

# Critical Determinants of Poor Performance in KCSE among Girls in Arid and Semi-Arid (ASAL) Regions in Kenya

Lewis Ngesu, Lydia Wachira, Beth Mwelu & Emily Nyabisi

## Abstract

*For many years, the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results of schools in marginalized regions have been the poorest nationally and more so for girls. In this regard, efforts are being mounted by the Kenyan Government at various levels to improve girls' participation in education. This paper explores the critical determinants of poor performance in KCSE among female students in Loitoktok Division. The study was conducted in three secondary schools in the division. Data was collected from students, teachers and community stakeholders by use of a questionnaire and focus group discussion. Findings indicate the influence of socio-cultural factors such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriages, nomadism, preference to boys especially in matters concerning education and long distance to school influence academic performance. In the light of these findings, it is recommended that the parents and community should be sensitized on the importance of girl child education.*

**Contact: Lewis Ngesu: [lewisngesu@gmail.com](mailto:lewisngesu@gmail.com)**

## Introduction

Improving girls' access to education, with the goal of attaining gender equality is a critical component of promoting development and meeting the millennium development goals (MDGS) (2000) in Kenya and across sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya like other developing countries invests in education with the belief that an educated and skilled labour force is a necessary condition for sustained economic growth (Ndiritu, 1999). Education at secondary school level is supposed to be the bedrock and the foundation towards higher knowledge in tertiary institutions. It is an investment as well as an instrument that can be used to achieve a more rapid economic, social, political, technological, scientific and cultural development in the country. The role of secondary education is to lay the foundation for further education and if a good foundation is laid at this level, there are likely to be no problem at subsequent levels. A critical analysis of girl child

education in marginalized regions in Kenya depicts a worrying trend, hampered by cultural practices which puts high premium on the usefulness of their labour, on domestic front, in caring for young siblings, cooking and fetching water and general cleaning (UNESCO, 2005). This scenario is likely to affect girl child performance and more so those living in rural areas. Poor performance in national exams triggers a vicious cycle wherein poorly educated women are left ill-equipped to obtain well paid jobs, and this in turn, reduces incentives for parents to invest in girls schooling.

In the arid and semi arid lands (ASAL) in Kenya particularly among the Maasai, culturally harmful practices such as early marriages, moranism and female genital mutilation are rampant. Kibera and Kimokoti (2007) argue that in some societies, a woman does not need to be educated because unlike the man who is the head of the family and bread earner, she is expected to be a home maker and a mother. She is a provider of non material services such as love, care and nurturing children.

### **Review of related literature**

According to Ngome (1999) and Ngesu (2010), the problem of under participation in education and poor performance in national examinations among children of nomadic communities has a historical dimension. Notwithstanding this controversy, it is fair to state that the learners' motivation, socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, the instructional environment including infrastructure and instructional resources, the distance to school, the quality and motivation of teachers to mention a few are some of the factors that influence learners attitudes towards learning and ultimate academic achievement in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) (Wairegi. 2009). These intra- school and extra-school factors appears to have

sustained the underdevelopment that has, in turn affected the provision of education to pastoralists' children, with an extreme marginalization of girls due to socio-cultural constraints (Ngome, 1999). Failure to catch up in class (due to social, cultural and economic constraints), being outperformed by fellow male students at local and regional levels resulting in hypercriticism by the class teacher and embarrassing situations that arise or may arise, for example, forced marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) with its attendant effects all add up to make such female students either psychologically withdrawn or militantly reactive in compensation for their apparent loss of or injured self esteem (Ngesu, 2010).

Various other studies on female academic performance (Barbara 2002; Mugenda 2001; Githaiga 2009) have made fairly similar conclusions. They concur that in marginalized regions performance in KSCE is lower than other regions. A report by the Ministry of Education on ASAL districts noted that lack of housing among other harsh conditions resulted in teachers' absenteeism (MOEST, 2005). Most of them skipped classes to go home early as poverty among most of the communities made it impossible to provide extra facilities including teachers' houses. The report observed that teachers wanted the government to help disadvantaged communities as a way of motivating teachers and improving in national examination (MOEST, 2005). Motivation of both students and teachers has been cited as a factor determining performance. A study by Ndiritu (1999) on factors influencing performance in public secondary schools in Central and Nairobi province showed a positive relationship between motivation of students, teachers and academic performance. In conclusion, regional disparities persist in favour of boys especially in arid and semi-arid lands. To address the low participation and poor performance by girls in national exams in marginalized areas, the government has provided grants to some girls' schools and is currently implementing an affirmative component in

awarding of bursaries to female students. But in spite of all the above efforts, girls' level of performance remains significantly low and especially in some marginalized communities like Maasai of Kenya (Ngware, 2008). The question is what can be done to improve academic performance for girls in ASAL regions of Kenya.

