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The Education of Girls in Kenya: Looking Back and Still Looking Forward

Female education in particular, with its multiplier effects, has been shown to be crucial for the advancement of nations (Beijing Declaration September 1995). Education empowers women to bring about necessary changes such as smaller, healthier families (Wamahui 1996). In Kenya, except for pockets of resistance, the value of formal education as a tool for individual and societal development was recognised by Kenyan parents right from independence. This is manifested by the tremendous expansion in school enrolments, the availability of physical facilities and the number of teachers during the first two post-independence decades. The second post-independence decade coincided with the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985).

During this period, the proportion of children at primary school level rose from 50 per cent at independence to 95 per cent by the mid-eighties, ten years after the Nairobi Women's meeting. At the secondary level, there was a phenomenal growth of 2000 per cent. Gender parity was also achieved in the primary cycle while at secondary level, girls' enrolment jumped from 34 per cent in 1963 to 43 per cent by 1985. National literacy levels reached 70 per cent in 1989 with that of women increasing from 10 per cent in 1960 to 60 per cent in 1989, and that of men rising from 30 per cent to 79 per cent during the same period (ROK 1997). Government expenditure on total education has grown annually by approxi-

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mately 8.3 per cent since 1992. However, the educational trends in the 1990s were not promising. The available statistics indicate a reversal of the gains of the first two post-independence decades.

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) identified the following factors that accounted for gender disparities in education:

- Customary attitudes;
- Early marriages;
- Early pregnancies;
- Inadequate and gender-biased teaching and learning materials and curricula;
- Sexual harassment;
- Inadequate physical facilities and other resources;
- Competing domestic responsibilities of girls and young women;
- Poverty.

According to Wamahiu (1997), a multiplicity of inter-related factors contributes to the under-participation (non-enrolment, lower persistence and poorer performance) of girls in formal and non-formal

education programmes in Kenya. A complex interplay of macro-level policy and micro-level practices, beliefs and attitudes determine whether households and communities feel it profitable to educate their daughters. A pervasive patriarchal ideology influences policy and practice at the national, community and school level, marginalising Kenyan girls in education. Arguably, this is manifested by:

- Deferred entry of girls into the school system;
- Frequent absenteeism from school;
- Poor performance;
- Lower aspirations; and consequently;
- High levels of wastage.

Some of the concerns raised at the Beijing Conference and framed within the Kenyan context still persist to a large extent.

- Poverty, the cost of schooling, competing domestic responsibilities and the labour market;
- Customary attitudes and negative traditions;
- Early pregnancy and schooling;
- The safety and security of girls;
- Gender biased teaching, learning materials, curricula and facilities;
- Lack of role models.

Providing educational opportunities to all Kenyan children is central to the Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Plan for Economic Recovery. The National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) Govern-

ment's resolve for improved service provision provides a clear window of opportunity to implement a forward-looking education policy and programme. The Ministry of Education (MoE), for its part, is committed to implementing the proposed education reforms while counting on the support of the domestic stakeholders and development partners. Girls' participation at all levels should improve through such policies.

At primary level, there are:

- Policy priorities for primary education to seek to address the major challenges discussed earlier;
- Addressing the problem of low enrolments by the abolition of the cost-sharing policy, which required households to contribute towards the cost of educating their children in primary schools;
- A deliberate policy to promote universal primary schooling, with the government providing free primary education

In addition, there are efforts aimed at improving the school environment to become learner-friendly through the provision of better facilities and equipment. Poor sanitation facilities, which have in the past been a hidden barrier to girls' education in particular are being addressed more seriously. The policy measures for addressing the problems related to retention have begun with the enforcement of the Children's Act which provides for the right to education by every Kenyan child. Further, a policy that prohibits repetition in schools is being strictly enforced; and the administration of district-wide mock examinations which place pressure on schools to sieve out poor students is being de-emphasised. The emphasis is, instead, placed on school-based examinations. This should work in the favour of girls who have been victims of repeating levels. Finally, adult education programmes are being strengthened to enlighten parents to appreciate the value of girls' education in particular.

At secondary school level, the major policy concern regarding secondary education is to address the issue of low participation. This sub-sector is critical to most learners, as it is terminal. Policy measures are also in place to enhance transition and entail the expansion of existing secondary schools to an average of three streams. To complement this policy measure, the government deliberately promotes

the establishment of new secondary schools especially in deficit areas. Girls' schools are receiving extra attention.

Policy measures also entail the development of day secondary schools to reduce the cost of secondary education. There is, therefore, a de-emphasising of boarding schools in the light of the fact that 50 per cent of the secondary school education cost is accounted for by boarding expenses. Despite the advantages of having boarding schools, the cost has in the past shut girls out. Furthermore, emphasis is laid on refurbishing existing secondary schools with the aim of enhancing the quality of the learning environment. The focus is mainly on sanitation and sanitary wear.

