



ARE WE THERE YET WITH GIRLS STILL FACING
EDUCATION INEQUALITIES?

**“Deconstructing the what
about boys’ narrative.”**

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Executive Summary

Gender disparities in low- and middle-income countries (LMCs) have significantly reduced over the years, with much effort being attributed to the Education for All (EFA) as well as other global, regional, and national initiatives. However, despite the promising trends in girls' enrollment, access to and completion rates in education at primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels remain lower than those of boys. This paper utilizes Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to examine issues of gender in education and highlight how gender inequalities are reproduced through socio-cultural practices, gender norms, stereotypes, and policies. Four key findings are presented, that is 1) multifaceted interventions are required to address systematic barriers that hinder equity in education, 2) gender disparities persist in poor households and marginalized communities, 3) current trends reveal worse gender disparity in favor of boys at the secondary level, and 4) gender disparities persist at post-secondary levels and has multiple knock-on effects. Based on evidence gathered, the study makes four recommendations to bridge the gender gap.

1. Introduction and Background

Globally, 262 million school-aged children and youth remain out of school, with 98 million being from sub-Saharan Africa, given the strong correlations between the poverty index and dropout rates (Thompson & Barbara, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). However, global estimates show significant progress over the last two decades in the reduction of the gender gap at primary and secondary school levels, with some regions reporting reversed trends where boys are now disadvantaged (Evans & Yuan, 2022). Data derived from recent studies, government reports, strategic plans, and policy briefs reveal that gender disparities exist across various LMICs and are worse for girls from poor backgrounds (Abuya et al., 2018; Chimombo, 2009; UNESCO, 2019, 2015; Oketch & Somerset, 2010). This gender gap persists despite global and national driven efforts to promote equal educational opportunities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions through examining emerging evidence to address the barriers that hinder girls' full participation, transition, education achievement and better livelihoods (Republic of Kenya, 2020a; UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Statistics from the Kenya National Gender Statistics Assessment conducted in 2018 show that Kenya ranks 76th among 144 nations on the Global Gender Gap Index, achieving a score of 0.694, with its lowest ranking in educational attainment at 120th place (UN Women, 2020).

Estimates of learning poverty in 27 LMICs, derived from data in the Global Learning Assessment Database, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), and UN Population datasets between 2000 and 2021, suggest that girls outperform boys by 4 percentage points in terms of learning outcomes (Azevedo et al., 2021). Despite these gains for the female learners, gender disparities remain evident in enrollment rates, particularly in countries such as Kenya, where boys continue to have higher

enrollment rates at both primary and secondary education levels (Republic of Kenya, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, young women face greater challenges in accessing higher education, achieving success in STEM courses, and transitioning from school to the workforce (Republic of Kenya, 2023). Various barriers that are deeply rooted in traditional patriarchal values that perpetuate men's power and inequalities within the family, school, community, and policy institutions, as well as economic and political structures, continue to shape individual's socio-cultural perspectives, belief systems, norms and practices (Ashraf et al., 2020; Moyo, 2022; Lawrence & Hensly, 2023).

To achieve gender equity in education, Kenya has implemented and ratified various statutes, treaties, and commitments and coordinated crucial gender-relevant strategies within the education sector by linking SDGs with Kenya Vision 2030. With some studies showing that investing in girls' education has an impact on age of marriage, dropout rate, fertility rate, children mortality rate, vulnerability to national disaster, among other key factors of sustainable development, it is paramount for governments to prioritize investing more in educating girls and bridging the existing gender gap particularly at secondary post-secondary levels and across different sectors of the economy (Evans & Yuan, 2022; Petroni et al., 2017; Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). These strategies are critical as they mitigate socio-cultural practices, forced early marriages, and structural barriers that are linked to early pregnancy and childbearing, which has been found to have a detrimental impact on these girls' health, further education advancement, livelihoods, and employment opportunities (Austrian et al., 2021; Birchall, 2018; UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

2. Theoretical Framework

We employ Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Neal & Neal, 2013) to explore the interconnected nature of human behavior and their holistic human development within the environmental contexts. Specifically, we use desk review and secondary data to interrogate concentric rings of influence of family/households, community, school, policymakers, groups of one's identity, and intertwined cultural perspectives and ideologies that are closely linked to Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. From an education stratification perspective, understanding how gender inequalities affect access to education, retention, and transition is critical as these factors have a ripple effect on social mobility and other interlinked community-driven factors, and post-schooling opportunities (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001; Grant & Behrman, 2010).

