Gender and the Return to School in Kenya

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Abstract

Gender gaps favoring girls have defined education systems in high-income countries for many years, but are becoming increasingly prevalent in low-income countries as well, including in Kenya. We conduct qualitative interviews with Kenyan primary school teachers and parents and find that these key stakeholders are grappling with different gender narratives and the complexity of gender dynamics, particularly in the wake of extended school closures. Many teachers believe that issues such as early marriage and pregnancy significantly increased during school closures, uniquely affecting girls and girls' education. At the same time, teachers also observed that girls were doing better academically than boys, both before and after the pandemic, and some parents felt that girls were more likely to spend time on education while schools were closed. Clear theories were expressed to explain the challenges girls face, but teachers and parents seemed to speculate about the challenges facing boys, bringing up issues related to discipline and economic activity. Further investigation is needed to understand the factors driving high achievement as well as poor performance in education across both genders.

Introduction

In all regions and in almost all countries around the world, rates of learning poverty (being unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten) are higher for boys than for girls (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, in more than 100 countries, men and boys have lower levels of educational enrollment and completion at the secondary and higher education levels (Bossavie and Kanninen, 2018). While the fact that girls are outperforming boys academically has been well documented and debated across high-income countries, the identification of this trend in low- and middle-income countries is more recent and has not received as much attention.

Gender gaps in education are a nuanced and complex issue, affected by many different social, cultural, and economic factors, and can vary across education level and subject. In addition, averages can conceal important trends and distributions, such as how in many countries, boys' underperformance is driven by a small population of poorly performing boys that bring down the average (World Bank, 2021). Data on academic performance and learning can also be hard to interpret in light of differing rates of dropout and grade repetition.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional complexity. School closures and other disruptions highlighted the unique challenges that girls face. It is estimated, for example, that 10 million additional girls are at risk of child marriage over the next decade (UNESCO, 2021). Less is known about the potential effect of the pandemic on boys' lives and education due to the lack of global research on factors related to boys' underachievement prior to the pandemic (Saavedra et al., 2022).

In this study, we conduct and analyze qualitative interviews with teachers and parents in Kenya following the country's pandemic-related school closures. We find that these key stakeholders are grappling with different gender narratives and their own observations of children and students. Many teachers discussed concerns for girls, such as early marriage and pregnancy, but these issues were not frequently mentioned by parents. Conversely, multiple parents observed that girls were more likely to read, study, or do other educational activities while schools were closed. Many teachers recognized that girls were doing better than boys academically, both before and after the pandemic, some appearing surprised by their own observations. Several teachers noted that the well-being of boys might be overlooked by girls-focused programming.

Recent research across East Africa finds that girls outperform boys in basic literacy and numeracy in nationally representative data from Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya (Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton, 2021). This research recognizes important sub-national variation, though, such as in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands in Kenya, where learning levels are higher for boys than for girls (Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton, 2021).

As actors across Kenya and in countries around the world implement and revise gender policies in education, further exploration and understanding of gender gaps and the theories and mechanisms for explaining both high achievement and poor performance will be important.

Learning from the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders such as teachers and parents will be a critical part of this work. Specific country case studies will also be an important contribution to the overall discourse (World Bank, 2021), in addition to even more localized research. This study aims to provide initial insight from Kenya, analyzing teachers' and parents' observations of gendered issues and trends in education, as well as the theorizing and beliefs they use to explain these trends.

Background

Historically, gender gaps in education have favored boys, and still, in the vast majority of countries, adult men are more educated than adult women (Evans, Akmal & Jakiela, 2020). Over the past several decades, though, better educational outcomes have started to be observed for girls as compared to boys, inspiring such terms as the "reverse gender gap" and "female advantage." In high-income and Western countries, these trends have been observed for some time: in the US, in 1972, a greater percentage of men as compared to women were awarded bachelor's degrees; this gap closed by 1982, and by 2019, a greater percentage of women were awarded bachelor's degrees, with a larger and widening gap. Broad generalizations of this trend are common (e.g. "Similar trends can be seen in every stage of the education system, and in almost every country in the world" (Reeves & Smith, 2021), but there is important variation along a number of different dimensions.

Analyzing data from Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in 38 low-income countries, Grant and Behrman (2010) found that boys ages 6-18 were more likely to be enrolled in school in 2000-2005 (except in Latin America and South Asia), but that conditional on ever attending school, girls had significantly better schooling progress. The authors note that this was the first time a "phenomenon of female schooling advantage in less developed countries" had been acknowledged in the literature (Grant & Behrman, 2010).

In reviewing school enrollment in 2015, the Gender Review accompanying UNESCO's annual Global Education Monitoring Report concluded that, "in 2014, gender parity was achieved globally, on average, in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education," but "global averages mask continuing disparity," and emphasized that gender disparity in access to education still primarily disadvantaged girls (p. 14) (UNESCO 2016). Later research has argued that what appears to be global gender parity is in fact diverging trends: in countries with high enrollment and high attainment, a male disadvantage is emerging, while in countries with low enrollment and low attainment, a female disadvantage persists (Psaki, McCarthy & Mensch, 2018).

