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## **Mapping the Challenges Facing the Girl-Child in Secondary Schools in Southwestern Kenya**

Dr. Joel Abaya\*

*Wichita State University*

Jane Moraa Ochoki\*\*

*Tangaza University College*

### **Abstract**

Conducted in Southwestern Kenya, this narrative case study highlights the manifestation and causes of gender parity in secondary schools. Four girls, purposively selected were interviewed using open ended questionnaires. Data analysis was done using Kohler Reissman's five levels of narrative analysis. Findings show that the girl child in Southwestern Kenya faces hindrances in accessing secondary education at home, at school and within the community thus exacerbating gender parity in secondary schools. It is recommended that school leaders employ more female teachers to act as role models, ensuring that the school environment is safe and sensitize the communities on the importance of educating their children. Policy makers are challenged to develop and implement initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty and contextualized leadership preparation programs.

**Keywords:** *Girl-Child, Maasai, Southwestern Kenya, Gender Parity, Secondary Education, Kisii*

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\* Dr. Joel Abaya is Assistant Professor in Counseling, Educational Leadership, Educational and School Psychology (CLES). Wichita State University, 1845 Fairmount, Wichita, KS 67260. Email: [joel.abaya@wichita.edu](mailto:joel.abaya@wichita.edu)

\*\* Jane Moraa Ochoki is a lecturer at Christ the Teacher Institute for Education, Tangaza University College P.O Box 15055-00509 Langata, Nairobi, Kenya. Email: [j\\_ochoki@yahoo.com](mailto:j_ochoki@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

Education is widely seen as one of the most promising paths to realize better, more productive lives and as drivers of national economic development. Education was listed as a fundamental human right by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The support for this assertion by the Kenyan government was by appending its signature to the Education For All (EFA) passed in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the World Education Forum in Dakar Senegal in 2000 and subsequent policy documents over the years. In *Kenya's Educational Sector Strategic Plan and Implementation Matrices: 2003-2007*, the Government of Kenya (GoK) confirms her commitment to eliminate poverty as a hindrance to educational development and promote human rights through provision of education (Achoka, Odebero, Maiyo, & Mualuko, 2007).

However, voicing support of a declaration is not same as achieving it. Albeit education being touted as a human right, millions of girl-children around the world continue facing persistent discriminatory practices (Rafferty, 2013) that cause gender parity in education.

According to *The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2013 On Promoting Gender Equality*, girls continued to face high barriers to schooling in Northern Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia in secondary education thus making the girl child discriminated, excluded and invisible (Ki-moon, 2013). Research on the state of the girl-child's access to and successful completion of secondary education highlight the widespread antifeminist practices tethered on culture and tradition that give preferential treatment to boys. In South East Asia for instance, this preferential treatment of boys over girls is rooted in the low value placed on females; in Africa the prejudice is about gender and sexuality (Houston, 2004). The girl-child in a typical African society is repressed by male dominance, controlled by traditional perceptions of a woman, and abused by the time-honored customs of her community (Kandiyoti, 1988). Indeed in many African countries, social-cultural practices continue to be a major hindrance to education for the girl-child (Hanemann, 2005).

In Kenyan secondary schools the girl-child faces a myriad of challenges that hinder access and successful completion of that level of education. For instance, the apparent negative attitude towards the female students through use of bad language, description of physical appearance of the girls, lack of tuition fee, and gender bias in terms of gender roles and responsibilities have been reported as factors that hinder the girl child's pursuit of secondary education (Keraita, 2014). These were findings were from studies many of them conducted at the primary. A few of the studies conducted in secondary schools were in contexts different from the study area or focused on different phenomena. It is our contention that lack of studies primarily focused on secondary schools located in the study area or those on the gender parity and access to the girl-child's secondary education creates a knowledge gap that we hope to fill through this research. We acknowledge existence of contextual unique characteristics that might distinguish one situation from another in close proximity do influence the manifestation of a phenomenon thus the need to consider localized differences and contextualizing parity. Consequently, in an attempt to understand the contextualized

characteristics that influence the girl-child's access to and successful completion of secondary education, the following questions were developed to guide the study;

1. What factors influence access and successful completion of secondary by the girl child in Southwestern Kenya?
2. What possible initiatives can secondary school principals put in place to improve the completion rates of the girl-child in Southwestern Kenya?

