

# GENDER AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN ENROLMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN KENYA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION PLANNING

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## Abstract

*According to the requirements of the educational millennium development goals, countries are supposed to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike complete a full course of primary education and eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and at all levels by 2015. In line with this requirement, the Kenya government introduced free primary education (FPE) in 2003 and free secondary education in 2008 particularly for day schools. Enrolment in both primary school and secondary school has increased tremendously. This paper examines and highlights the patterns of gender and regional disparities in enrolment and academic achievement in the country. It shows that despite the general increase in enrolment at all levels of education in most regions; the enrolment of boys still exceeds that of girls. The situation is worse North Eastern where enrolment has remained very low despite government interventions. While enrolment figures offer a lot of hope, the situation is grim in academic achievement. Near parity in enrolment in many regions has failed to translate into parity in academic achievement. The girls register low achievement in national examinations when compared to boys nationally and in their respective regions in the country. The paper focuses on the 2009 Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results because it is the most immediate examination year. Where possible, other years have been used for comparison purposes. This paper argues that it is not enough to have girls in school. They have to benefit from the system by achieving quality grades which will in turn guarantee placement in marketable courses especially those required to drive the economy. Educational planners and policy makers should shift the campaign from enrolment and participation to achievement particularly that of girls.*

**Key words:** gender disparity, enrolment, regions and achievement.

## Introduction

According to the Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), countries are faced with the challenge of eliminating gender disparities in basic education by the year 2010, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015 (Onsomu *et al*, 2005). There is also a special focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to education of good quality (UNESCO, 2003). Gender parity is a key indicator of progress made towards global achieve-

ment of education for all (UNESCO 2000). Parity is attained when the same proportion of girls and boys enter the education system, achieve educational goals and advance through different cycles (UNESCO, 2003). However, the question of gender equality in education means more than access to school for boys and girls. It combines the right to education (access and participation) with the rights within education (gender sensitive environments, processes and outcomes) and rights through education, that is, relevant education outcomes that connect quality education to a wider process of gender justice in society. Governments and donor agencies have in the past focused primarily on increasing female access and enrolment (as it is the case in Kenya) with insufficient attention to the quality or relevance of education for girls or their achievement rates (Sibbons, 2000).

Education for All (EFA) has focused on the goals of provision of primary education to everybody under universal primary education (UPE) and improved education quality. Indeed significant progress has been made towards realizing universal primary education (UPE). According to a report by Saitoti (2003), after the introduction of free primary education (FPE), the net enrolment rate (NER) rose from 79% to 84%. Evidently, free primary education which has been geared towards realizing Education for All (EFA) has accorded equal opportunities to both boys and girls resulting in gender parity in primary school enrolment. Nationally, Kenya has almost achieved gender parity in participation at the primary school level with a gross enrolment rate (GER) of 105.8 for boys and 103.7 for girls (MOEST, 2004). However, indicators related to the EFA goal mask gender and regional disparities in achievement. The Ministry acknowledges that these figures are deceptive because they hide regional disparities where participation of girls is as low as 15.7 compared to 29.31 for boys. Therefore, while indeed gender parity has almost been achieved in some regions, there are those which have gross disparity in enrolment.

As much as there has been dramatic expansion in primary education many school age children remain outside the education system. Many of these are nomadic pastoralists and sparsely populated North Eastern where only one in four children attend school and one in five girls is enrolled in school (Fleshma, 2005). According to UNESCO's 2010 Education for All Monitoring Report, fewer than 40 per cent of children on North Eastern Province were in primary school four years after the Kenya government set the goal of 100 per cent for national enrolment. The report further indicates that, over 60 per cent of Somali girls are not in primary school (Kelly, 2010).

Primary school education is meant to promote growth, impart literacy and numeracy skills. It lays a firm foundation for further formal education training and lifelong education. Secondary school is essential in developing individual learners' potential and character, while at the same time fortifying the learners' trainability and employability for smooth integration into the working life (Munavu *et al.* 2008). In Kenya, Primary school education culminates into Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) at the end of eight years while secondary education ends with the writing of Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination at the end of four years. The education system lays a very strong emphasis on examinations and is characterized by very high push out rates at the end of the two education cycles (primary and secondary). Although students sit for common examinations and are tutored on a common curriculum, taught by teachers who undergo similar training, the glaring disparities in achievement shows that this examination oriented system may not be favouring them. There is pressure to cover the syllabus earlier than the stipulated time which makes teaching competitive and leading to hurried syllabus coverage at the expense of learning. According to USAID (2008) what tests, examinations and achievements measure tell the students what matters. To the extent that these mechanisms reflect a gender bias, they transmit messages to students that can discourage interest in school or particular subjects. Results from classroom tests, national examinations and international assessments can influence boys' and girls' confidence levels and their percep-

tions of their abilities and what is expected of them.