Global averages mask important subnational variation as well. Analysis of data from nearly 10,000 school districts in the United States finds that on average, girls perform as well as boys in math, but that in school districts that are mostly rich, white, and suburban, boys are much more likely to outperform girls in math (Reardon et al., 2019) (Girls consistently perform about .23 standard deviations higher than boys in English and Language Arts throughout the US (Reardon et al., 2019)). Relevant theories include: high-income families are more likely to espouse views consistent with gender equality but live more traditionally gendered lives; and

high-income families invest more in sons because men earn more than women in higher socioeconomic classes, while low-income families invest more in daughters, as working-class women are more likely to be employed than working-class men (Chetty et al., 2016; Cain Miller & Quealy, 2018; Hopcroft & Martin, 2016; Trivers & Willard, 1973). These trends and hypotheses illustrate some of the complexity and nuance of gender dynamics and how they might influence children's educational performance in varying ways, even in a single national setting. Recognizing and investigating such trends, particularly at the subnational level, relies on the availability of extensive and detailed data.

International investigation into gender gaps has typically relied on datasets such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). On average, across both PISA and PIRLS, girls outperform boys in reading (Mullis et al., 2012). Results are mixed for mathematics (Mullis et al., 2016). These initiatives focus almost exclusively on high-income countries.

Analysis of gender gaps in low-income countries initially focused on school enrollment, and later completion rates. As more attention has shifted to learning, and more data on learning has become available, exploration into gender gaps in learning outcomes is increasing. However, it is important to view gender gaps within their particular educational context, as understanding the connections between issues such as enrollment, dropout, and learning is critical for interpreting such gaps, particularly in low-income countries where these dynamics are highly relevant across all levels of the education system. More research is needed to understand how changes in the composition of the student population might influence trends in educational performance (Psaki et al., 2018).

In South Africa, for example, Spall and Makaluza (2019) find that boys' higher performance in mathematics and physical science on the country's school leaving exam is at least partly explained by boys' higher dropout rates in high school, echoing earlier findings (Zuze and Reddy, 2014; Perry, 2003). Comparing equal numbers of boys and girls, girls do "unequivocally" better than boys, on average, across all of the tests' 13 subjects (Spall and Makaluza, 2019).

Analyzing data from Grade 6 students in the 14 countries included in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) Initiative, Saito (2011) finds that in 2007, girls outperformed boys in reading in nine school systems, with a statistically significant difference in six of those countries (treating Zanzibar as a separate school system from Mainland Tanzania). Conversely, boys outperformed girls in mathematics in eleven school systems, with a statistically significant difference in seven (Saito, 2011).

Using the nationally representative Uwezo surveys collected between 2010 and 2015 across Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton (2021) find that girls outperformed boys in both literacy and numeracy in each of the three countries. These analyses make a unique contribution to the discourse in several ways. First, the Uwezo data are a household survey, and include both in and out of school children, as well as key indicators of households' socioeconomic status such as access to electricity and parent education level. Second, with six rounds of survey data (the pooled datasets include 592,070 children in Kenya,

410,925 in Tanzania, and 366,224 in Kenya), the study includes one of the largest datasets to analyze gender gaps in LMICs and as a result, the study is able to explore subnational variation and factors related to the gender gaps. In addition, including all children 6-16 years of age resident in a household enables Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton (2021) to control for household fixed effects and children's progression through school. They find that across all three countries, girls are less likely to have dropped out, less likely to be over-age per grade, and have completed approximately two months more schooling on average than boys.

Controlling for dropout and grade progression and including household fixed effects, Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton (2021) find that girls outperform boys in both literacy and numeracy at the national and regional levels, but there is notable subnational variation. A small number of districts or counties in each country are defined by a gender gap favoring boys. These districts are the same for numeracy and literacy, and the two measures are highly correlated (0.89), suggesting that the gender gaps reflect challenges affecting both literacy and numeracy. One key factor appears to be labor market conditions: districts with a gender gap favoring boys have high female child labor market participation. Bulh-Wiggers et al., (2021) also find that maternal education is an important factor: in households where the mother has no education the gender gap favoring girls is highly reduced.

The authors note that in low-income countries at the time, few studies existed on the education-related challenges facing boys, with none in East Africa (Bulh-Wiggers et al., 2021). While there is an extensive literature and field of intervention focused on how to expand and improve girls' education in low- and middle-income countries, with multiple evidence reviews in recent years (Cameron et al., 2016; Sabet and Brown, 2018; World Bank, 2018; Evans, Acosta, Yuan, 2021; Psaki et al., 2022), there is no comparable literature for boys.

