Fifty Years of Boy Child Education in Kenya: A Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT: *Discourses on gender parity over the last fifty years in Kenya have been focused on the girl child and women as victims of societal subjugation, perhaps a reaction to the philosophy of patriarchy. The fight to subvert patriarchy has seen numerous gender activist groups, human rights crusaders and others come forward to route for the right of the girl child to get education. For reasons that can be understood and perhaps considering that setups had always favoured boy children, little talk has over the years gone into the education of the latter. This has had implications. Recent researches are now revealing that in majority of the communities in Kenya, the boy child is beginning to lag behind the way the girl child was years back. Soon there may be a boy child crisis and a new gender gap between boys and girls. This paper explores the challenges facing boy child education suggesting an equitable approach to the provision of education for both girls and boys. Data was collected using interviews, questionnaires and observations of the boy child in the homes, school and community at large. Researches on the current trends in education were also consulted.*
Keywords: Boy-child, Girl child, Educational, Educational facilities, Media, Role modeling, Challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the sixties, discourses on the challenges encountered in offering quality education for children in Kenya have tended to put more emphasis on the plight of girls with little or no focus given to the boys. The assumption – it seems – being that the scales in the patriarchal setups within which the children are operating are already tilted in favour of the boys. To remedy the imbalance, establishments have often gone out of their way to make it easier and more abundant for girls. As a result it appears that more girls' schools have been opened, more boarding facilities for girls have been made available to help the latter concentrate on studies without the inconveniences of commuting, entry requirements into schools and tertiary institutions have been lowered for girls, and a score of other, so to say, affirmative actions.

Just to give a hint on how educational facilities have been distributed to serve both girls and boys, one needs to take a cursory drive through, say, the upper western part of Nairobi City to go past State House Girls, St. Georges Girls, Kenya High, Moi Girls Nairobi, Precious Blood Riruta, Loreto Msongari, Kianda and many other leading girls schools both public and private. Within the same area only Upper Hill Boys and Nairobi School can pass as well established boys' schools. If such a distribution of educational facilities could be attributed to the enormously urban setting of Nairobi City, one may want to tour a rural setting, say, Busia County, to realize that the county has over ten boarding primary schools for girls, including the prestigious Nangina Girls Boarding, Chakol, St Joseph's Busia, Our Lady of Mercy, Amukura, Kolanya, Kisoko, Butula, among others. On the contrary the county has very few boys' boarding schools, for example St. Augustine's Boys. Meanwhile, admissions to universities and other tertiary institutions have from time immemorial lowered entry points for girls, sometimes requiring a boy to score up to three points higher to get admission into the same course.

Indeed, the strong focus on the girl child and the apparent neglect of the boy child in this process is beginning to raise some concern. While society appears to want to use the success of the girls alone as the measure of gender equity in education, recent studies are beginning to show that education for boys may be equally problematic, apparently the result of skewed socialization. In many parts of the country (Kenya), in the recent times, girls are beginning to outperform boys in literacy by up to 10% points in areas where they trailing behind the boys by up to 4%   points in numeracy, Kenya Government Report (GoK, 2010). This raises concerns, not because the girls are beginning to outperform the boys but more so because no questions are being raised regarding boys' underachievement. This study attempts to cross-examine these emerging patterns of reversed disparity.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study used a combination of survey and naturalistic designs (observation and ethnography). The respondents included the following categories of people selected through purposive sampling: parents, boys, girls, teachers, police and church leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informant, soliciting information on the following aspects: the success stories, challenges and the way forward for the boy child on the issues of education, socialization and media influences. Besides, the research also depended on

library visits, internet search and sampling of relevant documents to gain insight into the performance of the boy child in Kenya today.

