

# **Declining Boys' Participation and Performance in Kenyan Schools: Are Girls' Education Projects Influencing New Forms of Masculinities?**

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## **Abstract**

This study was designed to interrogate the basic assumption that boys in specific regions in Kenya were –compared with girls– beginning to underperform in school attendance, performance and completion rates. The study took cognisance of the fact that Girls' education has, for many years, been the preserve of projects. While these projects have produced some impressive results, they are necessarily limited in terms of promoting gender equality in the long-run because of their “blindness” to the issue of boys' education. This study, therefore, challenges the fundamental feminist standpoint theories that present men – as a group – as the *defacto* benefactors of the patriarchal power structures that oppress women and girls. Importantly, by focusing critically on the school experiences of boys in the context of the presumably advantaged girls in co-education settings, the study makes a departure from the traditional Kenyan gender researches which often foreground the girls while presenting them as universally marginalised –socially and educationally. The study moves to problematise the positioning of boys in 8 selected primary Kenyan schools that were distributed equally in the Counties of Nairobi city and rural Kirinyaga County. Using mainly qualitative methods that were complemented by a quantitative survey questionnaire, our findings reveal explicitly that awareness of gender issues in education was commonplace in all the 8 schools, albeit being concretised in varying degrees. Hence, a major finding was that gender awareness in the schools did not always translate into a practice of gender equality of outcomes. With regard to outcomes of schooling such as academic performance, school attendance or even completion, girls outperformed boys in over half of the school, especially in rural Kirinyaga and in at least one school in Nairobi. There was evidence of conscious effort by female school administration as well as female teachers to support girls with a clear aim of keeping them in school and enabling them perform well academically. In comparison, male teachers in both counties presented themselves as being “laid back” suggesting weak role models for the boys. Parental involvement in their children's schooling also revealed a bias towards the school achievements of their daughters more than of their sons, yielding a dominant discourse that presented girls' education as a relatively worthwhile investment compared with that of the boys. A key recommendation for this study is the enhancement of gender knowledge for school teachers to enable them more responsive to boys schooling with equal attention to that of the girls

**Key Words:** *Masculinities for African boys, gender relations, gender equality, successful masculinities.*

## **1. Introduction and Background**

The Government of Kenya has identified gender equity and equality as key drivers of enhancing social cohesion *within* and *through* education and inclusion in all aspects of private and public life as outlined in the Sessional Paper Number 1 of 2005 the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme –KESSPI<sup>1</sup> (GoK, 2005), in which gender ranks as one of its 23 investment programmes. This notwithstanding, we note in this study that the relational dimension that comprises the conceptual essence of gender is not underscored –nor in the least expounded- in this programming. The standpoint of this study is that such anomaly poses a potential risk in the marginalisation of boys as gender equality agenda tends to direct attention to empowerment of girls.

National strategic and development plans such as the Kenya Vision 2030 have been underscored as the nation’s route-map for attaining social, political and economic development by Year 2030. This study considers the centrality of the youth<sup>2</sup> as a vulnerable group that nonetheless bears the potential for driving the Kenya Vision 2030 to fruition. One of the pertinent aims articulated in the Vision 2030 is to improve on matters of equity specifically in ‘*power relations, resource distribution and improved livelihoods*’ that would construct all youth into ‘*responsible, competitive and prosperous*’ producers of goods and services within a *just and cohesive society*.

In Year 2003, a newly elected government of Kenya re-introduced the current Free Primary Education (FPE) which has been closely linked with steady growth in national enrolment and retention rates notably up to Grade Five (MoE, EMIS, 2007). However, In Central and Nairobi Provinces where our two study locales of Kirinyaga and Nairobi counties are located, girls have continued to lead in completing Grade Five as boys retention rates declined. The declined trend is particularly notable in Central Province where the boys dropped out of primary school at a higher rate (2.2%) compared to the girls at 1.6% while girls’ survival rate in primary Five (5) was recorded at 88.9% compared with that of the boys at 79.6% (MoE EMIS, 2007). In Nairobi, however, the trend was slightly different with the girls trailing behind the boys by 1.2 percentage points –but nonetheless remaining in school to complete Class 8 at a higher rate than that of the boys whose dropout rate stood at 4.2% compared with 4.0% among the girls.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

The view that boys are gradually being sidelined in the schooling process has been part of

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1 KESSP II is yet to be launched