### **Literature Review**

Conventionally, education has been portrayed as a valuable human resource perceived by many as a panacea for sustainable national development, so much so that the United Nations (UN) has classified education as a fundamental human right. In section, we present a brief review of literature that informs our study mainly the importance of education, state of women education and factors that hinder the girl-child from accessing and acquiring secondary.

### **Importance of Education**

The widely accepted notion of how important it is to have an education is rarely challenged. Indeed the presumed importance of education has seen it being categorized by the UN as a 'basic human right'. Even ancient philosophers Aristotle and Plato thought education was central to the moral fulfilment of individuals and the well-being of the society (Carr, 2011). According to literature, life expectancy is strongly associated with (Dowd & Hamoudi, 2015). Individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to be affected by poverty (Onsomu, Kosimbei, & Ngware, 2006) are generally more likely to portray greater satisfaction in life (Ramirez, 2014), actively engage in civic activities, trust others and have faith in the functioning of public institutions than those with lower levels of educational attainment. In many countries, education is generally regarded as the key to national development (Kanu, 2007) and one of the most promising paths for individuals to realize better, more productive lives.

Even though research attests to the advantages of having an education and despite the efforts by Kenyan government to ensure that every child is educated, there is even more literature highlighting the multifarious challenges faced by many girl-children in accessing and successfully completing secondary education access to education (Abuya, Oketch, & Musyoka, 2013). Several studies on access to basic education in Kenya (Gatheru, 2008; Kasandi, Judith, & Akumu, 2008) as well as on drop out (Morara & Chemwei, 2013) attest that girls' bleak chances of accessing and successfully completing secondary education are considerably less than those of boys. Whereas there was a marked increase in school enrolment in 2003, immediately after the introduction of free primary education in Kenya (Karogo & Orodho, 2014), the same could not be said of secondary education in 2008. Since the increase in primary cycle was as a result of tuition abolition, we can confidently hypothesis that financial constraints greatly influenced school attendance at the primary level. However, even with the abolition of tuition in secondary cycle, the surge in enrolment was not as marked as in the primary cycle. This alludes to different factors being in play with respect to access, enrolment and successful completion at the secondary cycle. According to research, restraints at the secondary level include;

effect of conflicts poor public school performance in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE), Lack of information, financial barriers (Malachi, 2011).

**Women's Education:**

When discussing the benefits of having an education, there is a likelihood of assuming that society in general enjoys these benefits uninterrupted. However reality and experience informs us that these benefits are not automatic nor are they available to everyone (Rose & Rose, 2012) as the gap between accessing education and the potential beneficiaries continues to persist. While these preventive and inhibitive challenges might be context specific or educational level specific, female learners face challenges throughout the various education cycles as learners (Nussbaum, 2014). Indeed extensive research confirms that investing in girls' education delivers high returns not only for female educational attainment, but also for maternal and children's health (Nyamukapa & Gregson, 2005), more sustainable families , women's empowerment , democracy, income growth , and productivity (Dollar & Gatti, 1999) . As regards education and income growth, empirical research notes that providing girls one extra year of education beyond the average boosts eventual wages by 10–20 percent (Psacharopoulos, 2014).

**Secondary Education:**

Even though secondary school education plays a key role in providing the youth with opportunities to acquire human capital that enables them to pursue higher education and higher labor market productivity (Gatta, Ngware, Onsomu, Muthaka, & Manda, 2006) the expansion and access to secondary education in Kenya is still very low. According to Mwiria (1997), literate women are more likely to promote the education of their children, more access formal employment, serve as role models for their children and girls in general, and lower infant mortality.

A number of studies conducted in Kenya have so far focused on many aspects of secondary education such as implementation of free secondary education (Chabari, 2010; Moranga, 2013), financing secondary education (Ntseto, 2009), compliance of safety standards in secondary schools (Ng'ang'a, 2013), poverty and quality education (Mualuko, 2007), school reform (Amukowa, 2013), and student performance (Nyatuka & Nasongo, 2010; Wanjiku, 2013)..All these studies confirm that secondary school access in Kenya remains low despite the recent reductions in secondary school fees. While the increased availability of bursaries (e.g. from the Constituency Development Fund(CDF) have provided many families with financial assistance, the pressing burden of secondary school fees prevent many students from attending secondary schools. These financial barriers are especially important for females and vulnerable groups such as orphans, and the poor. The continued poor public school performance in the KCPE and the increased social stratification in the secondary school system, where high performing private primary school students attend private secondary schools, has negatively impacted the public secondary school system in the long-run. There is ample evidence that secondary education can play a catalytic role in empowering girls with the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to make qualitative improvements to their lives. Consequently there is need to renew commitment to and mobilizing support for, secondary education for girls.