The context of the Boy Child

Makori(2014) laments that boy child and men are becoming victims of militarism, political hooliganism, jails, violence, among others. This begins to reveal the collapse of societal systems responsible for proper formation of boy children. While girls are busy in school, working hard, and creating more space for themselves, boys appear to be wandering around or in a daze at the periphery. The World Bank (2009) in its report on enrolment in schools has indicated that the enrolment of girls in schools has increased in the last 15 years but the participation of boys in education has reduced in many regions in Kenya. This position appears to be corroborated by Chege, 2011, reporting on the primary school enrolment for boys and girls in the years 2007 – 2011.
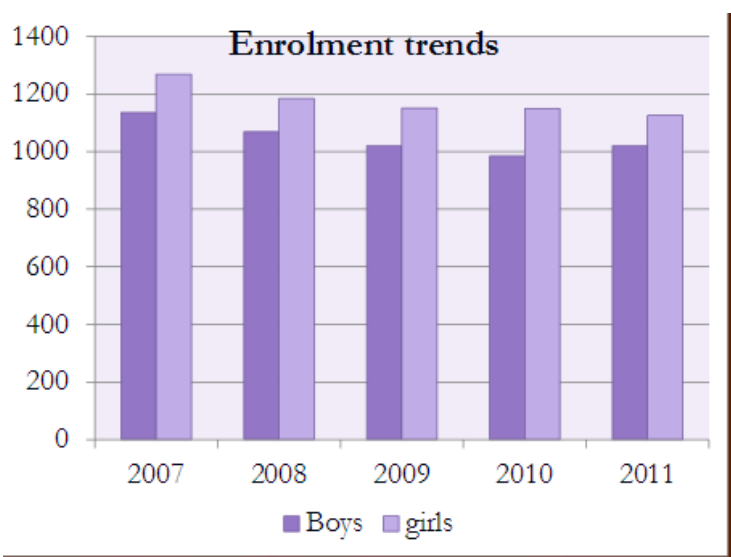
Source: Chege**, 2011.**

Even though this report indicates that there was a downward trend in enrolment of both girls and boys, a fact the report attributes to the post election violence (PEV) of 2008 and displacement of many families in the catchment communities, the consistent higher enrolment of girls than that of the boys is noteworthy. The report further notes that schools are being more friendly to girls than boys, for example, UNICEF has put up toilet and bathroom facilities for girls in some schools to facilitate their privacy when changing sanitary pads, but that while this is understandable, the toilets for the boys appear in a deplorable condition.

Perhaps due to the apparent neglect of the boy child, boys seem to become more and more prone to drug use and abuse, HIV/AIDS and estrangement from parents, thereby ending up on the streets in urban areas. Emphasis on the girl-child at the expense of boy-child seems to extend to the family level at home. While the girls have role models in their more present mothers who teach them life skills, the boys lack role-modeling due to the perpetual absence of the father figure at home. The fathers, who are mostly away from home for one reason or another, hardly interact with their sons. Indeed one respondent commented thus:

> *Kenyan men have lost their social, family & economic positioning. Sons have nobody to take as a model (for the masculine identity). We are faced with the problem of present but absent fathers.*

Incidentally, in the absence of would-be role models the boys – it is now apparent – take their life lessons from the media. The influence of media in the socialization of boys has then sometimes given them false hope, or encouraged them on unrealistic achievements that reverse their focus on school. They instead turn to seeking shortcuts to becoming like the successful artists, business people, or media personalities, say, cases such as Bonokode, of Getto Radio, or Ben Kenzo, a successful radio presenter and musician respectively, both of whom were street boys with barely any formal education, but who are now adorable personalities. This way, the preference for economic success begins to supersede the need for the winding classroom engagement. Chege (ibid) also observes that the great temptation for boys to drop out of school emanates from preference for trade, quest for money, parental neglect, lack of employment opportunities, the ease of entering informal engagements such as hawking/street trading, and long and tedious process of education to realize the returns.

Chege and Sifuna (2006) also appear to corroborate Chege's observations on school facilities for the two genders. They have argued that schools are more sensitive to girls' needs than those for boys. The study indicates that the teaching and learning space has been feminized in some parts of Kenya and tend to fail to address boys' educational needs and yet male performance is equally necessary. The tendency to forget and marginalize the boys if allowed to continue could lead to a total breakdown in boy education by 2030, (Omondi, the outgoing KCA president).

Onsarigo, 2013 takes interest in the completion rate at high school graduation. The table below shows clearly the gender disparity with changing trends for boys who used to record high completion rates than girls over the years.