3. Methodological Approach

The methodological approach employed in this study involved two phases: 1) document review and 2) secondary data analysis. Document review was chosen as it is known for studies that utilize indicative research design approaches to gather insights and develop an understanding to examine a particular phenomenon (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Kutsyuruba, 2017). In the first stage, we mapped government, local civil society organizations, and development partners that occasionally publish information-rich resources in various online platforms such as gray literature, project reports, policy briefs, Op-Eds, strategic plans, and raw data. In stage two, we used keywords on gender and education to curate evidence from peer-reviewed articles published between 2004 and 2024 in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Jstor. For stage three, we reviewed reference lists of recent journals found in stage two and skimmed through the articles recommended in the search engines to gather emerging and most relevant evidence. Secondary data for this study was drawn from the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC), Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), Usawa Agenda, Teachers Service Commission (TSC), Joint Admission Board, and the Ministry of Education.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Despite numerous interventions, girls are still disadvantaged

Much progress has been made in improving girls' access to education. For instance, between 1998 and 2018, the number of girls out-of-school decreased by 79 million globally, and the gender gap in primary school enrollment narrowed by 4% over those two decades, but 5.5 million more girls than boys still do not access primary education worldwide (Population Council Girl Center, 2024). Due to the disproportionate amount of household chores that girls are tasked with, caring for their younger siblings, and the perception that educating girls is not important, equitable access to education appears to be a significant obstacle for girls (Psaki et al., 2022). Interventions and policies aimed at empowering girls are therefore essential for addressing systemic barriers such as poverty, cultural norms, and gender-based violence that hinder their educational opportunities. Over the years, government, development partners, and civil society organizations have implemented various interventions targeting girls as recent Gender Parity Index (GPI) estimates reveal that Kenya is on the verge of closing the gender disparity in primary enrollment, with more girls than boys enrolling in non-Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (non-ASAL) regions (Republic of Kenya, 2018, 2020b, 2023). Nevertheless, disparities in education access and retention still exist across levels of education. For instance, the retention rate for girls in the fifth grade who had previously been enrolled in Grade 1 was 93.3% between 2018 and 2022, while the retention rate for boys was 90.3% (KNBS, 2023).

Integrating equity-led and empowerment initiatives that target both girls and boys is crucial to ensure males support gender equity by addressing contemporary and pressing issues such as mental health, education, and social integration for the holistic development of Kenyan youth. This is particularly important as countries with higher boys' education attainment are characterized with gender gaps reduction over time whereby as more boys acquire higher education, girls' access to education similarly improves (Evans et al., 2020). Empirical data from numerous studies also suggests that educated and trained young women have higher self-efficacy and autonomy, better access to educational outcomes such as attendance, retention, completion, and learning achievement, and experience improved health outcomes and well-being such as reduced cases of gender-based violence, lower fertility rate, and fewer unplanned pregnancies (Brody et al., 2016; Ellsberg et al., 2015; Gibbs et al., 2018; Upadhyay et al., 2014).

4.2 Gender Disparities Persistent in Poor Households and Marginalized Communities

Regions with higher returns from investment in education earned from better formal employment opportunities have low gender gaps, showing a correlation between wealth index and education outcomes beyond access (Evans, 2019; Mutisya et al., 2021). Evidence from a study conducted in 63 countries to explore demographic and socioeconomic determinants of school attendance further reveals that the poorest quintile households had a 22% out-of-school rate compared with only 6% for learners from the richest quintile households (Hattori, 2014). Furthermore, there exists strong evidence on wealth index and access to education between boys and girls as when families face financial difficulties, many parents in numerous communities, including Kenya, tend to choose to educate boys rather than girls since investing in boys education is believed to have a higher return on investment than girls (Branyon, 2005; Nudzor, 2015; Pasqua, 2005; Tuwor & Sossou, 2008). Thus, learners from impoverished contexts have higher gender disparities regarding access to schooling, grade progression, retention, and completion of basic education (Lewin & Sabates, 2012).

Data from recent reports indicate that girls have better access to education at the national level (Usawa Agenda, 2024). However, further disintegration of the data based on the socioeconomic status of the households and regions per capita index reveal that girls from poor households and contexts are likely to experience higher vulnerabilities and inequalities in education that impede equity in education, employment, health, and lifelong learning opportunities. Moreover, girls from poor households are most vulnerable to dropping out from school thus they record a low transition rate to secondary school (Mutisya et al., 2021). According to the FLANA study released at the end of February 2024 by Usawa Agenda, the ASAL Northeastern Region of Garissa, Mandera, and Wajir showed a 5% disparity in the preschool enrolment rates, with the boys' participation in education approximately 56% boys and girls 44%. In Isiolo and Turkana, 6.5% and 6.3% fewer girls than boys transition from primary to secondary school, respectively (Republic of Kenya, 2020c). These regions are characterized by early marriage, high rates of teenage pregnancies, and regressive social and cultural norms, all of which are linked to school dropout.