The government has started targeted bursary schemes to benefit those in the poorest quintile. Girls are receiving a lot of attention in this regard. Additional measures to improve the quality of learning and to reduce the costs entailed in the direct provision of teaching and learning materials, especially in sciences. This is an area where girls are most disadvantaged.

The policy also entails regulating the cost of secondary education by rationalising the learning costs through curriculum review and enhancing the teacher/pupil ratio. A study to review staffing norms has been carried out to provide justification for current levels of establishment and teacher utilisation.

At tertiary level, the medium term policy priority for the sub-sector is to enhance access and equity and to reduce the high cost of training. An associated policy priority is to improve the quality and relevance of Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes, to ensure a cadre of well-trained teaching staff. The government also places significant importance on university education for national development and training of highly qualified professionals, technicians and scientists who will provide solutions to the problem of underdevelopment.

The policy priority for university education is to expand opportunities to all deserving Kenyans. The government seeks to expand available places in public and private universities.

Policy on gender mainstreaming in universities has also received attention. There is a focus on the enhancement of

internal efficiency in the utilisation of resources. More importantly, policy focuses on enhancement and sustainability of quality. While this is happening, affirmative action is used to increase the enrolment of girls in degree programmes.

A gender education policy framework that provides for planning and implementation of gender responsive education sector programmes was mooted in 2003. The key gender concerns highlighted in education include disparities in enrolment, retention and transition rates, negative socio-cultural practices and attitudes which inhibit girls' access, learning environments that are not conducive to girls, stereotyping in learning materials and in class teaching, and the drop-out of girls due to pregnancy and early marriages.

A major contribution to the gender debate in the Kenyan education system is the publication of the current policy framework for the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme 2005–2010, entitled 'Delivering Quality Education and Training to All Kenyans'. It is noteworthy that this policy recognises gender equality as being central to the attainment of the EFA and MDG goals and has proposed a number of strategies to address gender concerns in education (Republic of Kenya, 2005: 219). This indicates that the government is prepared to fund these programmes from the central budget.

Persistent challenges

Katembu (1996) and Wamahu (1997) have pointed out the discouraging gross enrolment ratio (GER) since the 1980s. According to these writers the GER declined from 95 per cent nationally in the 1980s to 79 per cent in 1995. Wamahu (1997) attributes this trend to the sluggish growth of the Kenyan economy since the 1980s. According to her work, the sluggish growth was influenced by exogenous factors such as repeated droughts, the continued high cost of oil, the global recession, the rising incidence of HIV/AIDS, as well as internal factors including the lack of morale, commitment and accountability. These have all contributed to the stunting of educational progress.

It is however not clear to what extent this stunting affects female education. The gender ratio of 49:41 still persists (KNEC 1999, 2000). Even assuming that the gender disparity is marginal, some of the problems that characterised female education a decade ago still persist.

These include a lower completion rate for girls at primary school level, and lower completion rates for girls at secondary school level. There are gender disparities at the tertiary level with regard to enrolment and participation.

Conclusion

One may argue that Kenya is still ahead of many countries in terms of providing education for all. But the trends sketched above may be an indicator of complacency. Available data also indicate the greater disadvantage of girls in specific pockets of the country at the primary level, and the widening gender gap as one ascends the educational ladder. This gender disparity frustrates the achievement of gender equality and the efforts to empower females through education. Women in Kenya continue to constitute the minority in decision-making, whether in educational management, industry and commerce, in the professions or in nationwide political participation. Policies on gender mainstreaming are not enforced as expected.

Both the government and the civil society have a role to play towards the attainment of the Beijing objectives. The Kenya government has already signed numerous international and regional declarations and conventions guaranteeing every citizen the right to education. What the government now needs to do is to translate the provisions of the signed declaration into practice.

In many Africa societies, Kenya included, greater premiums are accorded to marriage, parenthood and family life than to education, training or working. This is a problem area for which solutions can be found. Schoolgirls can be encouraged to continue with their education rather than acceding to early marriage. Parents as well as governments can create the environment and take measures in support of such a move. At the same time access to education and training facilities for the female members of society can be improved by increasing the number, organisation, and quality of such facilities. Sensitising the female population and informing them of the role played by fellow women in the field of education, science and technology in the industrialised countries may help the development of the right attitude among female students with regard to science and technology professions.

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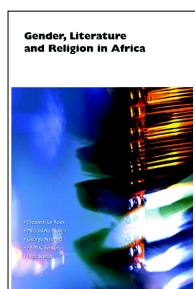
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Gender, Literature and Religion in Africa

CODESRIA Gender Series Volume 4



2005; 108 pages
ISBN 2-86978-157-1
Africa: CFA 6000;
non-CFA zone: \$12;
Elsewhere: £10.95/\$15.95

Studies in literature and religion are particularly vulnerable to accusations of subjectivity and bias, because by their very nature they deal with subjectivities and people's perceptions of their own identity. In the past, on the basis of a patriarchal worldview, literature and religion were seen as value-free and neutral, and a gendered perspective was not taken into account. Today, an increasing amount of research is revealing the gendered fault-lines in works of fiction and in religious beliefs.

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