Secondary school marks the transition between primary school and the world of further training and work. Access to tertiary education is highly dependent on performance in KCSE examination. In addition, courses that a student can pursue are determined by his/her performance in particular subjects. While the minimum university entry grade is pegged at C+ and above at KCSE, only a small fraction (15%-20%) of those who meet the final cut off points determined by the Joint Admissions Board (JAB) are finally admitted (Munavu, et al. 2008). The rest have to enroll under the parallel programmes join private universities or other middle level colleges.

Apart from the challenge of limited subsidized higher education at the local universities, there is the question of performance in subjects that are essential for the country's development objectives. Most students perform poorly in Science subjects and Mathematics which are important in meeting the country's vision 2030 goal of making Kenya a newly industrializing middle income country. The girls are worse hit because most of their grades in the sciences subjects and Mathematics are very weak. They are therefore lumped in the Arts and other general degree courses with very few meriting for competitive science oriented degrees.

Therefore, the need for gender parity in performance must take centre stage as long as KCPE and KCSE remain the hallmarks of success and determine advancement to the next education levels. Since secondary education is regarded as the pipeline to tertiary education from where technocrats, decision makers, reformists and other high standing personnel are recruited to drive the economy, then achievement in secondary school examinations has serious implications for the development of the country. Representation of both men and women in all sectors of the country is critical for the implementation of policies and practices that affect the entire republic. Improving academic achievement of girls at the secondary school level is an important intervention that can positively impact on political, social and economic advancement and participation. Educating girls possibly yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world (Summers, 1992). The economic returns to schooling at secondary school and tertiary levels are high for young women. There is also a heavy premium on secondary and tertiary schooling for later success in the labour market (Lloyd, 2005).

### **Gender and Regional Disparities in Enrolment and Achievement at the Primary School Level**

Table 1 presents the net enrolment rate by gender and province between 1999-2004. A casual glance at the table shows that indeed there is near parity in enrolment in some regions like Central, Eastern and Nairobi provinces. In Central province the enrolment of girls exceeds that of boys and the data indicates that even before the introduction of free primary education, this is definitely one province which obviously had more girls than boys in school.

**Table 1. Primary Schools Net Enrolment Rate Province: 1999-2004.**

Province	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Coast	58.8	52.1	55.5	60.1	52.4	56.2	66.9	60.1	63.5	72.8	67.7	70.0
Central	82.6	84.5	83.6	80.5	83.0	81.7	83.6	84.3	83.9	81.4	81.8	81.6
Eastern	74.2	76.8	79.3	83.5	86.2	84.9	90.4	90.3	90.4	91.4	91.5	91.5
Nairobi	46.4	43.5	45.0	37.8	44.3	40.9	35.5	40.3	37.7	35.9	41.1	38.5
R.Valley	67.8	67.3	67.5	75.0	74.3	74.6	84.1	82.0	83.1	87.8	85.4	86.6
Western	74.2	77.2	76.8	91.8	87.2	89.4	97.5	94.2	95.3	99.3	97.2	98.2
Nyanza	74.4	73.7	74.0	90.9	89.2	91.0	96.2	95.4	95.8	96.9	96.2	96.5
N.Eastern	17.9	10.6	15.4	18.8	11.3	15.3	20.1	10.2	15.5	23.0	13.0	18.0

While in Central province the girls' net enrolment is higher than that of boys, and there is near parity enrolment in most of the regions, still some regions have higher percentages of enrolment than others. In North Eastern Kenya, the net enrolment rate remains quite low despite the introduction of free primary education and other interventions. This is a worrying trend because it is draw back to the government's realization of the MDGs which emphasize the aim of ensuring that children everywhere, boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. This poor enrolment could be attributed to the tradition of early marriage for girls and boys dropping out of school to take care of livestock. Income inequality leads to gender inequality in the acquisition of education. When poor families conclude that they can only afford to educate some of their children, they tend to favour sons over daughters. This is because of the belief that it is important to equip the boys for the job-market.

Table 2 shows the performance of male and female students in KCPE during 2006, 2007 and 2009. The results for the year 2008 didn't indicate the respective gender of the top pupils in the respective regions so they were not included in this analysis.