2 Kenyan youth aged below 30 years constitute over 60% of the population

the public discourse for some time in Kenya. Indeed, education statistics in some of the regions have tended to support this view by portraying higher rates of school retention, completion and sometime performance in favour of girls. Notably, gender research in Kenya has often focused on the schooling experiences and outcomes for girls without comparable systematic analysis of the contexts within which boys engage with schooling. Hardly do the researches interrogate the role of schooling in the construction of masculinities that are successful and prepared to fit into a non-traditional world where gender relations are continually transforming by empowering girls and women to enter in the public world as actors in national development. While academic performance is an important outcome of schooling, this study posits that the social development of both girls and boys is an equally important outcome of any holistic education which has been mainly ignored with regard to the boys especially during the critical formative and transitional stages of childhood and adolescence. The marginalisation of any gender within and through education would clearly undermine the globally Bill of Rights which under Article 27 and 43 (f) guarantees all children –girls and boys- equality in education and freedom from discrimination. Further, a core mission of the Kenya Vision 2030, which is to enhance not only social and economic but also the attainment of *social cohesion* would be undermined by the educational marginalisation of either gender which in turn would hamper the achievement of the EFA goals as well of the MDGs. Further, an overall failure of schooling to harness gender equity and equality not only within but also across regional divides would most likely create an atmosphere within and outside the educational settings where gender conflict and violence would be a probable outcome. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to use statistical evidence on access, retention and academic performance of boys *vis-a-vis* that of the girls to guide in unveiling the qualitative dimensions of gender equality that shape the construction of masculinities and femininities in a context of gender equality within and outside schools.

## **2.1 Research Questions**

### Key research question:

***What are the effects of girls' educational projects on the schooling of boys in co-educational schools?***

### Specific research questions:

1. How do girls and boys compare in terms of enrolment and completion rates in the last 5 years in the selected research sites?
2. How does academic performance of boys compare with that of girls in key school subjects of Mathematics, English and Science in the selected schools and districts?
3. How does the school culture contribute to the construction of masculinities compared with femininities?
4. What policy implications emerge from gender equality/inequality school practices for both girls and boys?

### 3. Literature Review

#### *Schooling as a means of constructing new models of African men*

In Kenya, the National Examinations Council found out that girls outperformed in literacy by 10 percentage points while they trailed behind the boys with a relatively lower 4 percentage points in numeracy (GoK, 2010). Similarly, Uwezo Kenya (2010) confirmed the apparent lagging behind of the boys in literacy. Further, qualitative factors within Kenyan schools have been attributed to the notable disillusionment with schooling among the boys as noted through an evaluation study of the Child Friendly Schools Initiative –CFSI (UNICEF, 2008), where some of the schoolboys described school anti-boys. Such revelations about boys' perceptions of schooling question the role of in constructions of masculinities, which is the problem for this study.

Education data from other African region as is the case in many Western countries also reveals an emerging trend of male underperformance in education. In Western Africa, for example, UNICEF/Federal Government of Nigeria's evaluation of the Girls Education Programme (GEP, 2006) revealed gender variations in favour of the girls in both enrolment and attendance patterns in the 6 GEP States of Northern Nigeria. Enrolment rates for boys had increased from 17.3% in 2005/06 to 40% in 2006/07 compared with the relatively higher rates for girls at 36.4% and 73.2% respectively for the same periods. Attendance rates for boys also a decreased from 19.6% in 2005/2006 to 15.4% in 2006-2007 and on average stood at 7.1% between 2005 and 2007.

#### *Masculinities and the African contexts*

Research on constructions of masculinities is relatively low in sub-Saharan Africa. This is despite research evidence demonstrating that male disempowerment has potential to negate the gains made through the well-intentioned empowerment of girls and women through an education, whose aim is to respond effectively to the pertinent nation and state legislations as well as to international treaties and conventions. According to Margarethe and Siberschmidt (2005), the marginalisation of boys and men has tended to threaten masculinities which are constructed within patriarchal<sup>3</sup> ideologies, thus creating grounds for violence –physical and emotional- against the women and girls (see Margarethe and Siberschmidt, 2005; Leach 2006; Mitchell, 2006; UN 2006; Chege, 2007). Further, in their study among the rural Kisii people of Kenya as well as the urbanites of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania Margarethe and Siberschmidt (2005) demonstrate that, on the one hand, the men expressed hostility and violent tendencies towards their wives based on the perception that their empowered spouses disregarded male authority and consequently treated husbands with disrespect. On the other hand, the women from these communities confirmed their non-conformity to traditional expectations of

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3 Patriarchy refers to historical power imbalances and cultural practices and systems that accord men on aggregate more power in society, and offer men material benefits, such as higher incomes and informal benefits including care and domestic service from women and girls in the family (UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 2003).

submissiveness arguing that since the men were incapable of providing for family basic needs as was prescribed by traditional cultural norms, they felt no obligations to obey them as was required within traditional marriages (see Stambach, 2000; Chege, 2001; Pattman and Chege, 2003). In this context therefore, there is need to interrogate how boys navigate the route to manhood, especially through schooling as the legal site for growing up. This notwithstanding, Mkhize (2006) cautions against a looming crises for the African family, especially where material, economic and physical power are the glorified –more than schooling – as key in the construction of masculinity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theorisation of masculinities *vis-a-vis* femininities in the context of schooling is guided by the Postmodern Critical Theory (PCT) which is oriented toward challenging the dominant discourses that threaten the transformation of societies. Unlike traditional theory, critical theory offers a human rights-based foundation in the generation and analysis of data that is solicited from human subjects with the aim of seeking mutually interconnected elements while being reflexive and critical in making judgments or conclusions on the disjuncture between the actual realities and the possible (see Horkheimer, 1937).

