of education based on gender. Over the years girls are made aware that they are unequal to boys and every time students are seated or lined up by gender teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently. This allows degradation of girls' confidence and oppression of females. For examples girls are praised for being neat, quiet and calm whereas boys are encouraged to be independent thinkers, be active and even speak up (Bailey, 1992).

However a researcher Reay (2001) found that 'nice girl' is a derogatory term '...absence of toughness and attitude. The study further found that how we socialization in school occurs creates a situation where some behavior is tolerated. Assertive behavior from girls is often seen as disruptive and at times

viewed negatively by adults. This reinforces the notion that girls misbehavior to be looked upon as a character defect whilst boys misbehavior which is viewed as desire to assert themselves.

Another aspect is permissive attitude towards sexual harassment in schools which reinforces the socialization of girls as inferior. For example a situation where schools ignore interaction between students and by doing this they are giving tacit approval on threats or danger of boy child interaction. In certain circumstances girls are noted as not worthy of respect and that appropriate behavior for boys include exerting power over girls. This treatment has made girls to feel babied and not take up their position and always look upon someone to do things for them ( Bailey, 1992).

Beyond socialization patterns gender bias has been embedded in textbooks, materials used lesson provision of facilities and even teacher interactions with students in everyday curriculum. This is what is taught as a hidden curriculum of lessons taught implicitly to students through every day functioning of their classrooms.

Arnot & Ruduck (1998) shows that though some girls are excellent both at school and university level they are dominated by men in the society where men hold most positions of high status, high power and even high rewarding jobs. This may be attributed to responsibilities that get along their way especially at the middle age where they get engaged in raising families meaning they ascend the ladder at a slower rate. The remedy of this is mentoring of both boys and girls to each take up the challenge to work hard be focused so as to achieve education that will help them in future. There is need to improve on female achievement by working with the contradictions of femininity and intellect and by taking off feeling such as fear over 'male' subjects and the perceived difficulty into account

### **Remedy Of Hidden Curriculum**

To remedy the hidden curriculum the following ought to be done;

Teachers need to be aware to gender bias tendencies, provide strategies for altering behavior; efforts need to be made to reduce/combat gender bias in educational materials especially those used in lower levels of education in order to avoid children growing up with the stigma.

In-service and retraining and even change and revisiting the curriculum so as to remove any aspects that may encourage gender bias.

Teachers need to recognize their own gender biased behaviors and be provided with strategies and

resources to avert this. Self-directed modules should be provided that will encourage gender equity.

Specific attitudes and even dramatizing on the effects of gender bias be encouraged in schools. All stakeholders' administrators, parents, community Teachers and students are sensitized on the implications of gender biased tendencies and correct measures be taken to correct this.

In the end all those concerned should do a self evaluation on the extent of corrections made. Teachers be sensitized on gender biasness embedded in educational materials and texts and suggest measures to be taken to avert this.

Teacher responses towards questions and answers should be carefully reviewed and evaluated especially during the teaching and learning processes done either unconsciously or consciously. For example there are four types of teacher-responses to students which included, teacher praises and provides feedback for a response, teacher remediates, encourages a student to correct and expand their answers, teacher criticizes and states the answer is incorrect and teacher accepts and acknowledges students responses. Research done by Sadker ('1994) found that boys are likely to receive praise and remediation than girls, receive an acknowledged responses, given boys greater opportunity reinforced and even had their ideas expanded unlike the girls who are at times shy to express themselves.

Resources chosen for classrooms are subject to gender bias which in turn affects the learning process among students. For example writers omit the contributions made by women in the society, that which tokenize women experiences and that which show stereotype in roles compound the issue of gender bias in the curriculum. Research shows that the use of gender equitable materials allows the learners to have gender-balanced knowledge, develop more flexible attitude towards gender roles and even imitate role behaviors contained in the materials used (Klein, 1985). There is need for writers to be very keen when presenting their materials especially those used to teach the expected curriculum. This also calls for the concerned authorities to look into this matter as a matter of urgency so that we don't continue to create unnecessary stigma on the girl child.

The other issue that has been a challenge in education based on gender is the language bias which neglect on women and omissions of women as developers of history and initiators of events and absence of women from accounts of technological development (Bailey, 1992).

Ignorance of importance of girls education. To remedy against this vice government should

incorporate gender in its national plan in a deliberate effort to eliminate gender gap though something has been done more should be done through advocacy. This may be through civil society, NGOs for example Forum for African Educationalists (FAWE, 2002)) which have undertaken various programmes related to policy, advocacy and demonstrative intervention and mainstreaming best practices. More needs to be done to reach out to all areas

The need to link up with such bodies at grass root levels and using successful models to step up fight against gender inequality in education al all levels.

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