## **Socio-Culture and Traditions**

Tradition is a set of beliefs, practices, teachings, and modes of thinking that are inherited from the past and that may guide, organize, and regulate ways of living and of making sense of the world (Kanu, 2007). Within communities, traditional beliefs influence how girls are valued, expectations and constraints placed on them. Pressures to conform to social norms and cultural expectations influence heavily on a girl's life trajectory (Hechter & Opp, 2001)

In addition to tradition and culture, life in the rural areas also presents another perspective to a girl's secondary education. According to Byamugisha, 2011, more demands are made on them to perform household tasks and initiation rites are conducted around this time thus becoming a transition period for many girls as they take on additional roles, identities and duties as prescribed by culture and tradition. In Malawi for example girls are withdrawn permanently from school after initiation rites (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003), because they are considered women and ready to get married. In some instances, the girl child is valued as an object for economic exchange as parents expect to be paid dowry in exchange for their daughters in marriage.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Sometimes referred to as equity, gender parity is defined most frequently as a balance in terms of amount, status, or character. So, gender parity in schooling would mean that boys and girls have the opportunity to receive the same amount and kind of education (Wiseman, 2008) the equal participation of boys and girls in different aspects of education (Subrahmanian, 2005). Systems where gender parity exists would enroll boys and girls in schools of the same type and at the same rate. Gender parity indicators, measure the numbers of girls and boys with access to, and participating in education, at a particular moment of time; serve as dynamic indicators of change (Connell, 2014). Gender parity indicators can signal whether social forces maybe shifting to allow greater access of girls to schooling, enabling them to catch up with boys in an important dimension of life opportunity.

## **Methodology**

Narrative inquiry examines human lives through the lens of a narrative, honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013) and through stories we can fully enter another's life (Coles, 2014). In order to understand the lived experiences of the maasai girl-child in Southwestern Kenya with regard to secondary school education, we used a narrative approach. Four girls; Diamond, Ruby, Emerald and Opal were purposively selected to participate in this study. In Kenya, secondary education takes four years to complete. Each level is referred to as a 'form' thus form 1 is the first level and form 4 is the last level. Participant 1-Diamond, eighteen years old and in form 4, had been married off after undergoing a traditional rite of passage. She described her one year of marriage a 'disaster'. Participant 2- Ruby was in form 3, had been in a polygamous marriage with the local chief. She described her experience as 'unfulfilling' and 'stressful'. Participant 3, Fifteen year old Emerald, was in form two, and had recently undergone the traditional rite of passage. She described herself as 'being in limbo'

and under great pressure to get married. Participant 4-, Sixteen year-old Opal is in form one, hoped to be a doctor. She described her school life as a ‘daily struggle’

Data collection was through a 60 to 90 minutes long unstructured and open ended interviews conducted in the principal’s office. With their permission all the interviews were audio recorded. We utilized Kohler Reissman’s (1993) (Riessman, 1993) five levels of narrative analysis- attending, telling, transcribing, analyzing, and reading- to analyze the interview data. In applying Reisman’s method, we first asked the participants to describe their feelings, thoughts and experiences with being unable to access their secondary education and dropping out of school due to these challenges. Then, beyond noticing, the next levels telling, we focused on telling about the experience, and later transcribing the experience, and analyzing the transcription by assigning meaning to aspects of the experience. Finally, at the last stage, reading we went through with the participants on the last stages. The participants were at liberty to accept, refute or deny our final analysis.

To ensure validity of our research, we used multiple sources of information instead of just one source. We also had member checks by having our participants evaluate our conclusions and keeping a detailed record of data collection and the rationale of all the decisions we made while in the field.

## **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this research was to highlight challenges encountered by the girl-child in accessing and successfully completing secondary education in Southwestern Kenya. Four participants purposively selected were interviewed and data analysis indicated that the hindrances faced by the girl child are located at home, at school and on the self. In the following section we present in detail challenges faced by the girl child along the south western borderlands of Kenya in her pursuit of secondary education.