4.3 Current trends reveal worse gender disparity in favor of boys at the secondary level.

In LMIC, only 38% of girls complete lower secondary level compared with 43% of boys, and many girls and young women still face gender-related obstacles, such as poor grade level transition, high dropout rates, early or forced marriages, unplanned pregnancy, sexual violence, and discrimination (World Bank, 2024). Being out of school for girls due to various socio-cultural factors further exposes these girls to multiple vulnerabilities, particularly early marriage and pregnancy.

Data derived from Basic Education Statistical Booklet 2020 in select counties revealed higher gender disparities at the secondary level than that of primary level with most counties almost achieving gender parity (a range of 0.9 to 1.02). ASAL counties similarly registered the worst gender disparity, with Mandera, Turkana,

Samburu, and Isiolo reporting gender parity indices of 0.54, 0.62, 0.74, and 0.79, respectively. Also, data derived from the 2022 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics based on the 2009 and 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, show that there exists high gender inequalities in secondary school access between teenage boys and girls with the highest girl deprivation being in Mombasa (34.8%) and Homabay (26.7%) while Nyandarua and Embu registered the highest boys secondary school access deprivation at 69.1% and 37% respectively. A Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) Baseline Report on Monitoring Learner Achievement at Form 2 level of secondary education in Kenya published in 2020 revealed gender disparity in access to secondary school, with boys to girls proportion being 52.4% against 47.6%. The significant gender inequalities, particularly with girls aged 14-17 years having low school attendance in many counties, may be linked to early pregnancies, as this age range coincides with adolescence. This evidence is consistent with data from the aforementioned KNEC report, which shows that early pregnancy is the second leading cause of absenteeism, contributing to 75.9%, just behind school fees, which account for 80.5%.

Among the 15 reasons provided, gender-related and socialization factors, such as caring for sick relatives (14.0%), lacking sanitary towels (12.2%), and taking care of siblings (9.2%), were among the top eight reasons cited by teachers for student absenteeism. Also, almost half of the principals who responded to the survey (46.9%) reported that pregnancy significantly contributed to dropout at Form 2, while early marriages accounted for 23.7% and 21.5% in Form 2 and 3, respectively (KNEC, 2020).

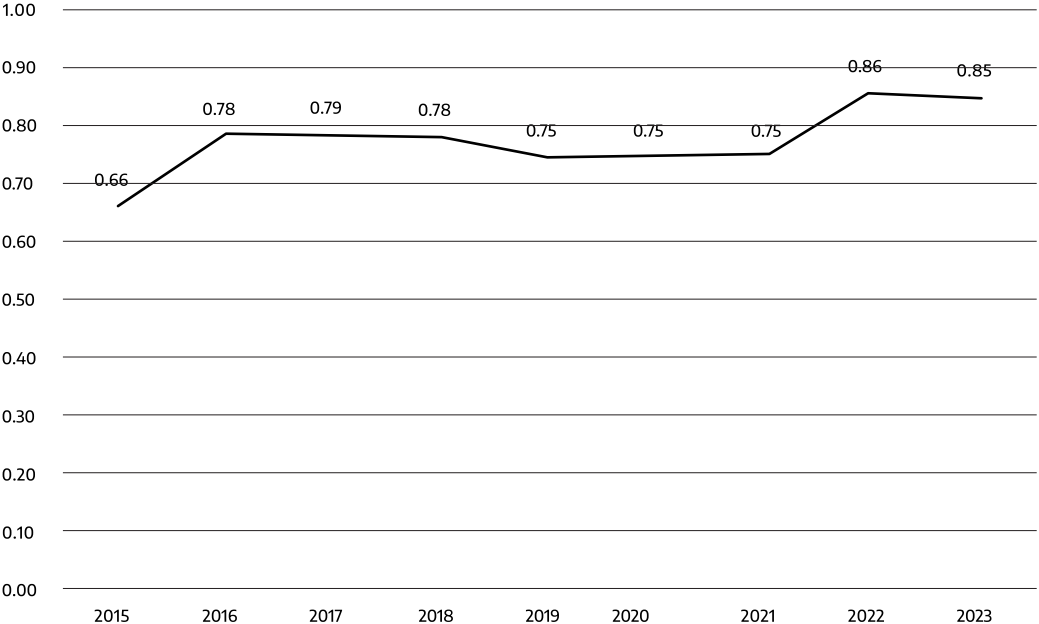
Furthermore, effects of climate change have exacerbated gender inequalities in LMIC, with girls and young women facing greater risks of displacement, dropping out of school and early marriages as they are more prone to conflicts created by limited natural resources due to drought (Booth, 2022). Approximately 4 million girls from LMIC are estimated to encounter school completion challenges caused by climate-related issues (Fry & Lei, 2021). A recent study by the Education