The lack of research on boys' education and education challenges is particularly clear in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures. Clear threats to girls' education and wellbeing have been identified - such as the estimate that 10 million additional girls worldwide are at risk of child marriage over the next decade (UNESCO, 2021). Much less is known about how the pandemic might have affected boys and boys' education because of the lack of global research on these issues and related factors prior to the pandemic (Saavedra et al., 2022).

Gender Gaps in Kenyan Education

The role of gender in Kenyan education is influenced by complex, long-standing dynamics and shaped by region, ethnicity, and class. The British colonial system capitalized on the gender imbalances that defined the pre-colonial era and also instituted new forms of oppression (Njue et al.; 2014; Ochwada, 1997). For education specifically, locals feared that the British education system would socialize girls and young women into "deviant" femininities by reducing labor time at home, assimilating them into European culture and delaying marriage and bride-wealth acquisition (Kanogo, 2005). As such, the British leveraged these gender biases and urged African parents to send sons rather than daughters to school (Ochwada, 1997). Even when

colonial education was eventually accessible to girls, the syllabus offered to them was structured to model a stereotype of a traditional domestic woman. Mission schools coached girls into becoming ideal wives and while formal education was also provided (mainly Bible reading and writing letters), domestic training courses (which included subjects such as cooking, child welfare, and housewifery) were the primary focus of learning for girls. Boys on the other hand, were prepared for paid workforce engagement (Simiyu, 2018; Njue et al., 2014; Kanogo, 2005; Ochwada, 1997).

Advancing the rights of girls and women in Kenya can be largely attributed to outspoken efforts by women's organizations who have for several decades challenged patriarchal ideologies. Following Kenya's independence in 1962, women-led efforts progressed in the fight for equal participation in politics in the 1990s, and culminated in the promulgation of a new progressive constitution in 2010 which explicitly recognizes women as a vulnerable group (Pike, 2020).

The Kenyan government's commitment to addressing equal opportunities in education is highlighted in various international and national policies and agreements on gender equality and human rights such as the Dakar Framework of Action on Education for All (2000), the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (2011) and the Constitution of Kenya (2010). Since independence, the government has spearheaded various interventions to promote increased educational opportunities for both boys and girls. These include Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, Free Day Secondary Education in 2008 (FDSE), Low Cost Boarding Schools and Mobile Schools in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), school re-entry for pregnant girls, affirmative action in bursary allocation, and university admission for girls (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2015).

Some research has found that Kenya's educational initiatives have not always worked to reduce gaps. A study on the FPE program, for example, found that though the policy increased primary school completion rates for both genders, there was a larger effect for boys, thus increasing the gender gap in primary school completion rates (this seems to be in part driven by the behavior of boys older than 17, who were more likely to complete primary school than girls of similar age and is also focused on a relatively short time frame following implementation of the policy) (Lucas & Mbiti, 2012).

Still, Kenya has been broadly recognized for its work to advance girls' education (Brookings, 2021; Global Partnership for Education, 2020). Impressive results include in 2011, similar primary school completion rates for girls (73%) and boys (75%) and gross primary school enrollment rates for girls (114%) and boys (115%) and also a national gender parity index of 98% (Rabbani, 2020).

Concerns over whether the education of boys has been overlooked, or even undermined by the emphasis on girls' education have started to emerge in Kenya (Muyaka & Mulenya 2021; Pike, 2020; Chang'ach, 2012). Underpinning these concerns are reports suggesting lower completion rates for boys compared to girls in primary schools and the underperformance of boys in both rural and urban schools. These initial studies appear to focus on specific localities and local records, such as Busia and Kirinyaga counties in the case of Muyaka & Mulenya (2021).

Content analysis of Kenyan online newspapers texts finds that the narrative of Kenya's neglected "boy child" has been present as early as 2000, intensifying around 2010 (Pike, 2019). In some cases, this narrative can be seen as a negative backlash to perceived gains in women's rights, but in others, appears to reflect more genuine concern for boys (Pike, 2019). Also contributing to this debate is the discussion of various gender stereotypes, such as that boys are less interested in studies than girls, but also key factors affecting children's lives such as relative autonomy and the ability to secure income (Chege and Likoye 2015; National Gender and Equality Commission 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and school closures were a dramatic disruption that likely influenced many aspects of education and gender in Kenya. Rigorous analysis of data and trends are still emerging, but at least one study in Kenya has found that comparing COVID-19 and pre-COVID-19 cohorts of adolescents, the pandemic has been associated with higher rate of school dropout, debuted sex, and reported pregnancy (Zulaika et al., 2022). This work builds on an established evidence base that finds that girls can be particularly susceptible to negative shocks such as drought or the death of a parent (Sun & Yao, 2010; Maluccio, Nubler, & Austrian, 2017; Feeny et al., 2021). Less research and attention have focused on how boys' and boys' education might have been affected by the pandemic, or other shocks.

