GENDER AND THE RETURN TO SCHOOL IN KENYA

Authors: Sarah Kabay and Victoria Kiasyo Isika

Presenter: Victoria Kiasyo Isika
Associate Director of Policy, Innovations for Poverty Action
Structure of Presentation

● Brief overview of study objectives & methodology
● Summary of key findings
● Recommendations
Study objectives

- Our qual research is part of a larger study
- Larger study aimed to develop & test a mobile phone intervention called ElimuLeo to support maths learning among primary-school-aged children in Kenya during school closures
- This study gave us the opportunity to include qualitative investigation more broadly to understand children’s lives during school closures and the return to school from a gender lens
Objectives of the qualitative study
To understand:
- caregivers’ and teachers’ gendered perceptions of school closures and return to school*

Semi-structured Interviews
Interviews conducted shortly after the return to school following COVID-19 school closures**
Caregivers from 20 hhs interviewed in late Apr ’21
21 primary school teachers interviewed early June ‘21

Qualitative data analysis
Transcripts were reviewed & analyzed by both authors (Oct ‘22 – June ’23)
The authors used a process of open-coding
Data units were compared to identify emerging themes
Summary of key findings

1) Concerns for girls in education - early marriage & pregnancy
1) Findings on girls’ academically outperforming boys
1) Reasons associated with girls’ outperformance
1) Findings on boys academic underachievement
1) Reasons associated with boys’ academic underachievement
1) Concern for early marriage and pregnancy

- Many teachers expressed concern that girls’ experiences of early marriage and pregnancy increased during the pandemic and mentioned specific girls at their school.
- Some research in Kenya supports these impressions (Zulaika et al., 2022) but these trends can be difficult to investigate.
- For instance, analysis of data from Kenya’s Health Information System did not find evidence of a dramatic increase, instead noting that these rates are typically high in Kenya (Kahurani, 2020).
2) Girls academically outperformed boys

- Despite the concerns for girls, many teachers believed that girls’ educational performance was better than boys.

- It was unclear whether this was a general trend or unique to their school.

- Varied responses as to whether this trend existed before or during the pandemic.
An example of how some teachers discussed this issue:

Respondent: 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
3) Reasons for girls academic achievement

- No clear theories as to why girls performed better were provided.
- But possible explanations include:
  - Girls (including pregnant girls) responding faster/positively to guidance and counseling during school resumption (relative to boys)
  - Respondents believed that girls were intrinsically interested in studies and activities such as reading at home than boys (including during lockdown)
4) Boys academically underachieving

- Most respondents expressed deep concern for boys academic progress during school resumption

- Several theories or reasons associated with this observation
5) Reasons for boys’ academic underachievement

● Several boys participated in gainful employment during pandemic.

● Hence, access to money was more attractive when school resumed.

● Money made boys feel more masculine, thus, the studious boy imagery less appealing.

● But, parents/caregivers also played a negative role - some deprioritized learning, expecting boys to skip school to supplement hh income.
5) Reasons for boys’ academic underachievement (cont.)

- Boys less responsive to school guidance and counseling sessions.
  - Teachers seemed better equipped to tackle pandemic-associated challenges relating to girls e.g mentoring, encouraging pregnant girls by providing safe learning spaces
  - But less equipped to handle struggles unique to boys e.g drugs/alcohol abuse etc
  - Unclear whether a gendered approach to counseling was applied e.g to deconstruct harmful masculinity
5) Reasons for boys’ academic underachievement (cont.)

- Some teachers cited investment in girls’ education in Kenya before and during the pandemic as a reason for boys declining performance:

  “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…."

- Large investments in girls’ education can provide additional explanations for why teachers felt less equipped to support “troublesome” or underachieving boys
Conclusion

- Boys face unique challenges in education which should be addressed
- More research is needed to better understand boys' experiences in/out of school & how this correlates with their academic performance
- Recognizing that boys face unique challenges in education:
  - Does not mean that boys and girls must be in competition for educ resources (World Bank, 2021)
  - Can & should be done w/out undermining the importance of girls’ safety & wellbeing in education
  - Should be done w/out ignoring the unique challenges experienced by girls before, during and after the pandemic e.g early marriages and pregnancies
Contact Us

www.poverty-action.org

vkisika@poverty-action.org

skabay@poverty-action.org