Development Trust also showed that in pastoralist communities while girls stay at home with their mothers helping them with domestic chores instead of going to school due to conflicts, boys were more likely to drop out of school and migrate with their fathers to look for pasture and water for their animals (Amenya & Fitzpatrick 2023). Empowerment should not be viewed as a zero-sum game where the progress of one gender comes at the expense of the other. True gender equality means acknowledging and addressing the distinct needs of both boys and girls. Empowering boys is equally essential for creating a balanced society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

4.4 Gender disparities persist at post-secondary levels and has multiple knock-on effects

According to data from the KNBS Economic Surveys of 2021 and 2024, female student enrollment in Kenya's TVET institutions in 2023 stood at 46%, significantly lower than the 54% enrollment rate for male students. A review of the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in TVET institutions across the country between 2015 and 2023, as shown in Figure 1, revealed that girls continue being disadvantaged in accessing TVET education with the worst disparity in 2015 (0.66). However, there was a remarkable improvement in TVET female enrollment in 2022 and 2023, with gender disparity shrinking, providing hope that equity can be achieved in TVET enrollment if strategic interventions are implemented.

Figure 1: Trends in Gender Parity Index in all TVET institutions , 2015-2023



NB: A GPI of 1 indicates equality between female and male; GPI less than 1 shows disparity in favor of male; a GPI of greater than 1 shows disparity in favor of female

Source: Authors own calculations based on KNBS Economic Survey 2021 and 2024

At the university level, while female-male enrollment has slightly improved from 40.5% against 59.5% in 2019 to 43.2% against 56.8% in 2023, data from the 2024 KNBS Economic Survey shows access to university education has remained between 16% to 19% lower among the female. Although there has been an increase in female participation, males still dominate in the STEM field and overall enrollment numbers, which have implications on employability and livelihoods.

Ensuring equitable education and training opportunities at Basic and higher education levels is crucial, as when girls are not empowered through education, they are more vulnerable to poverty, sexual exploitation, unwanted pregnancies, HIV, intimate partner violence, risky behaviors such as prostitution, drug and substance abuse, and various gender powered imbalances (Gibbs & Bishop, 2019; Kabiru et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2018; Nyariro 2018).

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The exploration of gender disparities in this paper reveals a complex narrative that has evolved significantly over time, highlighting the need for developing feminist frameworks to address the unique challenges faced by girls and young women to achieve gender equity in education, and advocating inclusive policies that recognize and address the specific needs of all genders, and (Baten et al., 2021; King & Winthrop, 2015). Finally, we present the following policy recommendations to highlight various strategies that could help bridge the gender gap in education.

- **5.1 Promote a multisectoral approach for bridging gender inequalities across different levels of education.** Structured collaboration among families, schools, and community leaders is essential to develop a robust, integrated data management system to tackle harmful social and cultural practices, norms, and stereotypes that hinder girls' access to education, retention, learning outcomes, and transition from basic to post-secondary education.
- **5.2 Gender-focused government institutions and civil society players to develop a gender-policy-enabling environment targeting marginalized populations in Kenya.** These organizations could include the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC) and other relevant stakeholders.
- **5.3 Develop and strengthen the capacity of county government to assess, design and implement context-relevant and equity-led interventions.** NGEC and the Ministry of Public Service, Gender and Affirmative Action should collaborate with the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), gender-focused international organizations, KNBS, and Department

of Gender in the Universities to build capacity in the counties to explore gender trends in different levels of education while ensuring accurate identification of equity indicators.

- **5.4 Develop and operationalize a Framework for implementing Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALPs) for Out of School Children and Youth (OOSCY) and integrate it into the formal education system.** The Ministry of Education should collaborate with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and KNEC to design and implement a robust framework for Alternative Learning Programs (ALPs). These programs, including catch-up initiatives, aim to support girls and young women who have experienced educational disruptions or dropped out due to social, cultural, or economic barriers. The framework should illustrate participatory models of involving men in community-driven holistic empowerment programming therefore makes them champions of change at individual, family, and community levels.

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PAL NETWORK
People's Action for Learning

GIRLRISING



RELI
Regional Education Learning Initiative



AMPLIFY
GIRLS



JASLIKA



Siprosa



GRiC
Grassroots hub for Innovations and Change



MEN
END FGM



A world where gender equality shapes every learner's opportunity to thrive.