Kenya's Ministry of Education is currently in the process of revising its Education and Training Sector Gender Policy (2015). The policy views gender from a holistic lens, emphasizing the inclusion of boys and men in an understanding of gender:

> The Education Sector Gender Policy is geared towards a human rights based approach, ensuring equal rights to education for boys and girls, men and women…. The policy adopts a wide perspective of equality that includes girls and boys, women and men, rather than a focus on just girls and women (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2015, p.1)

Despite this gender-inclusive definition, only a few studies examining boys' education have been published in the country – leaving stakeholders with very little guidance on how to apply a gender-balanced approach to the formulation and revision of education policies. Emerging concerns over the lack of sufficient evidence on boys' academic underachievement were recently raised by education policymakers during a convening on the review of the above mentioned policy held in early 2023. This signals a growing demand for evidence-informed policymaking in education and an inclusive approach to gender that includes the experiences of both genders in the schooling system and related spheres.

Sample, Data and Methods

Our data were collected as part of a larger research project focused on ElimuLeo, an educational service developed by the NGO Precision Development (PxD) in collaboration with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). ElimuLeo was designed to support children's learning during school closures and was promoted among a sample of 10,000 active users of PxD's agricultural services (typically smallholder farming households located in rural areas). The research project also encouraged primary school teachers to promote ElimuLeo among their students. KICD provided a sample of approximately 9,300 primary school teachers' phone numbers which the project team used to contact primary school teachers to inform them about ElimuLeo, and encourage them to recruit students to use the service. More details on the intervention and accompanying research can be found in Walter, Gray-lobe, and Kabay (2023).

The qualitative aspect of the larger research project was focused on understanding users' experiences and impressions of the ElimuLeo service. It included two types of respondents: caregivers and primary school teachers. The former were recruited from the sample of households directly contacted by PxD as part of the ElimuLeo service. Teachers were recruited from the sample of teachers' phone numbers provided by KICD. In both cases, in order to learn from a variety of user experiences, data generated by the ElimuLeo platform were used to define user profiles: households that frequently and consistently used the service, households that initially used the service but then stopped, households that did not use the service at all, etc. and, similarly, teachers that recruited many students to the platform, teachers that did not recruit any at all, etc. Within each profile, respondents were randomly selected to be contacted for qualitative interviews.

In total, we completed qualitative interviews with 20 respondents from households and 21 primary school teachers. All interviews were conducted over the phone by a Kenyan enumerator, either in English or in Kiswahili. Enumerators were trained on qualitative interviewing and followed a semi-structured interview protocol, one designed for households and one designed for teachers. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the Kiswahili interviews were translated into English.

In addition to discussing the ElimuLeo service, the interviews also addressed the school closures more generally, as well as the return to school. The qualitative interviews were conducted shortly after the return to school following Kenya's pandemic-related school closures. Schools were closed in Kenya from March 2020 until January 2021. Schools were opened from January 2021 to March 2021 and then again closed for end of term holidays, until May 2021. Qualitative interviews were conducted with parents at the end of April, 2021 and with teachers at the beginning of June 2021. Both sets of interviews began with general open-ended questions. Enumerators used prompts and follow up questions to clarify, elicit additional detail, and further investigate respondents' answers.

Parents were asked general questions such as "Can you describe to me how children are spending their time recently (during this period while schools are closed?" and "Is anyone in the household involved in children's educational activities?" Teachers were asked "Can you describe what this past semester was like for you?", "Do you think gender played a role in how

children experienced the school closures?" and "How did children perform this past semester?" This paper is focused on respondents' answers to these questions and related discussion.

Transcripts were reviewed by both authors and using a process of open coding were broken down into data units. Data units were compared across the two authors in order to identify emerging themes and motivate further analysis. The data on teachers provided by KICD included teachers' gender and the sub county in which the school is located, both of which were factored into analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Many teachers believed that the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures were particularly detrimental for girls. Teachers discussed interrelated concerns such as early marriage, elopement, and pregnancy and several highlight the specific cases they observed among the children in their schools:

> *Personally . . . about three examples of the female learners who ended up eloping. Yeah. Though, you try to trace them, the parents also, haven't heard any information of where they are. Not even responsible as such. So, this one [school closures] impacted negatively most, the female gender in as much as our school is concerned.*

> *"[We] saw a big challenge especially on girls [during school closure]. Yeah, we realized five pregnancy cases. So I think the term was long, so these learners had a lot of time interacting, so most girls were affected, in particular. So we had five cases of pregnancy [..] So to me the girls were the ones who were hard hit [by school closure]"*

Other teachers did not mention specific cases, and instead speculated about what might explain girls' dropout and related challenges:

> *Interviewer: So, girls not being able to return to school. What are some of the reasons why they are not able to return to school?*

> *Respondent: Aah maybe. Maybe is in terms of aah…the funding, not funding as such but what we call the homecare from, from the guardians. Maybe some of them they went to…. They dropped out due to pregnancy and other cases.*

