

# **Gender Participation in Free Primary Education in Kenya; what is the Place of Girl Child?**

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Education remains the single most important tool for social transformation and for furthering the gender equality agenda. It is also the single biggest opportunity to close the gap between the poor and the rich, and to help those in chronic poverty to overcome cyclic and intergenerational poverty. Its importance for social and economic development has seen governments make it a right to every child, boy and girl. Literature reveals major strides made by regions and governments in attaining gender parity in education since the adoption of Education for All(EFA). In Africa countries have registered remarkable progress though with variations across the continent. Kenya in particular made spirited efforts to close gender gap in education by the introduction of FPE.

The United Nations has set universal education as one of the Millennium development goals(MDGs) that should be achieved by 2015. Free primary education(FPE) was identified as one of the key pillars of this goal(Onyango B., 2014). However, until the last decade the level of education attainment in Sub-Saharan Africa remained very low, though the figures varied greatly across the continent. Kenya in particular, the level of education attainment remained worryingly low. By the year 2002 only 61.7 % of children in Kenya were enrolled in schools(UN). Thus in 2003 the government introduced free Primary education aiming at improving this figure.

Education attainment reflects long term participation in primary, secondary, and post secondary education by the adult population of a country(Heubler F., 2012). Prior to the year 2002, there had been a lot emphasis on girl child education in Kenya because of cultural issues that hindered girl child education. In fact since independence boy child had been favored by many socio-cultural issues that had strong influence in many communities in Kenya. For example culturally, girls were required in most communities to remain at home and take care of domestic chores. However, these customs have loosened and more girls have got the opportunity to enroll in schools. According to demographic data available between 1998 and 2009, Kenya had recorded an improvement of between 87 and 94 % in education enrollment and, nearly similar number of boys and girls were enrolled(Onyango, 2014). Nonetheless, after the introduction of FPE, girl child enrollment in schools significantly improved.

Some reports have indicated that girl child enrollment in schools had surpassed that of boy child. Nevertheless, there has not been sufficient to prove claims of disparities of gender participation in education since the introduction of FPE.

Access to education is measured in terms of Gender Parity Index(GPI). This measure is defined as the value of a given indicator for girls divided by that value for boys. A GPI value of 1 signifies that there is no difference in the indicators for girls and boys. On the other hand a GPI of less than 1 indicates that the value of an indicator is higher for boys than for girls. When the GPI is greater than 1 the opposite is true. GPI intends to ensure that there is equal participation in education for both boys and girls. The call for GPI was first highlighted at the Jomtien World conference on EFA in 1990. The emphasis then was that both girls and boys should get equal treatment in accessing educational opportunities. However it began to bear fruit when it was reaffirmed by World Education forum held in Dakar and subsequently by Millennium Development Goals of 2000(UNESCO, 2012). Thereafter different countries adopted different strategies. Kenya specifically began to implement free Primary education for all as effort to attain EFA goal.

Researches show that access to education is an issue in almost all countries. In some countries the focus has however shifted from enrollment into primary schools to repetition, late entry and dropout. Today however, it is acknowledged that with the introduction of formal education, both at Primary and tertiary levels, educational opportunities are expanding and illiteracy levels falling as enrollment levels rise. Following Dakar education forum in 2000 which endorsed education for all(EFA) agenda, there has been a big leap in educational progress: the number of students doubled globally from 647 million to 1,397 million, while enrolments increased from 418 to 702 million at primary level, and from 196 to 531 million at secondary level and 33 to 164 million in higher education. In a similar vein the world seems to have kept pace with the increased demand for education by increasing the capacity for education(UNESCO, 2012). But just who is benefiting from the expanding global educational opportunities is still the question the world continues to grapple with. To date there is still a global outcry for the girl child education. In many countries, the phenomenon of under participation in education by girls has been real threat gender parity. According to a report released by UNESCO in 2011, around 65 million girls both of primary and secondary school age were still out of school, thus undermining the prospects of their contribution to society (<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/gender-education.aspx>).

While this disparity has been a global phenomenon, it has been more intense in certain regions. Africa in specific for a long time, gender participation in education has been badly skewed in favor of boy child. According to Ombati and Mokua(2012), access to education in Africa is biased based on gender, location, region and class. This they posited has resulted to higher inequality rates among girls

and women in comparison to boys and men. In Kenya for example by 2008, only 2% of school age children in urban areas could not attend schools, while 6% could be said of children in rural areas. Regionally regions that were favored by Missionaries in Kenya upon introduction of Western style education because of favorable climate and richness of land: Rift Valley, Eastern and Nyanza continued to lead in education enrollment, unlike N. Eastern which has a harsh climate(Onyango, 2014). It is also confirmed that generally only girls from richer families are more likely to access education. In Kenya 99% of children from the wealthiest 20<sup>th</sup> percentile were in school compared to 84% in the poorest 20<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2008/09(Onyango, 2014). This fact is a major cause for alarm because more than half of school age population resides in Sub Saharan Africa and Asia (UNESCO, 2012) where poverty still has a hold on most families.