### **Conceptual framework**

Connell (1987 & 1994) and Kimmel (2000) have influence the choice of social constructionist perspective as it provides the conceptual framework within which evidence adduced in this study is analysed and discussed. Within this framework, gender (masculinities and femininities) are ‘socially constructed (rather than being biologically given and driven), making them subject to variation across historical and social contexts. In this study, the social construction of masculinities and femininities is located within the processes of schooling whereby enrolment, school attendance, performance, completion and transitions provide insights into the meaning of success for boys and girls. In addition, insights into the role that families and communities play is entwined in this conceptualisation (see Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). Scalway (2000) argues that that gender positioning entails multiple interacting social sites all of which contribute to the construction of the ideal masculinity or femininity.

## **4. Research Methodology**

The study adapted a comparative case study design which supports the study of multiple social realities within specific settings while seeking to achieve ‘in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, event or occurrence within its real-life context’ (Mugenda and Mugenda 2012: 39). The qualitative methodological paradigm was the main approach in generating data using interviews, focus group discussion and observation. Analyses of school documents as well as use of quantitative survey questionnaire were employed to complement the qualitative methods and offer the basis for triangulation of inquiries, data sources and findings as advocated by

Marshall and Rossman (1999). The qualitative approach provided the means of grounding our study in the lived experiences of the girls and boys in a naturalistic and interpretive manner that is explicitly consistent with respect for the humanity of participants, while remaining ‘emergent and evolving’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 2).

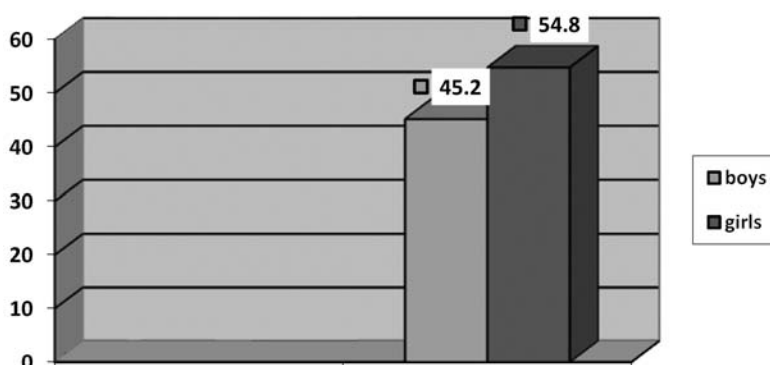
### Sampling

#### *Research locales, sites and participants*

Two counties in Kenya, namely Nairobi and Kirinyaga that are located respectively in Nairobi and Central provinces of Kenya were selected purposively based official Ministry of Education (MoE) pronouncement regarding perceived deterioration of boys’ education compared with that of the girls, especially in terms of enrolment and completion as well as in performance in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education –KCPE (MoE ministerial release, 2011).

In each of the 2 counties of Nairobi and Kirinyaga, 2 research districts were sampled purposively based on their location as urban, peri-urban or rural, yielding a total of (4). Within each of the 4 district, 4 co-educational primary schools were purposively selected to comprise a total sample of 16<sup>4</sup> schools based on two criteria. *Firstly*, their location as urban, peri-urban or rural and *secondly* their overall performance whereby half of the schools had girls outperforming boys in specific aspects such as enrolment, completion and academic performance that qualified them for transition to secondary school. Out of the targeted 15 schools covered, 8 were in Kirinyaga and 7 in Nairobi

The study target constituted all the Class 7 girls and boys in each of the participating school whereby 1,834 pupils<sup>5</sup> (1,005 girls and 829 boys) participated. In each school, the sample pupils completed a closed-ended questionnaire with a section of them participating in single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs). Figure 2 below demonstrates the sample types and sizes for the pupils by gender.



**Figure 1: Pupil Sample by gender**

4 One of the sampled schools did not participate due to persistent conflict of timing between the research team and the school.

5 On average, 83% of both the girls and boys indicated they lived with their mothers while just about half of them had their fathers present at home. One-in-five of them lived in a one-room house.