Kenya is one of 26 countries in Africa that have "conditional re-entry" policies (Martinez & Odhiambo, 2018). Technically, pregnant girls are allowed to stay in school and then resume their education six months after giving birth. In practice, girls face serious stigma, and other interrelated challenges limit their ability to stay in and/or return to school, a fact recognized by many teachers:

> *[School closures] really affected mostly our girls. You know, a boy, can make a girl pregnant. But the boy will remain the way he was. But the girl, will be pregnant, she will be forced to give birth, when she comes, even the shape has changed. She is inferior. Because some boys will start even throwing some words to her. So, you find that aah, she is not comfortable in school because of the words maybe these boys talk about her.*

As described in the quote above, pregnancy has a clearly disproportionate effect on girls, but it is notable that teachers also presented early marriage and elopement as concerns exclusively for girls. One explanation might be that girls are entering into relationships with older boys and men. Sexual relationships defined by large age and economic asymmetries have long been a critical public health concern in Kenya and across Sub-Saharan Africa. An important theory is that age-mixing in sexual relationships might be a key factor influencing the spread of infectious disease (Ott et al., 2011). However, data on such age-mixing is rare, and some research suggests that in Kenya as well as in other contexts the "sugar daddy" phenomenon is not as prevalent as anecdotal reports might suggest (Luke, 2005; Ott et al., 2011; Wyrod et al., 2011).

In our data, few teachers mentioned girls' partners. Those that did tended to refer to them as "boys," but two respondents suggested possible age asymmetries. One teacher described relationships between boys enrolled in secondary school with girls enrolled in primary school, explaining, "*You find that a form 2 boy has impregnated a class 6 girl. A form 3 boy has impregnated a standard 8 girl.*" Another teacher raised the issue of transactional sex and some of the challenges in particular communities, such as fishing communities, which are influenced by various behavioral and structural factors that lead to high rates of HIV infection, among other issues (Kwena et al., 2019):

> *Some of the parents you see…their…their earning is not that much... So there is this age where learners need food. At the age of twelve to maybe eighteen there. And they can't get this adequate food, however, due to lake region fishers ….some of those fishermen take advantage of them and then due to that little they need to receive. So mostly…ladies, girls are affected because of that. They are living below poverty lines and they could not…parents could not sustain them and their needs are endless"*

While many teachers discussed marriage, elopement, and pregnancy, only two parents brought up these concerns. Both referenced general dynamics, rather than specific cases. Interestingly, one of these two parents, a father, emphasized the role of boys, saying:

> *"Early pregnancies have increased. Now you can't say it is only one gender that committed that sin. They must include both gender, female and male. They must have been both involved."*

It is possible that attention to the particular risks associated with girls' relationships with older partners might overlook the role of boys in dynamics such as early marriage, elopement, and pregnancy.

In Kenya and worldwide, further investigation into the effect of the pandemic and school closures on early marriage and pregnancy will be critical, but increased understanding of longer-term trends for these issues is also important. Widespread reports and news articles in Kenya warned of a "dramatic rise" or "spike" in adolescent pregnancy (Capital News, 2020; Yusuf, 2020; Plan International 2020, Smith, 2020). Analysis of data from the Kenya Health Information Management System did not find evidence of such a trend, though, and instead emphasized that rates of adolescent pregnancy have historically been very high and consistently continue to be very high throughout Kenya (Kahurani, 2020). All research on these issues stresses the incredible importance of supporting girls' wellbeing and safety. Experiences such as early pregnancy have life-long consequences for girls' health, education, and socioeconomic status. In addition, though not present in our data, the role of sexual violence can be a highly relevant factor.

Two more recent studies do find evidence of increases in adolescent pregnancy during the pandemic (Congo et al., 2022), such as a study in Western Kenya that found that compared to previous time periods, female secondary school students had twice the pregnancy risk and were three times more likely to drop out of school if they had been out of school for at least six months during the pandemic (Zulaika et al., 2022). It is unclear whether these dynamics are driven by relationships with older partners or not.

Relationships and related concerns are typically framed only in relation to girls, aligning with the fact that girls often face certain consequences alone, but possible solutions could involve multiple actors. Moving forward, it could be helpful to consider the role of boys. For example, in describing these concerns, one teacher referred to the threat to girls from "school dropouts" saying,

> *"Gender plays a major role because you realize that the girl child is majorly endangered as compared to the boy child, because they mature early and at times they fall prey to the deceptions from some busy bodies or some people like the, the school dropouts and so on, so they majorly, they majorly fall in the hands of some bad boys, who general misadvise and even abuse them."*

This teacher's use of the term "school dropout" potentially suggests that these boys might have faced their own education-related challenges. If programs or policies were able to reduce the number of boys dropping out of school, for example, it is possible that other dynamics might be affected as well. Without dedicated research or attention to the role of boys though, existing theories or explanations are limited.