Table 1.5 Secondary School Completion Rates by gender 1998 - 2009

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Boys	45.7	46.4	44.7	44.5	44.6	43.0	45.1	46.3	46.4	47.7	48.3	52.5
Girls	40.5	41.6	48.2	42.2	43.0	42.1	43.5	45.8	48.1	47.8	49.5	52.6
Total	43.2	44.1	46.4	43.4	43.9	42.6	44.3	46.1	47.2	47.7	48.9	52.6

Source: Onsarigo (2013).

It is notable that before 2006, the boys always led in completion rate, except in 2000 when the girls recorded 48.2 against 44.7 for the boys. But from 2006, the girls appear to consecutively lead the boys in completion. This could be attributed to affirmative actions over the years in favour of girls. The boy child is currently experiencing low transition rates due constant absenteeism, low expectation from the boy child and the general dismal performance at terminal examinations, (ibid). A close analysis of most academic institutions reveals an increase in girl-child enrolment, but the same might not be said of the boy-child, whose enrolment even where it is higher, still fewer complete at higher institutions of learning. This trend has definitely deprived some of the boys opportunities for higher learning, (Juma, 2009).

However, even those who manage to end up as university graduates don't have much to celebrate about either, as many of them are frustrated as a result of unemployment, which is adding to their disappointment, thus, discouraging young boys to go to school (Amutabi & Lutta-Mukhebi, 2001). The boys appear to feel that even if they go to school and attain degrees, these degrees have no meaning since they won't be employed. As a result many drop out of school only to end up competing for jobs like bus conductors and guards alongside school drop outs. Hamasi, 2012 argues that the boy child's condition is not only worrying in the marginal areas but all over Kenya. Even in counties considered as enlightened like Nyeri, Vihiga, West Pokot and Migori, young boys have abandoned school to engage in illegal activities. Apparently, where there is greater access to media there is a higher likelihood to learn and engage in disagreeable activities.

Boy child space and media

Media seems to be the most pervasive and one of the most powerful influences on how society views the world. Media influences people's daily lives, insinuating messages into people's consciousness at every turn. However, media sometimes perpetuates and perpetuates unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions. It interests this paper to interrogate the role media has played and continues to play in socializing boy children both at school and at home. Apparently, mass media and technology seem to greatly influence how learners manage their time for study and leisure, a case in point being face book, twitter, whatsapp, texting on cell phones or watching videos during and after school hours. This keeps the boys absorbed in their own world and spending so much time, potentially influencing their behavior and jeopardizing school performance.

Besides taking all the time that could be used on school work, media sometimes serves as an agent of conveying messages that could negatively influence boy children, for example, adverts that glorify cigarette smoking, bullying, alcohol and violence. These are always likely to steer boys towards imitating values that promote deviance. This likelihood is increased where celebrities that the boys admire are involved. Boys tend to adore images of great footballers, musicians, dancers, athletes, artists, fashion designers, and others with "celebrity lifestyle" and will want to copy what the celebrities do regardless of its social, cultural and ethical value, or relevance to the boys' education pursuits. Often the celebrities are characters who failed in the academic world but happened to succeed in their respective fields, a scenario which the boys who have lost the psyche for school then take solace in.

While it would make sense to argue that this same should as well affect the education of girls this may not exactly the case. As observed by one of our respondents:

> *Boys tend to be influenced more by media than girls because they are accorded much more freedom. Besides, boys are more extroverted, courageous and antagonistic, venturing to learn and daring to adopt more from outside their own culture.*

This perhaps explains why their focus on education is likely to suffer more in the face of other lures.

Confronting the Problem

The challenges boys face have – fortunately – not completely gone unnoticed. Scholars, popular media, and the general public appear to be starting to notice this development. Recent headlines and studies have asserted that there is a problem with boys, a boy's crisis, so to say, and a new gender gap between boys and girls. Girls are now dominating in school so that their coming to dominate the employment field is only a matter of course and time. Indeed, looking around, one finds that majority of activities that run day to life appear mostly run by the girls. They are the ones in cyber cafes, m-pesa places, boutiques, photo copying and typing stalls and many others. This, as the boy child begins to take the form of an endangered species, lagging behind in every aspect of life.