In this regard, given the biting poverty in Sub Saharan Africa, more girl child is likely to continue to miss out educational opportunities, unless some measures of intervention are put in place to foster equity in access among the poor countries. It is probably in recognition of this fact that many countries around the globe adopted the policy of compulsory education, irrespective of the region (<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/unesco-world-atlas-gender-education-2012.pdf>). Nonetheless despite the adoption of this policy, education access still continues to vary across regions even within Africa itself. This is due to varying degrees of commitment to education among these countries.

In general the gender disparities in access to education in Africa have been attributed to many factors. In their study Ombita and Mokuu(2012) posited that discrimination against girl child in accessing education is due to negative cultural values, female genital Mutilation(FGM), early and forced marriages, sexual harassment muted against girls and political instability and violence against girl child. This is in addition to lack of gender responsiveness among teachers, ineffective teaching, lack of materials, poor learning environments and impact of HIV and Aids which seem to affect girls more than boys. In Kenya gender disparity in education sector is due to social customs and gender roles that favored boy child. In many communities many people prefer that the girls should stay at home and do domestic chores as the male ones go to school.

With regard to HIV/AIDS UNAIDS(2009) found that young girls aged between 15-24 years are five times more likely to contract HIV/AIDS than their male counterparts. In addition to their own infections girls are often asked to leave school when one of their family members is HIV/AIDS positive so that they can provide home care. Those of them orphaned by HIV/ AIDS are often forced to leave school to head their families or to join labor market to fend for the family. Thus HIV and Aids remains a major obstacle to girl child education in Kenya.

Education environment in Kenya has neither made learning favorable for girls. Those of them who initially have the opportunity to attend schools are some time required to undertake maintenance of schools while boys are spared. Thus it is lamentable that institutions of learning have reinforced gender stereotypes in most communities, not only in Kenya but in Africa in general. This problem could be solved by designing an education curriculum that demystifies myths about gender roles in the society. However stakeholders in Kenya's education sector have not made substantial progress to that end. In fact it is suffice to say that education curriculum in Kenya is unresponsive to the plight of girl child progress in education. This lack of gender responsiveness is exhibited in many ways. For example teaching materials with stereotypical images that orient women to feminine roles and home care are also to blame (Obura, 1991). Furthermore there are numerous situations in which teachers often discriminate girls and focus more on encouraging boys to perform better. The teachers' thinking is permeated by the societal ideology that emphasizes that education attainment by boy child is more rewarding. This problem of gender stereotypes is extended beyond primary to secondary and university education. In Secondary education girls have been trained to believe that they are inferior in pursuing educational careers by fixing their choices to subjects that are seen as easy. Thus educationists and parents in Kenya seem to encourage girls to focus on less technical courses like social science studies making technical courses like mathematics and sciences a preserve for boys.

At undergraduate level girls in Kenya are marginalized into taking courses like social sciences but less lucrative in the job market, while male students dominate areas like engineering and physical sciences. This not only makes girls feel less than capable, but also lowers their prospects of getting employment in well paying sectors of the economy. But that is expected in a culture in which the predominant ideology is that independent or well educated, professional women with better paying are not marriageable. This view has been reinforced by few cases where well educated and independent women some time seek divorce. Thus Kenya also needs women role models who are independent but respect and preserve the institution of marriage.

In addition violence against girl child is prevalent in many schools. In most schools there is a lot of violence such as bullying, harassment and intimidation muted against girls that go unreported for fear of further victimization (Mokua, 2013).

Others have attributed low girl child education in Kenya to poverty which strikes girls most. In particular girls from poor families abstain from school due to lack of sanitary towels which they cannot afford (Schreiber, 2012). Once they attain the age of menstruation girls from poor families stay away from school for fear of being embarrassed by bloodstained clothes. Thus even though primary education is free in Kenya, the additional needs by girls keep those from poor families out of school. Many donors and independent organizations have made efforts to help girl child from poor families

by providing them with sanitary towels every month. One such organization is called 'Educate an African child' and is currently supported by individuals in Korea. While these efforts are positive, more donors are still needed to help the Kenyan girl child.

