



Fostering Gender Equity in Kenya's Education Sector: Challenges, Progress, and the Path Ahead

Introduction

A recent study by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) indicates gaps in the promotion of gender equity in the education sector that limit the academic advancement and career trajectory of girls in Kenya. Gender equity in education is crucial for promoting social justice, empowering individuals, and driving economic development (Smith & Doe, 2019).

It ensures equal access to education for all genders, leading to improved health outcomes, increased global competitiveness, and innovation (Kabeer, 2005). By prioritizing gender equity in education policies and practices, societies can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), foster inclusive growth, and create a more equitable world for future generations.

Gender disparities and persistent related challenges in Kenya's education sector are multifaceted and deeply rooted in societal norms and structural inequalities. Some key findings of the study include:

- **Access to Education:** Despite efforts to promote universal access to education, disparities persist, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Girls, especially those from impoverished backgrounds and marginalized communities, face barriers such as cultural norms and practices that prioritize boys' education. This results in lower enrollment rates and higher dropout rates among girls compared to boys.
- **Retention and Completion Rates:** Gender disparities are evident in retention and completion rates, with girls being more likely to drop out of school, often due to early marriages, pregnancies, household responsibilities, and economic pressures. These challenges hinder girls' ability to complete their education and achieve their full potential.
- **Quality of Education:** Disparities also exist in the quality of education offered to boys and girls. Girls may face gender-specific challenges such as lack of access to menstrual hygiene facilities, gender-based violence in schools, and limited

opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities or leadership roles. Additionally, unconscious biases among teachers and administrators may contribute to differential treatment and lower academic expectations for girls.

- **Gender Stereotypes and Subject Choice:** Societal expectations and gender stereotypes influence subject choices and career aspirations, leading to the underrepresentation of girls in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics fields (STEM) and other male-dominated professions. Girls may face pressure to pursue traditionally feminine subjects or roles, limiting their opportunities for economic empowerment and leadership.
- **Teacher Training and Capacity Building:** There is a need for comprehensive teacher training and capacity-building programs focused on gender-responsive pedagogy and addressing gender biases in the classroom. Teachers play a crucial role in creating an inclusive learning environment where both boys and girls feel valued and supported in their educational journey.

- **Resource Allocation and Infrastructure:** Schools in marginalized areas often lack adequate resources, including qualified teachers, textbooks, safe and sanitary facilities, and infrastructure. This disproportionately affects girls' education and contributes to disparities in learning outcomes.

Addressing these gender disparities and persistent challenges requires a holistic approach that involves targeted policies, community engagement, investment in girls' education, teacher training, and efforts to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes. The study strongly suggests that by prioritizing gender equity in the education sector and addressing these challenges, Kenya can ensure that all children, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to fulfill their educational potential and contribute to the country's development.

Policy Context

Since independence, the Kenyan government has enacted legislation, policies, and reforms aimed at enhancing access to, participation in, and transition through various educational levels. Notable initiatives such as the Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) policies, alongside subsidized secondary schooling and the 100% transition policy from primary to secondary schools, have significantly contributed to achieving gender parity in education. Despite these efforts, gender disparities persist in most parts of Kenya, particularly favoring boys in arid and semi-arid regions.

The 2015 Education and Training Sector Gender Policy (insert abbreviation) is central to promoting gender equality in education. It guides efforts to address disparities in access, equity, and empowerment for all. A recent review of this policy provided a chance to assess its impact on reducing gender inequalities in education. The review, conducted jointly by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), the Ministry of Education Kenya (MoE), and with support from the Center for Global Development (CGD), aimed to:

- Assess the readiness of the teacher-training curriculum in equipping educators with gender-mainstreaming strategies, including training skills and processes outlined in basic education sector policies and guidelines.
- Evaluate the implementation of gender mainstreaming practices within the classroom during teaching and learning processes.
- Investigate the correlation between effective pedagogical practices that integrate gender considerations and students' attendance, subject selection, and academic performance.
- Explore government and private sector initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity within basic education programs and strategies.



Study Findings

The study was framed within the Gender Integration Continuum (GIC), a theoretical framework used to classify how policies and practices address gender norms and equality. According to the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), the continuum includes “gender blind” policies that overlook gender considerations, and “gender aware” policies that intentionally address gender-related effects. Gender-aware interventions can be further classified into transformative, accommodating, and exploitative categories.

The study revealed that while teacher trainees demonstrate a good grasp of gender-equitable teaching practices from an equity perspective, there’s limited emphasis on gender-responsive lesson planning and support for female students in STEM. Gender mainstreaming is not integrated into the teacher training curriculum as a standalone unit. It was also clear that gender disparities are observed in classroom engagement, with secondary level teachers engaging boys more than girls, particularly in literacy and STEM classes. Gender differences were also noted in optional subject selection at the secondary level, with more boys opting for geography and more girls selecting Christian Religious Education.

The use of gender-equitable teaching practices were seen to positively influence academic outcomes, particularly in English and STEM subjects, at both primary and secondary levels. Educators establish

inclusive learning environments by incorporating a spectrum of narratives and principles of equity. They facilitate active engagement, particularly among female students, through collaborative activities and practical applications within STEM disciplines. They also confront ingrained societal perceptions by equitably distributing opportunities, allowing girls to take leadership roles in scientific endeavors.

Furthermore, instructors individualize instruction to accommodate diverse learning modalities, providing supplementary assistance in language arts or immersive experiences in science and technology. Through acknowledgment of diligence and cultivation of self-assurance, educators cultivate academic excellence among students irrespective of gender.

While some schools have guidelines on sexual harassment and gender-based violence, many are not readily available. Gender disparities persist among teaching staff, with a higher proportion of male teachers allocated to STEM subjects. Quality assurance visits address gender issues in a minority of institutions, indicating a need for greater focus on gender mainstreaming in school governance and management.

Policy Recommendations

The study recommendations address various aspects of gender inclusivity and equity in education as follows;

- Incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into teacher training curricula
- Enhancing access to education for all genders
- Promoting gender mainstreaming in school management structures
- Emphasizes on the importance of providing quality education, ensuring safety and security, nurturing and mentoring girls in STEM
- Encourages gender-balanced representation in school leadership positions.

Call to Action: Changing the Narrative, Evening the Playing Field

- ① Duty bearers are urged to take immediate action to implement and monitor the policy recommendations outlined above. It is essential to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into teacher-training programs, ensuring that educators are equipped with the necessary skills to promote inclusivity and equity in the classroom. Additionally, efforts should be made to enhance access to education for all genders, particularly in underserved regions, while actively promoting gender mainstreaming within school management structures.
- ② Stakeholders must prioritize the provision of quality education for all students, irrespective of gender, and take proactive measures to ensure the safety and security of learners and staff within educational institutions. Special attention should be given to nurturing and mentoring girls in STEM subjects, providing them with the support and encouragement needed to pursue careers in these fields.
- ③ Stakeholders are called upon to promote gender-balanced representation in school leadership positions



Conclusion

In an ideal future, stakeholders unite to enact and oversee policy recommendations for a transformative educational landscape, ensuring gender inclusivity and equity become concrete realities. Classrooms should be bastions of diversity and acceptance, with educators seamlessly integrating gender-sensitive approaches into teaching methodologies.

Education should evolve from a privilege to a fundamental right, with targeted interventions empowering underserved communities and bridging regional disparities. School management structures must prioritize gender mainstreaming to foster environments where every voice matters.



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