The significance of this trend in a culture that traditionally looks up to the men to lead could have far reaching effects. Perhaps as a way of trying to find some foothold in life, boys are commonly starting to identify with gangs such as *Mungiki* in Central Kenya, *Chinkororo* in Kisii, *Msumbiji* in Western Kenya, MRC at the Coast and many others which exist to serve their members for criminal purposes, of course not forgetting international terror groups such as Al shaabab or Al queida. Even though one may argue that these groups incorporate women as well, the truth is that women's ratio to men could actually be approximately 1:10, a near negligible women participation. This begins to read the collapse of the society.

Perhaps it is high time affirmative action was now directed towards the boy child. Arguably this is what the traditional patriarchal society did, for example, there were certain privileges that were a preserve of the men and invited no competition from the women. Of course such a suggestion may not make sense in a world where gender 'equality' and 'equity' are now the key words. The question, however, is: Why in the very shower of those two key words are we now talking about a collapsing male gender. Is it possible that the exerted effort over the years to vouch for the emancipation of the girl child was in fact war waged to eliminate the boy child? Is it true what Juma, 2009 points out that there are far too many boys out there who need help, but are neglected because men were domineering, and the young men coming after have to pay for the sins of the men who came before them? If what Juma (ibid) observes is anything to go by, one would perhaps conclude that the effort towards the girls was not just to better them, but to bring them above the boys to, so to say, reverse the dominance in favour of the former, in what one would perhaps term as: "it is now our time". . This then brings the equation back to square one where the words 'equality' and 'equity' have no meaning, perhaps the way they were when the push to bring up the girls started.

In the event that the push for the girls also maintained due space for the boys, one is bound to ask the question: Do boys have no stamina to compete against girls? This question may sound rhetorical, but I would argue that as long as society appears to emphasize girl child welfare while neglecting that of the boy child, the latter are always likely lag behind, even go down the drain. Perhaps at the risk of sounding like an activist, it is my view in this paper that as much as it is important to reach out to the girl-child, it should not be at the expense of the boy-child, for a just society is when the two complement each other, not when they are involved in outdoing each other, in .what one could call 'cat-rat competition'. Both genders are crucial to the success of the society. In fact, it may not sound out of place to point out that with the changing nature of the society today, issues that were back then impediments to the girl child accessing education are no longer as pressing as they were. This is perhaps why the same urgency that is being used to promote girl child education should be replicated to the boy child. It's time we created a platform that addresses gender 'equality' and 'equity' in the education for boys and girls at a fifty-fifty scale to achieve a fifty-fifty society.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to put some spotlight on how boy children are fairing in education in Kenya. The study notes that perhaps taking cue from the way the African traditional society viewed education for girl children in the fifties, sixties and seventies – society preferred to educate the boy rather than the girl – there arose need to develop agency for girl child education, which included engaging affirmative action to ensure the latter is emancipated. It however, appears that the effort has beens overstayed at the detriment of education for boys. Research now shows that boys are beginning to fall far behind the girls who, however, still continue to enjoy greater focus. While the paper commends the improved educational facilities that favour girl education, an equitable and equating atmosphere should be targeted so as to ensure that boys too are enabled to keep at par with the girls.

The paper recognizes three issues that have tended to disadvantage the development of boy children. One is that educational facilities for boys have sometimes not been given much attention, thereby leaving them to learn under deplorable environments, as the girls sometimes enjoy more learner friendly spaces, a factor that has often played a role in frustrating boys' educational pursuits. The other observation is that fathers have sometimes not been there for their sons, giving guidance as well as providing them with role models. This is because the fathers are often absent from home pursuing one thing or another out there. The boys have then ended up learning the facts of life from the media. Learning from the media, forms the other disadvantage the boys face in their formation, as they sometimes end up learning from some unrealistic media personalities, a fact that leads them to developing unrealistic goals.

This paper, therefore, cites the foregoing disadvantages, as a contributor to the kind of situations some boy children have found themselves in such as drug abuse, performing poorly at school, dropping out of school among other predicaments. Meanwhile, those having dropped out of school – perhaps trying to get something to cling on – often join gang groups. The paper, therefore, recommends that education for boys be given equal attention as that for girls to maintain an equitable society.

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