The study also included head teachers from the sample schools (7 female and 8 male) who participated in 15 in-depth individual interviews while teachers (30 female and 30 male) of the Class 7 pupils participated in 15 mixed-sex focus group discussions (FGDs) –one in each of the schools. Table 1a and b capture the three categories of adult sample

**Table 1a: Head teachers by gender**

Gender	Frequency
Female	7
Male	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>

**Table 1b: Class teachers by gender**

Teachers	Frequency
Female	30
Male	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>

### Data Analysis

The statistical package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 11.5 was used to process and analyse data from pupil questionnaires as well as school records on enrolment, performance and transition, using simple statistics. For the qualitative data from the *Atlas ti* computer package was used to process thematic codes based on the systematic data coding, transform the interview transcripts and analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researchers solicited access to the schools through the government and school administration protocols. In the schools, informed consent was secured through a sharing of the project issues and objectives with the head-teachers, assistant teachers and the pupils. The questionnaires for pupils were administered with anonymity to protect the girls and boys from any eventualities of harm while pseudonyms were used to camouflage the identity of interviewees and group discussants.

## **5. Presentation of Study Findings**

This section provides key findings in response to the sequence and content of the four (4) research questions that guided this study. Qualitative and quantities evidence will be presented discursively to enhance the depth and demonstrate the social complexities that characterised the statistical trends in the schooling of girls and boys in the study. It was noteworthy that all the sample schools had displayed school mottos in conspicuous positions to express their aspiration. However, some were brief and general in nature while others entailed lengthy elaboration of their motto to entail a vision and mission that took into account various aspect of the school mandate, including gender equality as presented in abstracts of indicated in the following two plates.



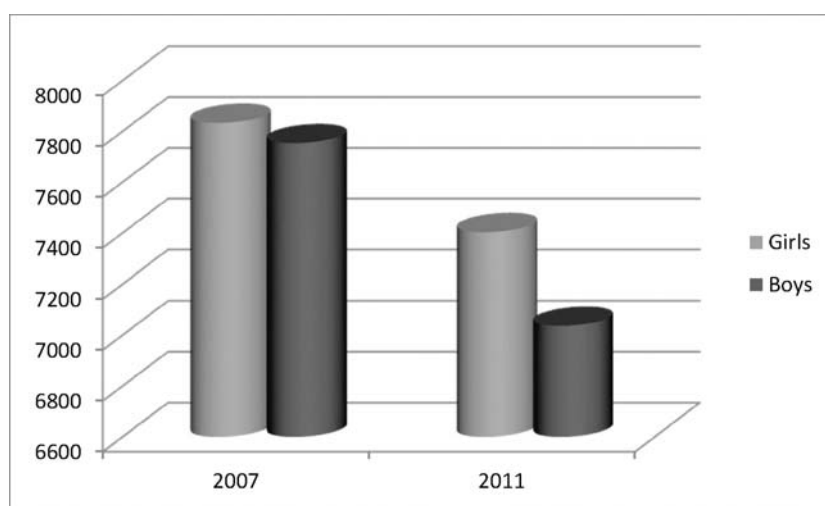
## 6. Gendered Patterns of Educational Access and School Participation

It is noteworthy that while the Ministry of Education requires school data of various types to be gender disaggregated, fieldwork revealed that data in this form was available in only 2 out of the 7 schools in Nairobi County and a similar in 8 of the schools in Kirinyaga County<sup>6</sup>. Further, another 3 schools in Nairobi and 2 in Kirinyaga were able to provide data of between only between 2 and 3 previous years. This anomaly notwithstanding, the researchers used qualitative perceptual data from key informants and to explore relevant insights linked to the research questions.

### *Declining Male Enrolment and Participation Rates*

Data that was available confirmed, unequivocally that the general perceptions that boys were indeed lagging behind the girls in half of the schools in the two study counties. In addition, even where data were not available, girls were still portrayed as being more pro-school compared with their male peers who were described often as “not too keen” with schooling in almost all areas that include enrolment, transition and performance.

In Langata District of Nairobi County for example, our findings show that more girls than boys remained in the primary school system during the 5 years leading to the study period. In 2007, the boys in this county were 8,047 which was 6% fewer than the girls at 8,153. By 2011, however, the boys had decreased by nearly 9 percentage points to stand at 7,293 compared to the girls whose enrolment had declined by 5 percentage points to stand at 7,403 as depicted in Figure 1 below.