### **Challenges Facing the Girl-Child At Home**

Based on our thesis that education is not limited exclusively to learning activities within the confines of the school, we aver that even at home the learners engage in activities that enhance, encourage or eases up the process started at school. Examples of such activities would include revision and completion of school work at home, or even gathering materials to be used at school during learning. Respondents shared with us situations and conditions at home that at best can be described as competing for time with education.

**Acculturation:** Data analysis confirmed that the girl child while at home was at the mercy of tradition and culturally framed demands and expectations that competed with their time and attention. Traditionally girls take charge of the house chores such as cooking, searching for firewood, tending cattle, taking care of young siblings and grazing family cattle. Given that southwestern Kenya is located on the border zone between two traditionally sworn enemies; ethnic violence is a common occurrence. Tradition and culture demand that during times of war, women and girls act as porters at the frontlines thus missing out of school. As a result, ‘numerous’ girls dropped out of school, got into early marriages and even some had lost their lives as they were exposed to dangers of war.

**Socio-economic status:** In describing the economic status of their family respondents used terms such as ‘extremely poor’, ‘struggling’, ‘living a day at a time’ and ‘barely surviving. The effect of high levels of poverty as described by the participants was manifested in the inability to purchase books, pens and pencil on the one hand and pay tuition. The respondents also said that they were unable to pay for the lunch programs as well as holiday tuition. Unable to pay lunch meant that many girls attended afternoon classes hungry while some, unable to bear the pangs of hunger became truant. Many girls also missed school for long periods after being sent home due to fee problem.

**Parental involvement:** When asked whether their parents played any supportive role in their education, all respondents said ‘no’ and added that none ever inquired about their academic progress. None of the parents was involved in buying books required by the school, paying for extra private tuition, assisting with homework, participating in career choices, and school visits. From this information, and even after seeking clarification, evidently along the south western borders of Kenya, parental support for the girl-child learners was nonexistent.

**Pressure at home:** The practice of bride price and the perception of it being a potential source of wealth for many families within the study area, presented another challenge to the girl-child. From our data, the prospect of acquiring wealth in form of a bride price had become a death knell to the girl-child’s dream for secondary education. Consequently the pressure to marry off their daughter intensified with poverty. According to all the participants, they confirmed that they had been pressured to marry.

### **School Based Challenges**

In Southwestern Kenya, the school yard had become a site of frustrations to the girl child as her attaining secondary education became more and more elusive.

**Unfairness in financial aid allocation:** Our participants shared their frustrations and eventual denial of any financial aid in form of bursaries and the Constituency Development Fund (CDF).It emerged there was a deliberate attempt by those disbursing these monies to deny female applicants. Talking about this denial, Ruby shared that she heard some committee members argue that funding her (and all the girls) education was ‘a waste of money’ as she would marry away and thus benefit the community of her spouse. As a result of being denied these funds financial burden on the already poor parents increased leading to a domino effect. For instance, the respondents were sent home on many occasions missing many school days thus potentially performing poorly academically. Also this meant that the girl child would not buy the necessary books, uniforms and writing materials and pay for school meals.

**Negative classroom experiences:** On their relationship with teachers, the respondents said most of the teachers were ‘bad to me’ and ‘called me names’ or demeaning names such as ;‘mama’, a name connoting ‘old’, ‘aged’ or ‘elderly’ in the local dialect. Opal shared how some students used to refer to her as ‘*mathe*’ slang for an ‘old woman’. Another example was with reference to using her (and her friends) as examples of negative attributes. Diamond informed us that during lessons on

family life, sexuality or adulthood, many teachers used her as an example causing her immense embarrassment and discomfort. To minimize this discomfort she mostly avoided any activity in class that would draw attention to herself and consequently becoming an introvert and a loner.

**Low teacher expectations:** Teachers had and expressed very low academic expectations female learners. Based on the cultural perception of women as ‘service providers’ and ‘inferior to men’, our respondents explained that they had been told they were ‘wasting their time in school’. On several occasions they had been conveniently reminded that ‘no woman has ever completed secondary school’ and ‘you do not need secondary education to be a good wife’. She related a recent incidence where she had been reminded that ‘women cannot comprehend mathematics’.

**Tracking in Career subjects:** The participants informed us that at the end of form two, they had to select subjects related to their desired careers. However most times the girls were tracked in to ‘art subjects’ as opposed to science subjects. Even though the girls wanted to take mathematics, chemistry and biology and language electives the teachers proceeded to substituting them with history, geography, home science and agriculture. On inquiry, the careers masters advised them to be realistic for as a women they needed to take home improvement careers for that’s where their calling was meant to be!