As illustrated by the quote above which describes girls as "endangered," the data in our study include concrete and specific observations, but also sweeping generalizations. These beliefs were often used to explain observed behavior, for example a teacher describing, *"[Boys] are usually troublesome but not like girls. You know I am a mother and I know boys can overcome but girls are very delicate."* Gender essentialist beliefs were not universally negative though and sometimes were believed to work to girls' educational advantage. A few parents mentioned that girls were more likely to read, study and do educational activities while schools were closed:

Respondent: I see the girl or girls try to spend more time reading books than … boys really love playing football, their game
Interviewer: Why do you think there is that difference in reading between boys and girls?
R: Uhhhh... it is just the way they like.

Similarly, some teachers mentioned that during the return to school, girls were much easier to counsel and support, as in, "Sometimes girls respond faster to counseling. If you tell them now, they respond." Generally, teachers mentioned guidance and counseling as their key strategy for supporting students in the return to school and addressing the many challenges that arose during the school closures. At least two teachers mentioned that even in the case of pregnant girls, counseling was effective and girls were able to return to school and take exams:

In fact one of the parents had sent…had chased the girl from home. So the girl was staying with a neighbor. So we called the guiding and counseling team, then the parent, the father was called. It is the father who was very bitter, he did not want to see the girl. So they talked to the father, the father cried but at last he agreed and allowed the girl to come back to school. The girl surprised us. She got 294 marks.

Girls' ability to perform well academically in spite of recent challenges spoke to one of the most salient and prevalent themes in our data with teachers: their observations that girls were outperforming boys academically:

"The girls were, like in my class, the class eight, the girls were better than the boys. In fact you could find from number, from position one to five you find girls maybe only one boy, for the girls they were above even in grade four. The girls were topped."

"Okay, so for class 8 when we ranked the mean score for girls again we were surprised that the mean score of girls was better than the mean score of boys."

"Interview: And how did children perform this past semester? How did the boys perform and how did the girls perform?
Respondent: Aaah…in our school the girls performed better than the boys. But I can't give the analysis…I did not prepare at all.
Interviewer: Yes.
Respondent: But the girls performed slightly higher than the boys."

Multiple teachers stated that they didn't have an explanation for why girls might be doing better than boys, or whether this was something that was observed just for their school or if broader trends might be considered:

The girls again [are doing better], though the boys are coming but I don't know how I can put it but for boys there is a lot to be done. I don't know if it is from my area or it is the whole country but for boys there is a lot to be done for the boys

> *Interviewer: The girls really performed.*
> *Respondent: Boys are lagging behind, yeah*
> *Interviewer: And why is that?*
> *Respondent: Eeh*
> *Interviewer: Why is that, why are they lagging behind?*
> *Respondent: (Laughing) I don't know. I don't know. Those who are performing*
> *well now are girls*

One teacher even seemed to interpret their school as an aberration, saying that boys do better than girls in education, it's just in her particular school that was not the case:

> *Interviewer: Mmmh. Okay, how did children perform in the last term?*
> *Respondent: Boys performed better than girls.*
> *Interviewer: Mmmmh.*
> *Respondent: However, in our school girls topped.*

Across the 21 teachers that we interviewed, about half believed that girls' educational performance was better than that of boys, with some variation as to whether that was a trend that existed before the pandemic or not. The other half of teachers believed that girls were further behind, especially in the wake of school closures. A key theory for explaining girls' challenges was their household responsibilities and chores. Teachers explained "Because of the environment we are in, you find that most of the girls when they go back home, they are tasked with a lot of duties, fetching firewood, fetching water, a lot of domestic work…. this idea of domestic work being left only to girls" and "In rural setup the girl child is given a lot of work. They tend to be given a lot of responsibilities like they do the house chores, in most cases. Doing the cooking and all that." Due to these tasks and responsibilities, teachers believed girls did not have as much time for educational activities.

These teachers' impressions connect to an established literature across contexts that finds that girls spend more time on domestic chores (Bjorkman-Nyqvist, 2013; Akmal et al., 2020). In our interviews with parents, they did differentiate the types of chores that girls do as compared to boys, for example

> *Interviewer: So, maybe you can separate for me that girls do this work and boys*
> *do this kind of work, something like that.*
> *Respondent: Here girls go to fetch firewood, washing utensils, going to the river*
> *and studying. That's all.*
> *Interviewer: hmmm, and the boys?*
> *Respondent: A boy's work is to look after the cattle. Then he...helps the girls*
> *fetch water from the river then goes to play.*

Parents also recognized that the amount of time children spent doing work and household chores undermined their ability to spend time on education, but did not emphasize one gender over the other in this respect:

Interviewer: Do they spend their time on education when schools are closed?
Respondent: It is very rare.
Interviewer: Hmm.
Reviewer: Because of household chores too.
Interviewer: Household chores.
Respondent: Eeh so someone in the evening will complain that they are tired.
They don't feel like studying. It becomes hard.