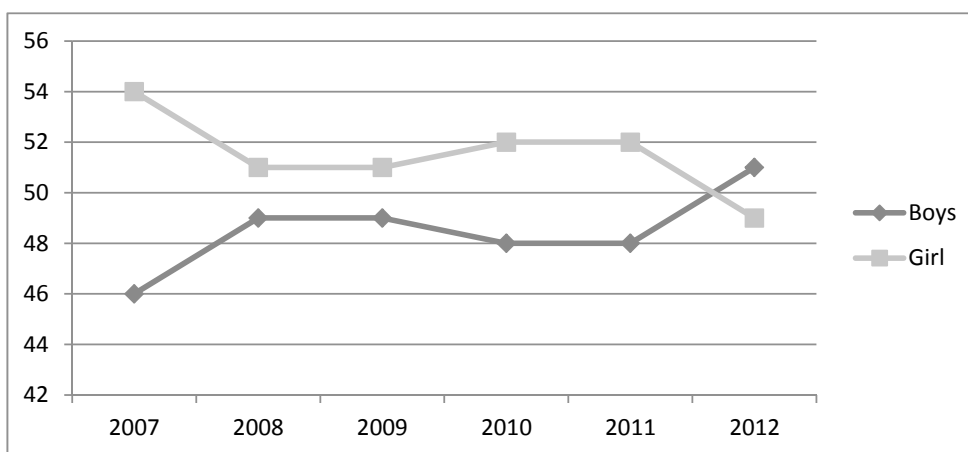


**Figure 1: Enrolment patterns by gender, Langata District**

<sup>6</sup> The researchers learnt that, traditionally, many of the school administrators did not organized gender disaggregated data until the Ministry of Education began to demand them. The researchers used the opportunity to point out the need to disaggregate pupil data by gender



In Kirinyaga Central District of Kirinyaga County, the trend of girls maintaining relatively higher rates in school enrolment was noteworthy in half of the 8 participating schools. However, even in schools where the boys were more, their retention rate was lower than that of the girls as the boys tended to leave school earlier than the girls. While teachers discussed this scenario with what seemed to be serious concern, very few schools seemed to have a policy in place to address the issue of boys leaving school early. Indeed, in all the 15 schools in Nairobi and Kirinyaga counties, there was only one school in Kirinyaga Central where the head teacher explained the school's unwritten policy of trying to motivate girls and boys equally to complete school and compete equally. Despite the efforts in this school, the gender-disaggregated data still portrayed that the proportion of girls in school had remained more than that of the boys for 5 consecutive years since Year 2007 to Year 2011 as depicted in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Urban school in Kirinyaga Central District**

*The story of Girls' enhanced enrolment and retention*

During interviews and FGDs, the head teachers as well as class teachers respectively expressed the assumption that girls –more than the boys– were increasingly getting motivated to complete school and that the trend of having fewer boys in school was likely to continue because, the family as well as school cultures tended to support girls more than they did boys. This view seemed to hold considering that while the analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that approximately 78% of both boys and girls claimed to ‘*enjoy being in school*’, that enjoyment was apparently not enough to keep a comparable proportion of boys in school. Also, even where transition trends were declining for both the girls and boys, that of the boys remained proportionately higher. The in-depth interviews and FGDs with head teachers and class teachers helped to explore the underlying reasons either as verifiable realities or as dominant perceptions.

According to most of the teachers, especially the female ones the increase in girls' enrolment and retention in the school was directly linked to both in-school as well as out-of-school social and economic factors that influenced girls and boys in different but explicitly

gendered ways.

*The socio-gender shift in favour of girls*

All the head teachers and the class teachers, without exception, were of the view that the contemporary family was characterised by parents, mainly mother, who made explicit efforts to not only keep their daughters in school but also motivate them and support them to attain educational success both in the process of the school cycle and in the benefits or outcomes. It was argued that many parents apparently constructed their daughters as worthwhile investments whose economic and material returns to the parents were guaranteed. Boys were constructed as self-centred and less likely to support their parents after completing school.

In an interview, one head teacher from Kirinyaga Central expressed his observation as follows:

When they (children) are entering class nursery, the boys are many. Like now I have more boys in nursery class. I have got about 63 pupils and the way they are coming up, the boys get lost on the way. Now it is not the girls who get lost on the way, it is the boy who is getting lost on the way, yeah. (Head teacher –Kirinyaga urban–Female)

The above view was captured from teachers' FGDs, whereby the declining educational trend for boys was discussed as exemplified in following excerpts.

The society was much up for the boy child but as time came, people wanted a girl child to come up. But the way the society came up is with more secondary schools for girls...mmh! If you look, like in this area, it is now we are starting day secondary schools because boys especially in Kirinyaga had about five schools for boys but very many schools for girls. So I tend to think that that might have promoted the girl child uplifting herself better than the boy child because most of the boys were left... they did not go to school (–Rural Mwea–teachers FGD M).

One of the female teachers in the above-cited FGD underscored the role of the society in constructing masculinity, saying:

It is the way the society views at home. At home we are having men. They are not doing their duties so these boys have got nobody to look up to (Kirinyaga Central–teachers FGD)

*The school gender culture with a feminised workforce*

In all the schools, discussions with teachers and school administrators were consistent on the observation that the schooling culture had increasingly made girls more confident both socially and in academic performance. In addition, the school workforce which was, in most cases, predominantly female portrayed an explicit enthusiasm of empowering girls through education. Observation as well as documentary evidence supported the fact that overall, there were more women teachers in the schools than men. In one Nairobi school, for instance, all the teachers apart from the head teacher were female while in many others the female teachers constituted up to three-quarters of the workforce.