**Difficult daily schedule:** In the study area a school day starts at 6am and ends close to 7pm.

Students were expected to be in class at 6am to take part in a mandatory ‘morning preps’ an activity sanctioned and authorized by the school. But the expectation that the girls do home chores in the morning before school and evening after school, became an impediment because they were always late and missed all prep lessons and had to leave school early in order to get home in time to prepare supper as expected and required by tradition.

### **Personal Challenges**

Personal factors were also a challenge to the girl-child’s pursuit of secondary education within the study area. Some of the personal factors that were determined to at play within the study area are highlighted below:

**Peer pressure:** Amongst southwestern Kenya communities the concept of ‘age group’ and ‘age sets’ form an important part of community life. An age group comprises all girls within a 5-yearage difference. It is a traditional and cultural requirement that members of an age group move as a cohort in terms of marriage. The participants had not fallen out with their age group and so they were under pressure from their cohort members to marry lest they are shunned branded as a sellout, a failure, a bad influence, a rebel, an embarrassment and a pariah. In addition the participants were also under peer pressure to ‘prove’ themselves; were informed it entailed a girl deliberately being becoming pregnant, engaging in illicit sexual affairs with mature boys within the community and taking of alcohol

**Low Self Esteem:** The gendered view of women as inferior to men in the community made the girl child in the study area perceive herself as 'worthless'. The respondents noted they saw no reason of going to school because as Opal put it, 'I will end up as a housewife anyway'. This defeatist resolve was reinforced by their parent's adamant refusal to pay tuition fees after their initiation and intentionally forcing them towards marriage. As a result Ruby said, 'School is a routine that has neither meaning nor purpose'. While Diamond said she was contented to 'get by' with minimum effort. Low self-esteem was a consequent of many factors making the girl child feel 'worthless', substandard, cheap and valueless.

### **Community Based Challenges**

Further data analysis, confirmed some challenges situated within the community negatively impacted access and successful completion of secondary education of the girl-child. These factors are discussed in detail below:

**Distance from school:** When asked on average the distance between home and school, Diamond responded 'very far', Ruby 'beyond' those hills'. From a map of the area, we established that the shortest distance from the homes of any of the four participants was 5km making it a 45 minute walk. By the time they got to school they were 'very tired' 'drained', and 'sweaty' making them uncomfortable and drastically affecting their level of engagement and concentration in class. Trekking late in the evening or at dawn exposed the girls to attempted abductions, sexual and physical harassment. All participants said they were in 'a scared mode' at times returning home midway to school or arriving school later in the day because of seeking alternative routes to school.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

The purpose of this study was to highlight the challenges in access to secondary education encountered by the secondary school girl-child in Southwestern Kenya and suggest possible initiatives that might enhance gender parity. With reference to the girl-child of Kenya, Pichi, (2012) asserts the rationale for advocating for girl education is indisputable as it translates into lower infant and maternal mortality, smaller and healthier families, higher agricultural productivity, higher per capita income, the single most effective preventive weapon against HIV/AIDS. More fundamentally, education is a right for both girls and boys. Despite the documented benefits of educating the girl-child there are pockets of communities in Kenya who have consciously or unconsciously placed barriers on the path of the girl-child's search for a secondary education. Findings from this study confirm that there are such near insurmountable hindrances for the girl-child in Southwestern Kenya. It is our informed opinion the hindrances are a manifestation of systemic chronic poverty and deep seated culturally revered traditions in the study area. Thus any efforts to liberate the girl child in south western should expressly focus on these two broad areas.

### **Effects of Poverty and Educational Parity in Southwestern Kenya**

The level of poverty in Kenya is well documented. According to Achoka et al., (2007), by 1994, 44% of Kenya's total population lived under the poverty line and by 2002; the level had risen to 56%. According to Watkins, (2006) four out of Kenya's eight provinces recorded an increase in poverty levels while the level of Kenyans

living in abject poverty deepened. The national poverty situation is still described as gloomy (Kristjanson, Mango, Krishna, Radeny, & Johnson, 2010). Mapping the areas where poverty levels recorded a marked increase were also characterized with remoteness, poor road network, lack of production technology, storage capacities, and fluid cash among others (Achoka et al., 2007). As a result, most residents of these regions also suffer from food shortages, lack medical care and clean habitats (Belle Doucet, 2003). Children from such regions are pre-disposed to disadvantaged access to education due to financial impoverishments of their parents (Achoka et al., 2007; Ruto, Ongwenyi, & Mugo, 2010).