## **Research Methodology**

The main aim of this study was to investigate critical factors influencing female performance in KCSE in ASAL regions of Kenya. The study sought to analyse the historical factors that have contributed to perennial poor performance in KSCE and suggest possible remedial measures to combat the menace in ASAL areas, with a focus on girl child. The study was based in Loitokitok division. Purposive sampling techniques were utilized to help identify the interviewees and female students from the marginalized areas. Six teachers and five community leaders were involved in focus group discussion while 120 students completed questionnaires. These participants had been chosen by virtue of their sex, age, roles and the kind of information needed. The quantitative data were processed with the help of Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) software programme while qualitative data were subjected to content analysis from which relevant information was extracted.

## **Findings of the Study**

The following were the major findings of the study: a) intra/extra school factors, b) historical factors and c) strategies to improve girls' education.

***Intra/extra school factors:*** It is apparent from the findings that both intra-school and extra-school factors are related to the incidences of poor performance in KSCE. Intra-school factors

include poor infrastructure, inadequate teachers, reading and learning resources while extra-school activities include long distances from home to school, cultural practices like FGM, early marriages and preference of boys education and lack of role models.

**Historical factors:** On historical factors that have contributed to perennial poor performance among girls in KSCE, the study found out that this region has been marginalized since colonial times. The students in these regions are disadvantaged by the chronic impoverishment, water scarcity and recurrent famine endemic in the region. This means that the consequence for the secondary schools depending on efforts to review the school situation by relevant government organs vis-à-vis its future orientation, the immediate and medium-range consequence may be negative in terms of poor performance in KSCE, student enrolment and school development plans.

**Strategies to improve girls' education:** Possible remedial measures to improve performance in KCSE for girls in ASAL areas are given below::

- Strengthen affirmative action by awarding bursaries to needy girls in secondary schools hence creating a positive and productive learning environment where the girl child fully participate in school;
- Increase single sex boarding schools to avoid premature sexual relations among the circumcised boys (Morans) and girls which is likely to occupy their study time;
- Sensitize the community on the need to educate both boys and girls without discrimination in order to spur social economic development;
- Counselling of girls and parents in order to counter cultural practices which place a premium on the reproductive and domestic roles of girls and women; and

- Involve all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students, school community and education personnel) in the process of transforming the school and its surrounding community into a gender responsive environment; physically, academically and socially thereby opening up opportunities for optional client understanding, participation and sense of ownership.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Girls poor performance in KSCE seems to stem from a combination of factors. This implies that the causes of poor performance in KSCE are varied and complex and reflect a combination of past events (historical injustices) and current barriers and strains within individuals, schools and community. The multifaceted approach to responding to the problem of female under-performance across all levels of education needs to be given priority.

Although poor performance in KSCE in marginalised regions is firmly rooted in the social-historical factors (FGM, early marriages and political isolation), teachers motivation and teacher-student ratio, among intra school factor seems to have had a precipitating influence on student performance in KSCE. This is a causal linked to newly posted teachers, some who claimed that they were not motivated to teach in these regions.

The long term impact of poor performance in KSCE in marginalized area and its ramifications include negative image of the school, post-school trauma by students and others who are victims of poor performance and loss of self esteem. These impacts evolve from a long historical chain of events that include the growing-up experience of individuals, from pre-school years within the context of the family to the social and psychological ethos of school life.

The findings of this study have revealed that community partnership is fundamental in the process of transforming schools. This is because community involvement and support facilitates communication between school staff and parents about students who are experiencing difficulties. It is therefore recommended that the Government of Kenya should develop an active policy of providing bursaries to needy and disadvantaged students in consultation with the stakeholders of the school.

The findings of the study have also revealed that retrogressive activities such as FGM and moranism have a negative impact on students' academic performance. A possible explanation for this state of affairs is that both parents and students view problems and situations differently on account of generation gap. The Ministry of Education should strengthen guidance and counselling units with a view to ensuring greater bonding between teachers, students and parents.

Causes of poor performance in KCSE by female students' according to this study stems from a combination of factors, including long distance between home and school and social-cultural issues among other factors. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education should develop in-service programmes for teachers to ensure that teachers are aware of and conversant with emerging issues that includes the rights of the child and other areas of relevance for content delivery and classroom management.

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#### **About authors:**

1. Lewis Ngesu, Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundation, University of Nairobi. Email: [lewisngesu@gmail.com](mailto:lewisngesu@gmail.com)
2. Lydia Wachira, Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundation, University of Nairobi. Email: [lydiahn.wachira@gmail.com](mailto:lydiahn.wachira@gmail.com)
3. Beth Mwelu, Lecturer-Mount Kenya University. Email: [bethmwelu@gmail.com](mailto:bethmwelu@gmail.com)
4. Emily Nyabisi, Lecturer- Mount Kenya University. Email: [milynyabisi@yahoo.com](mailto:milynyabisi@yahoo.com)