Other possible theories or explanations for girls' poor performance, such as an underinvestment in girls' education due to low expectations in future earnings relative to boys (Jensen, 2012; Heath & Mobarak, 2015) were not mentioned. As previously discussed, some parents felt that girls were more likely to spend time on education, but generally presented interest and aptitude for education equally. A few parents discussed preferences by subject, but even pushed back on the interpretation of their own observations. One father for example described, "Mostly, most boys will like working with mathematics. Mostly and then you will find the girls like maybe language, yeah so that's my ...my experience there" but later clarified "It's just a personal issue because mm... if you look at for example girls' schools, girls boarding high school. We have some very good girls who are doing well in mathematics. So we cannot say it's a gender issue. That one is just personal." There is some research in Kenya that finds that boys do better on mathematics (Ngware et al., 2012; Ng'ang'a et al., 2018)

While the narratives around girls and the challenges they face emerged very clearly in relation to domestic chores and sexual and reproductive health, it seemed like various stakeholders were speculating about the challenges facing boys. Teachers in particular relied on generalizations, never mentioning specific cases. Around the world, a number of frameworks have emerged to better understand boys' educational underperformance, relying on theories such as intersectionality to examine how low levels of academic achievement for boys interlink with several vectors of disadvantage such as socio-economic status and ethnicity (see for example, USAID, 2016). Other theories draw attention to key conceptual frameworks of social norms, such as hegemonic masculinity and 'laddishness" (see World Bank, 2021). Many of our interviews with teachers reflected these themes.

As previously discussed, the idea that counseling is more effective for girls was presented as an explanation for boys underperformance by teachers:

> *A boy child was mostly affected [by school closures], if you look at our school*
> *when you look at the academic performance first, we have found that most of the*
> *boys were behind while the girl child has really tried to show up in terms of*
> *academics. And again, in the program when we were trying to try to do guidance*
> *and counseling, we have found that the boys have become somehow rude*
> *maybe drugs have also affected them due to this long holiday that they were just*
> *at home and nobody was caring for them, nobody was looking at aah! What time*
> *or where are they spending their time? Yeah.*

The concept of hegemonic masculinity encompasses a set of social norms (for example, emphasizing sexuality, physical strength, and social dominance) that can sometimes be seen to be in opposition to the behavior conducive for academic success. Conversely, educational practices and activities such as reading can be characterized as effeminate (World Bank, 2021, p.23). The perceived "feminization" of the school environment has been presented as a factor contributing to the under participation of boys in education in other contexts (Davis and Hay 2018; Carrington and McPhee 2008).

Teachers from our study reported that several boys rebelled against school and this reaction could be viewed as a tactic to preserve a hegemonic masculine status. Gainful employment and access to money was more attractive and masculine, and the less appealing studious boy imagery was likely affiliated with a subsidiary form of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity also regulates the behavior of boys and girls in school settings. It can reinforce images associating girls with exemplary traits such as academic excellence and self-efficacy on one hand, and boys with more negative connotations on the other (Jha et al., 2017).

> *Boys are lagging behind, yeah [...] Those who are performing well now are girls. Boys, boys have a lot of games [...] some had forgotten [about their studies], in the process of bringing them to school, girls were able to catch up fast than boys. [...] So, there were indiscipline cases. Like there was theft. Then bullying, bullying, bullying was either someone have done something, they have stolen something from me, I have been beaten. It was there. So, most, it was experienced in the boy's dormitory. But for the girls it was just minimum.*

> *Okay it's like they were in peer groups and they were involved in things like..cigarette smoking, alcohol and things of the sort. Even the behavior in terms of their social life because there was like…there was a lot of freedom and there was nothing like controlled measure on them and that made them to do things and that really impacted on their performance. So I said that boys, their behavior was totally different from girls [...] But for boys you know the pressure, so they wanted… it's like they thought the atmosphere is for them and they compared themselves to grown-ups now. So they thought they were adults. For boys. And that really was a big issue in terms of their behavior. So boys they really disturbed and some thought that they had reached a stage that they can marry, they can do what they want after…at any given time. So for boys it was a…a big challenge*

School counseling sessions attempted to steer boys to academic success, but none of the teacher narratives compellingly signaled whether a gendered approach to counseling was implemented to deconstruct these harmful forms of masculinity. Much of teachers' language aligns with the notion of "laddishness" (Butt, Weedon & Wood, 2004) - a negative variation of masculinity which Jackson (2010) argues encourages disruptive behavior and resistance to authority, particularly in the school environment.

Laddish behavior can negatively affect relationships between teachers and students, as well as expectations and behaviors in the class and school environments (Jha et al., 2017). However,

Younger and Cobbett (2014) caution against drawing too much attention to this notion because stereotypical explanations can at times be misleading and mask challenges faced by boys who are genuinely underachieving in education. Teachers especially play a crucial role in shaping gender norms at school and boys may lack sufficient support if hegemonic masculinity and laddish notions pervade the school environment (World Bank, 2021).