There was an expressed view that many of the female teachers inspired girls to be outgoing, confident, and competitive, while encouraging them to demonstrate their capabilities by taking up school and classroom leadership positions in responsibilities which traditionally had been the preserve of the boys. Apparently, this kind of gendered focus was evident only among the female teachers and not among their male counterparts who in most cases were disproportionately few.

#### *E-masculinisation of the school and entrapment of boys*

There was little doubt that schools, as exemplified by the sample schools, were becoming progressively more feminised with women teachers being the majority overall. In most of the schools both in Nairobi and Kirinyaga counties, the female teachers outnumbered the male with a large margin. In some cases, a school would have only one male teacher –often the head teacher. In other cases, the female teachers would as many as eight times more than their male colleagues. Out of the 15 schools, only two of them (one in peri-urban Nairobi) portrayed equal distribution of male and female teachers while overall, only one of the 15 schools, again in peri-urban Nairobi, had male teachers being double the number of their female colleagues. Accordingly, the female head teachers and their deputies raised concerns that while the men teachers were relatively few, they also portrayed themselves ‘laid-back’ and were apparently not interested in connecting with the boys and the boys’ interests as men-to-be; let alone with the girls as future citizens.

In addition, the dearth of available school-based mentors also played havoc in the construction of masculinities through schooling. Observation in the school revealed that boys lacked male figures who could guide and counsel them in the same way as the girls in their schools, thus resulting in frustration with the schooling career and eventual apathy when the girls ‘outdid’ them in school work.

#### *Inadequate school transition opportunities for boys*

According to many of the teachers in Nairobi, and in Kirinyaga, the availability of more girls’ secondary schools within the environments of their schools was a major determinant in the differentiated motivation for schooling among girls and boys. Education officers and the teachers reported that there were inadequate secondary government schools for boys compared with the girls hence, creating a conflict between aspirations of continued education and the real expectation of finding the appropriate and affordable pathway<sup>7</sup>. These findings help in contextualising the link between the relatively lower school enrolment and retention of boys with their real life contexts as expressed by their significant others within and outside the school. In less elaborate expressions, the girls and boys in this study confirmed these constructions of masculinities and femininities through their interviews and further through their responses to their questionnaires.

#### *Boy’s attraction to early employment*

The pupil focus group discussions (FGDs) and questionnaires showed that, majority of the girls and boys (85%) expected schooling to lead to the acquisition of formal employment and

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<sup>7</sup> The researchers observe that new county government had the chance to transform the situation for boys by focusing on gender balanced provision of educational opportunities in their jurisdictions.

for boys, being able to earn money was clearly their major marker of successful masculinity. Over 90% of these boys and girls were from the peri-urban settings of Langata in Nairobi and the urban settings of Kirinyaga Central, where boys reportedly left school to look for jobs. According to the head teachers and teachers, concrete economic activities were readily available for the boys, especially in Kirinyaga County whereby boy child-labour was reportedly preferred because it was cheap and because boys were easy to control and possibly overwork. Of central importance was attraction to transportation business using motorbikes (boda-boda) for ferrying passengers or using donkey carts to vend water and not in the least working in the rice paddies where boy-child labour was in high demand. Some of the teachers linked the declining schooling of boys as being more linked to the outside of school economic attractions more than the in-school factors. One head-teacher explained

Sometimes boys think that school is not as important as there are other activities which are being done out there. You see for example we have the boda-boda (commuter motorbike services) issue whereby the motorcycles are introduced to the transport industry. So sometimes you may find the class seven and six (boys) are being trained how to ride the motorbikes and maybe one or two days you might find the boys absent because of that. We also have the influence of drugs in the area in a certain catchment area of the school and once some are involved in that then you also find them that missing class for one or two days. (Head teacher –Kirinyaga rural –Male)



Models of young men often primary school drop outs engaging in motorbike transport business that is a major attraction to primary school boys



Rice paddies located near schools are a major attraction to boy-child labour which negatively impacts on male school attendance and performance

In the peri-urban informal settlement of Nairobi, the issue of out-of-school economic attractions was also a dominant feature as one head teacher explained:

We have more boys going there (for petty trade) selling of whatever they lay hands upon and as they are doing this the girls are in school. So you find that they are missing classes and at times when they are out there some of them are also engaged in drug taking. So they are not able to come back and if they come back their concentration span become low as compared to that of girls ( peri-urban Nairobi head

teacher - Male)

The above findings notwithstanding, many of the teachers from both Nairobi and Kirinyaga acknowledged the fact that, as teachers concentrated on improving girls' education as a way of enhancing gender equality within and through schooling, the boys were missing out in that equation of equality which was demonstrated through their declining enrolments and participation rates, as well as performance and transition rates.