While there may be other hindrances in other regions of Kenya, we argue that within the study area in addition to being remote and prone to sporadic ethnic violence, it is also characterized with a poor infrastructure. As a result, the level of economic activities is subsistence. As a result, financial decisions regarding expenditure focus on meeting basic needs while education is not a priority. Further, potential parental support for the girl-child is negatively impacted as parents spend more of their time engaging in labor intensive subsistence activities. We aver that the pressure exerted on the girl-child to marry is one way that parents use to try and improve their economic status while also reducing the pressure at home as the girl moves out of the household. The effects of poverty were also felt in the school as bursaries were 'rationed' and channeled to very few recipients. The inability of the schools to stock their libraries, hire more trained teachers to provide a wider curriculum is also a manifestation of high levels of poverty. Since most of the monies spent in the schools accrue mainly from tuition payments made to the schools by the parents, a reduction in money at home impacts the money available to the school. As a result the girl child is exposed to a curriculum that requires minimum expenditure and cheap local untrained teachers. It is such local teachers who fail to differentiate the boundaries between school and communities and so extend negative community politics into the school.

**Number of schools and poverty:** Location and accessibility of schools has been identified as a major factor in determining a girls' ability to attend school. Research has shown that distance impedes school enrollment, with some researchers arguing that female schooling maybe more sensitive to physical distance to school due to safety concerns (McDonald, 2008). Indeed building schools close to girls' homes boosts enrollments (Herz & Sperling, 2004). However since schools in the study area are solely built by community through self-help or 'Harambee' (Keller, 2011) we argue that poverty levels in the study area have negatively impacted the construction of many schools thus the distance in between individual schools is still prohibitive to the girl-child necessitating walking over long distances to and from school. In such excruciating conditions the girl-child in the study area has to navigate through rugged terrains infested with 'wild animals, men trying to woo her into pre-marital sexual relations, possible attack from wild animals, weather elements, 'knowing glances and discouraging remarks from her peers' on a daily basis. In addition the girl-child often has to go the whole day without a decent meal because they of nonpayment of lunch fee.

**Role models at school:** In much gender parity research there is reference to the immense importance of initiating girl-friendly schools (Kunje et al., 2011; Nasrullah & Bhatti, 2012). Research shows that having female teachers in schools encourage girls' enrollment. Lack of role models in the study area was an impediment to the girl-child's secondary educational endeavors (Kane, 2004). High levels of poverty severely limited the pool of teachers in the school as only locally untrained teachers were hired. These untrained teachers who hailed from the community were male, inexperienced, lacked basic professional decorum, believed and lived by the demeaning and negative constructions of the girl-child as embedded in the community rhetoric.

They lacked a sincere desire to inspire the girl-children as learners to think and aspire for greater things. As a result these local untrained teachers used the same demeaning language as used in the community and often times viewed the girl-children as women first instead of as learners, and addressed them as so. Even though role models in many of the above stated context are women, we argue that in schools where male teachers are professional and of integrity, they too can be role models in addition to improving the girl-child's self-esteem. We concur with (Lockwood, 2006) who asserted that it is not always necessarily true that same sex role models are the best. However with respect to our findings, we aver that poverty in the study area has denied the girl child role model teachers be they male or female.

### **Culture and Tradition**

The assertion that the discrimination against the girl child, in almost every society, begin before or at birth (UNICEF, 2005) could as well be referring to the study area. The controlling effect of culture and tradition and its grip on the life of the people in the study area were manifested through sex preference and gender stereotypes. Sex preference or son-preference an acceptable ancient tradition still exists in regions of the world and persists (Almond, Edlund, & Milligan, 2013), most societies exhibit some degree though mildly of son preference (Williamson, 1976). However, in the study area, the logic of patrilineality and kinship systems is very rigid (Marshall, 2015) as lots of importance is attached on the maintenance of genealogies.