In our study, education for girls was elevated in narratives, teachers appeared to be better equipped to tackle pandemic-associated challenges relating to girls; with counseling sessions playing an instrumental role in encouraging, mentoring and providing safe spaces for pregnant girls to return to school, as much as these challenges still appeared to have serious consequences for many girls. Teachers' perceptions and actions during the COVID-19 crisis were influenced by well-established interventions targeting girls even prior to the pandemic. As highlighted in the previous section, discourses on advancing girls schooling are dominant and mainstream in Kenya. Dominant or influential discourses propagate what Weedon (1997) refers to as "common-sense knowledge" so that it appears "natural, obvious and therefore true" (p.74) to support girls more than boys in the case of Kenya.

A few teachers believed that it was actually this attention to girls that has resulted in boys' underperformance. As with all previous themes, these concerns were mentioned by both male and female teachers

> *"Focus is given to the female gender [leaving] the male gender to be sidelined. [...] Much focus is given to the female gender compared to the male gender. This one has led to… I mean poor performance in terms of class activities of the boy-child."*

> *"Now the girls are performing well than boys [..] because this time there is a lot of monitoring for girl-child and people are not.. they have neglected these boys and they, they have come up with another… there are so many organizations favoring girls for example with have this Wasichana Wote Wafaulu program it is just there, they are enlightening girl child and this boy child I think something must be done."*

These narratives reflect an emerging discourse in Kenya concerning the "plight of the boy-child" (Chang'ach, 2012, p.181) and provide additional explanations as to why teachers appeared to be ill-equipped to manage "troublesome" or underachieving boys. Narratives of blame towards parents and caregivers was a recurring theme. Teachers blame parents for "*neglecting their duties*" by "*leaving the bulk of the work to the teachers*" or "*the learners themselves*" and sometimes deprioritizing learning by expecting children to skip school and help out at home or "*look for some kind of work to do so that they can get their daily bread*". Aligning with arguments linking educational achievement with parental level of education, teachers in our study often tied these negative parental behaviors and attitudes to parental illiteracy. Parental engagement in general, has been associated with positive academic outcomes for students and for boys in particular, the engagement of fathers has been linked to educational development (Doherty et al. 2015; Clark, 2009).

The clearest narrative to emerge concerning boys' educational challenges was related to economic activity. Several teachers in our study reported that many boys ventured into the "boda boda" or motorbike taxi business during school closures, with a small number also engaging in paid farm work activities to offset poverty associated with the pandemic.

> *Yeah, but the percentage of those who were affected [by school closure], more were boys than girls [...] The challenges that they were facing, one, you find now that at home, they were now forced to, to get into income generating activities. The motorbike issue. And now for sometime, they had got into that particular activity and, and now you find that they were used to getting money. So, coming back to school in an environment whereby they were not earning anything was kind of a challenge. So, keeping them in school was also a problem because the mind had already been set into making money. Yes, so now again tuning their mind into get back to school where they can be here for almost eight hours without earning anything and going home knowing they are only depending on the parents.*

> *[referring to boys] "So, they were happy that they were getting some money from the motorbike. So, in school they are not going to get anything. You find them, they prefer even going back home. In order to at least get something from the motorbike. Some even started planting these tree seedlings. And getting something from it. So, they felt that going to school might be as useless as possible"*

According to these narratives, school resumption was perceived by boys as an interruption to their economic freedom and thus a threat to their newly acquired masculine identity. In low-income economies and poor communities such as those included in our study, children and in particular boys - who have more income generating opportunities than girls - can be an economic resource for poor parents. As a consequence, parents depend on children's labor earnings to cushion themselves during harsh economic situations (Ahmed and Ray 2011). These observations align with the finding of Buhl-Wiggers, Jones & Thornton (2021) that gender gaps favoring girls tend not to exist in areas where there is high female child labor force participation.

Conclusions

Interviews with teachers and parents in Kenya following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closures highlighted complex, dynamic, and challenging narratives concerning gender and education. First, the importance of girls' safety and wellbeing cannot be overstated. Early marriage, elopement, and pregnancy were relevant concerns for girls and girls' education before the pandemic and will continue to be relevant after the pandemic. Girls face unique threats and factors that influence their ability to engage meaningfully in educational opportunities.

Recognizing that challenges facing boys and girls can be interrelated, and also that boys face their own unique challenges does not indicate that boys and girls must be in competition for educational resources or that the need to work to ensure access to meaningful and quality education for girls and women no longer exists (World Bank, 2021). More research is needed to

better understand boys' experiences in and out of school and the roots of both high achievement and underperformance across both genders. Recognizing the complexity of gender gaps, and their variation across contexts, educational subjects, and educational levels, as well as their disconnect from later labor force outcomes and related issues will be important moving forward.

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