## 7. Academic Performance and School Transition

During the initial courtesy calls in the research Districts, one of the Education Officers in Kirinyaga confirmed that girls had performed better in the county during the previous 5 years preceding this study. Indeed, an eventual documentary analysis of the relevant documents revealed that the mean scores for boys were declining compared with that of the girls. The head teachers and teachers eager to explain these scenarios using their schools as case studies for demonstration as exemplified below.

In my school, I would say girls have been performing better than boys across board that is from class one to class eight. Then when we come to subject performance you find that girls perform better in sciences as compared to boys (head teacher — Kirinyaga - Female).

From Nairobi, the head teacher of one city primary school also had the following to say:

Actually the girls have always turned very well. We also had boys that were doing well but girls were doing exceptionally very well. (...). (Head teacher – Nairobi city - Female)

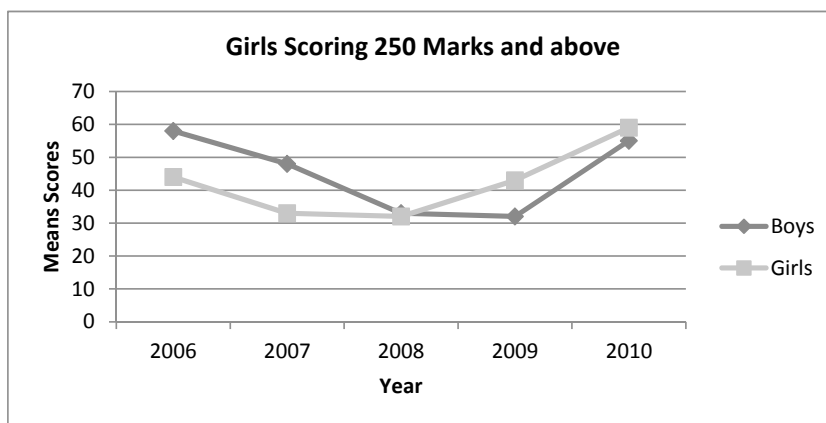
### *Boys academic performance vis-à-vis that of Girls*

The arguments and observations that boys' educational marginalisation was linked to their underperformance in academic work sometimes lacked the support of empirical evidence in an overall manner. For instance, even as boys were progressively being overtaken in Mathematics, they were still holding the lead in science in most of the schools in the study. Table 2 below shows boys' relative performance in English and Science in one of the schools in Kirinyaga Central where the girls outperformed them in English:

**Table 2: Performance in key school subjects (Primary –Kirinyaga Central)**

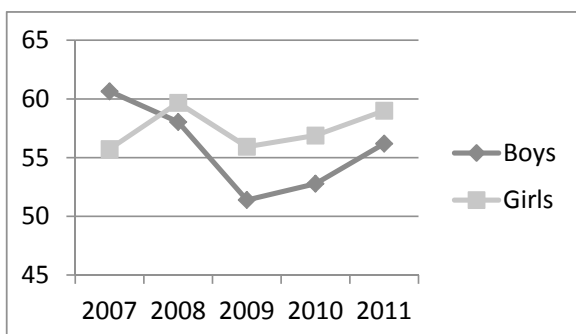
<b>Performance in English</b>					
	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
<b>Boys</b>	67.2	62.6	59.6	57.7	61.0
<b>Girls</b>	69.9	65.50	64.7	61.6	63.3
<b>Performance in Science</b>					
	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
<b>Boys</b>	61.8	62.5	59.3	60.5	60.1
<b>Girls</b>	55.4	55.8	55.9	58.6	57.0

In a Nairobi school, however, records showed that overall the girls were beginning to outperform boys in overall academic performance with the school administrators predicting that the new trend in girls' performance was likely to be sustained due to the presumed overall focus on girls' education. For example, in one of the Nairobi school, the fact that the head teacher and two of the deputies were all female was presented as the cause of the major shift in the improvement of girls' performance as demonstrated in figure 3 below.

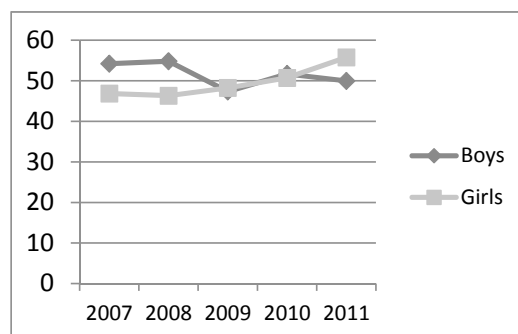


**Figure 3: City school in Nairobi**

In one of the few Kirinyaga Central schools that had its gender disaggregated data, girls were leading in English and competing closely in mathematics as illustrated in Figures 4a and 4b below. This trend has been confirmed in other studies globally, regionally and locally as documented in the SACMEQ data and reports from studies by the Kenya National Examinations Council and Uwezo as earlier in this paper.



**Figure 4a: English performance 2007-2011)**



**Figure 4b: Mathematics performance (2007-2011)**

The foregoing scenario notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that most of the girls and boys (over 90%) regardless of their gender expressed the view the view that *all pupils ought to be treated equally* in school and be given the chances to attain their potentials (Pupil Questionnaire).