Secondly, it appears that while boy child education is highly prized, the opportunity cost for girls to stay out of school is low. Ranked as a low income food deficient country by UNDP(2007), most parents in Kenya face a hard tradeoff between sending their children to school and meeting other basic family needs. This is because even though primary education is free most schools still require parents to pay some money for utilities while also providing for uniforms and additional stationary children. When faced with such choices most parents prefer to let girls stay at home or join labor force to contribute to family income. In many cases girl child from poor households in Kenya is often involved in exploitative labor that keeps them away from school(ILO, 2002). Poverty is also responsible for regional disparities enrollment. For example in 2006, overall enrollment in the country was 49 percent for girls and 51 percent for boys. But in North Eastern province which is an area with higher poverty index only 16.5 percent of girls were enrolled compared to 23.4 percent of boys.

It is also worth noting that low participation of girls in education in Kenya varies from one region to another as reflected in cultural differences. The education attainment is influenced by powerful patriarchal system and gender stereotypes that often relegate the position of women to the periphery. For example among cattle keeping communities like the Masai, Samburu and Turkana, cultural norms has exacerbated low education attainment. These communities place more value in cattle and therefore they exchange their girls for cattle at early age. Boys in these communities are expected to assume the responsibility of protecting the community upon reaching a certain age and undergoing circumcision. Girls are similarly assigned their traditional duty of care giving for the family. In these communities, the predominant belief is that education stops boys and girls from taking their societal responsibilities. These traditional beliefs however have more effect on girls than boys. This is also because when girls are married off at early age when they are virgins they can fetch more cattle to the family. Among the Samburu people for instance, the marriage age for girls is between 10 to 12 years.

On the other hand Female Genital Mutilation(FGM) is a dominant practice among the Masai people and often leads girls to dropout of schools. The Masai community also believes that girls should not be educated because once they get married they join the husband's family and does not contribute to the wellbeing of her biological family. The fear of early pregnancy among Masai girls is further a hindrance to their participation in education once they become mature. This is because pregnancy before marriage is disgraced and lowers bride price. It is also sad to note that religion has been a barrier to closing gender gap in education. Islam dominated regions of Kenya such as Northern Kenya shows very dismal enrollment of girls. In some of these regions education of girls is not emphasized

because they believe their place is in taking care of their bodies and the family. This is the predominant belief among Muslims in coastal Kenya. Religious scholars need to challenge such notions.

Aside from cultural issues, distance to school is also a stumbling block to girls. And since they have to walk long distance to school it is often unsafe for them to go to school. Generally most parents are afraid of sending their girls to school when there is threat of being kidnapped or raped (United Nations Children's Fund, 1992). Distance to school is thus a major cause for late enrolment in most remote areas as parents have to wait for the government to organize security structures for their school age children (Mokua, 2013).

However disparities in enrollment have been on the decline globally. According to UNESCO (2012) two third of countries have achieved parity in enrollment both in primary and secondary schools. It also observed that enrollment of girls has been rising faster than that of boys. In Kenya even though these disparities continued to exist, evidence shows a similar trend where female enrollment has been rising consistently and faster than boys. It must be appreciated that these disparities have continued to narrow down with time due to successful campaign for girl child education. Data shows that at Independence in 1964, girls were just a small fraction: the GPI stood at 55, meaning that there were only about 55 girls enrolled at primary school for every 100 boys. Few years later, however, there was acceleration of movement towards more equal participation. As of 1969, the GPI had jumped to 68, indicating that for every 100 boys enrolled, there were 68 girls. By 1973 this figure had reached 77, while in Somerset (2007).

In 2008, data from the ministry of education in Kenya revealed that enrollment between boys and girls had narrowed further: 49 percent of girls were enrolled compared to 51 percent of boys. Hence despite the introduction of free Primary education in Kenya, girl child participation in education was still below that of boys though remarkable progress has been made. It is therefore suffice to say that education participation in Kenya has been consistent with the patterns registered globally. This narrowing gap could be because of the vigorous campaigns across the country by various organizations as well as by individuals concerned with the dwindling fortunes of the girl child. It can also be attributed to the fact that cultural barriers to girl child education have loosened its grip because such retrogressive cultural notions have consistently come under attack lately in Kenya. It is notable that in the same period evidence showed that in some parts of the country girls enroll more than boys. These regions include Nairobi and Western provinces. On the other hand North Eastern Kenya had the highest gender gap in education as of 2008 with about 60 percent of boys enrolled compared to 40 percent of girls.

However cultural issues being a major factor in determining education participation in most communities the government and stakeholder in education may need to focus their efforts on ideological transformation of the mindset to tackle retrogressive cultural practices. However efforts must also be put on supporting boy child education especially in communities where their enrollment has fallen below that of girls.

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