In addition many parents in the study area perceive the net value of sons as higher than of daughters. More so the presence of ethnic violence in the study area and the need for sons to fight as warriors and protect the community against aggressive neighbors has made the sons preference in the study area even more acute and relegated the girl child to a person of lesser value. Findings indicated that much of the work at home was done by the girls. In the study area, traditional division of labor continues to burden girl-child with the care of younger children and other domestic tasks (Kenyatta, 2015). According to the culture and tradition in the study area, domestic work is narrowly defined as the work of women and girls (Njiru, 2013). Property ownership, labor patterns and hierarchies within the households put men and boys above women and girls (Rowbotham, 2015) Being pressured to carry out these culturally defined roles reduced the girl-child's time available for educational purposes. The perception that boys were a better investment was manifested when girls were held back so that boys could go to school and also during active wars to supply food to the warriors.

### **Improving Girl-Child Access to Secondary Education in Southwestern Kenya**

This section offers suggestions that might improve girl-child's access to secondary education ultimately graduating successfully. We call for contextualizing the suggestions because contextual differences greatly influence gender parity.

**Expand or introduce boarding and feeding facilities in schools:** Even though several studies advocate for the construction of many schools (Menon, 2015) we posit such cannot be a possibility given the poverty levels in the community. However we advocate the introduction of boarding facilities which if effected requires lesser capital input. By having the girls live in boarding schools when in session the probability of sexual harassment is readily reduced, more time and energy to concentrate on her academic work. Studies conducted (Rugh, 2000); confirm that by reducing/eliminating distance between home and school sites, enrolment for girls increased. Where funds are not immediately available for a boarding facility, the principals can introduce feeding or lunch programs. Evidence suggests that school feeding programs improve girls' attendance, retention and improves learning outcomes (Ahmed, 2004).

**Sensitization workshops:** The school leaders within the study areas are highly respectable members of the society and their advice and opinions are sought by the locals in a wide range of issues and situations. The principals can use that good will and sensitize parents and traditional authorities or community leaders on the issues of gender equity Advocacy (in the form of workshops or training) achieve change in traditional modes of thought and adaptation of customs.

**Recruitment of female teachers and staff:** There's a consensus in literature that lack of female teachers is a crucial issue (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). From the findings, the study area is located in a social context where women have been portrayed as inferior to men and whose contribution to development starts and ends with taking and obeying orders. However it is our assertion that because of such ancient practices, women have over the years been relegated to subservient roles and as a result the current generation has no role models. We hasten to add that this is not only confined within the school setting should involve the whole community. Outside the school yard there are no women leaders to instill hope and broaden the horizon for the young girls to dream about. 'Seeing is believing' and so the old adage goes. We suggest that school leaders should recruit female teachers and school staff as a way of creating a pool from which girls can draw inspiration and encouragement. The female teachers can also be advocates (Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002) for the girl-child.

### **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to highlight not only the challenges that the girl child faces in pursuit of secondary level education in Southwestern Kenya but also suggest contextualized initiatives that school principals might implement to eradicate these challenges. Findings from this study confirm that the girl-child in Southwestern Kenya still encounters situations and conditions at home, in the community and school that impede attendance and successful completion of secondary education.

Irrespective of location or stage in development, the girl child faces a tremendous challenge in the noble search of education.

Further, it was adduced that these impeding characteristics in the study area are anchored in culture and tradition bolstered by the high levels of poverty present in the study area. When a population is characterized with high levels of poverty, its ability to implement development projects is greatly compromised. To effectively address many of the findings that we have discussed in this research, would require a huge capital outlay in terms of construction of schools, establishing boarding sections, hiring highly qualified teachers and staff (both male and female) who can act as role models.

It is thus our contention that initiatives put in place should first address the underlying factors of poverty and the level of cultural entrenchment in the study area. We believe that even though schools and other educational institutions often reflect prevailing social norms they can also offer spaces in which social norms are challenged and reshaped. Despite the apparent challenges that school leaders face in their role functions, they are still expected to be proactive in developing initiatives in their schools that enable their students especially the minority achieve a level of education that empowers them to be successful and productive members of society.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE**

- i. The expectation that school leaders are responsible for the successful attainment of education is anchored in the belief that they are conversant with educational challenges that exist in their schools. However School leaders can never be successful in the provision and implementation of a curriculum in a context they are not familiar with.
- ii. Policy makers have an important role to play in developing and implementing policies that favor the girl-child in schools.
- iii. Leadership programs being developed need to aim at equipping school leaders with specific and contextualized skills.

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