## **8. Teachers' Role in Enhancing Gender Equality in School**

There were instances whereby teachers confessed that they had indeed neglected boys in the quest to demonstrate their efforts in enhancing girls' education as per government policy. In rural Kirinyaga, one female head teacher owned up the negligence of schoolboy saying:

We (teachers) forget to talk about the boy but usually there are problems that also affect the boys. We think about the girl very much, even we teachers we contribute in one way or the other, taking care of that girl very much to improve their performance (head teacher Kirinyaga –female)

Underperforming boys were more prone to leaving school and engaging in crime as one of the female teachers noted by saying, “the boys begin planning for the crime they will undertake in the evening while at school”, possibly to get money and feel fulfilled.

A Nairobi teacher acknowledged that boys actually posed serious behavioural problems possibly because of teacher negligence as they focused mostly on the girls while leaving the boys unattended.

To some extent (...) you see that most boys are having behaviour problems. I think it is because maybe girls are given more attention or because I know with the girls they only talk of maybe of (...) teenage pregnancies which to some extent has reduced... forgetting about boys. We are really having a problem with boys (Nairobi Primary peri-urban- teacher FGD –Female)

## **9. New Masculinities and Gender Equality Through Schooling**

For this study, the location of boy's schooling and its implications on the construction of masculinities in relation to femininities is critical for the realisation of fulfilled forms of gender identities as well as harmonious gender relations within the broader context of the international human rights framework for gender equitable societies. The findings of this study confirm the public debates that have –over time- suggested that “something was not quite right” with the process of schooling for boys compared with that of the girls. Arguably, any successful nation requires responsible, responsive, resourceful and confident men and women who work harmoniously regardless of their various diversities, including gender differences. The study confirms the apparent sidelining of boys thus resulting in their declining outcomes both academically and socially. For boys and girls to succeed equally within school and through the outcomes of their schooling, teachers need to consciously portray equal enthusiasm in a gender equitable schooling that is devoid of discrimination against either gender. The qualitative data suggests very strongly that many boys may have been resisting resisted schooling because the experiences for them were not consistent with the promise of making them successful future men.

In the two study locales, the perception of both girls and boys regarding the gender of the teachers who encouraged them to participate in class did not have any considerable difference,

raising the questions as to whether the general perception that teachers encouraged girls more than they did boys. For instance, approximately 30% of girls and boys agreed that *female teachers encouraged girls in class*, compared with slightly below 30% of them who wrote that *male teachers encouraged boys in class*. Also, 42% of girls in Nairobi's Langata District and 43% of the boys indicated that *female teachers encouraged the girls to participate in class always or sometimes*. This response was confirmed interviews whereby both the girls and boys were eager to express that the female teachers were helpful to them without gender discrimination. In Nairobi, over 40% of the girls and boys portrayed a consensus that *male teachers encouraged boys to participate in class*. Both in Nairobi and Kirinyaga, it is clear that nearly two thirds of the girls and boys did not consider their teachers as a source of their encouragement in schooling which raises a new question regarding the source of inspiration for the majority of girls and boys in their schooling. This notwithstanding however, the school space emerged as more accommodating for the girls' preparation for future life compared with many of the boys, especially in rural Kirinyaga, who looked to the space outside school as more offering competing opportunities for their quest of becoming successful future men.

## 10. Conclusions and Recommendations

**Firstly**, the perception that schooling may be failing many boys in their transition to manhood is supported by school data which captures a clearly emerging trend of underperforming boys in terms of enrolment, participation and performance. The school culture emerges as friendlier to the girls who seem to receive considerable attention from the female teachers compared with the boys. **Secondly**, the relatively fewer male teachers, specifically in urban schools and the fact that such male teachers notably appear to be "laid back" and disinterested in the schooling life of boys seems to have a direct link to the boys' lack of male figures to emulate within the school. Such a gender void would most likely contribute to new forms of less confident masculinities which presented a contradiction of expectations of dominant traditional African masculinities. **Thirdly**, because most teachers did not appear to consider boys' socialisation needs, it is not surprising that boys seemed to take the "back stage" in many of the schools where focus was mainly on the performance of the girls.

In view of these findings, it is imperative that teacher and school administrators be empowered with the relevant knowledge and skills that would enhance their capacities to respond to the qualitative aspects of gender issues in their schools. Such capacities would have to entail skills in ensuring the nature of the school culture was gender friendly and that gender relations were equitable between teachers as well as between pupils and among the school community actors at various levels. This kind of gender-based transformation of the school life is important in providing the foundation for successful transitions into further education and into the world of work in the wider society of gender equitable women and men. It is therefore imperative that gender equality issues be made core to the content of teacher education and training for both the in-service and pre-service context.



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