**Table 2. Trends of performance in KCPE (2006, 2007 and 2009): top 100 positions by province.**

Province	2006		Year 2007		2009	
	Boys %	girls %	Boys %	girls %	Boys %	girls %
Coast	64 (56.6)	49 (43.36)	70(57.85)	51(42.15)	68(62.39)	41(37.61)
Central	65 (55.08)	53 (44.92)	91 (68.42)	42(31.58)	69(66.99)	34(33.01)
Eastern	84 (66.14)	43 (33.86)	85 (68.0)	40 (32.0)	69(65.71)	36(34.29)
Nairobi	57 (50.44)	56 (49.56)	70 (58.82)	49 (41.18)	52(48.60)	55(51.40)
R.Valley	85 (65.38)	45 (34.62)	80 (66.12)	41(33.88)	57(52.78)	51(47.22)
Western	81 (65.32)	43 (34.68)	72 (68.57)	33 (31.43)	60(55.05)	49(44.95)
Nyanza	84 (73.68)	30 (26.32)	83 (67.48)	40 (32.52)	77(71.30)	31(28.70)
N.Eastern	84 (80.77)	20 (19.23)	82 (75.93)	26 (24.07)	78(76.47)	24(23.53)

Source: Derived from KNEC.

There are gender disparities in enrolment and academic achievement of pupils across different regions in Kenya. General performance trends indicate that boys constantly outperform girls. During the three years for which results were available for comparison, the percentage of girls appearing on the top 100 merit ranking list in each province was less than 50%. The only exception is that of Nairobi province which in 2009 had girls outperforming boys and posting 55(51.40%) of female candidates on the top 100 merit ranking list. Clearly then, the near gender parity realized in enrolment and participation has not translated into gender parity in performance at KCPE. In Nyanza and North Eastern province, boys took a lion's share of the top 100 pupils on the merit ranking list.

Table 3 shows the number and gender of candidates in each province who registered and sat for KCPE in 2009.

**Table 3. KCPE Examination Candidature by province in 2009.**

Province	Number of male candidates	Number of female candidates	Total
Coast	30,007	22,698	53,005
Central	50,693	51,168	101,881
Eastern	64,206	64,064	128,270
Nairobi	19,221	18,883	38,104
R.Valley	97,852	88,305	186,157
Western	46,733	44,896	91,629
Nyanza	64,657	52,226	116,923
N.Eastern	7,666	2,732	10,398

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council

Table 3 shows that Rift Valley Province had the highest number of candidates in 2009 followed by Eastern Province while North Eastern had the lowest number followed by Nairobi Province. On the gender parity scale, the number of male candidates was higher than that of female in all the provinces except Central where there were more females than males. These figures also indicate that there is near parity for Nairobi and Eastern provinces while North Eastern is the worst hit with the lowest number of candidates and a paltry female candidature of 2,732. This region is occupied by the Swahili and nomadic groups. These are very patriarchal societies and this explains the reluctance to embrace education especially that of the girl child. As it has been reported in many studies, in such societies where the main leadership roles are in the local and national life occupied by males, where marriage of girls occurs at a much younger age than boys, where religious and customary beliefs inhibit the progression of girls, the incentives to make girls attend school and perform well are less than those of the boys. The girls automatically subscribe to the societal expectations.

Table 4 presents the gender and regional performance in KCPE in 2009. Analysis here focuses on the number of boys and girls in each province who made it to the top 100 list of merit nationally.

**Table 4. Top 100 pupils in 2009 KCPE by Province.**

Province	Number of male (%)	Number of female (%)	Total (%)
Coast	6 / 4.65	2 / 1.55	8 / 6.20
Central	16 / 12.40	9 / 6.98	25 / 19.38
Eastern	11 / 8.52	5 / 3.88	16 / 12.40
Nairobi	16 / 12.40	19 / 14.73	35 / 27.13
R.Valley	13 / 10.08	13 / 10.08	26 / 10.16
Western	7 / 5.43	4 / 3.10	11 / 8.53
Nyanza	7 / 5.43	1 / 0.78	8 / 6.20
N.Eastern	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0
Total	76 / 58.91	53 / 41.09	129 / 100

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council.

Appearing on the top 100 provincial ranking list guarantees these pupils' access to national schools and top provincial schools. These are themselves gateways to the university. While table 3 indicates that Rift Valley province had the highest candidature, it was the second best in the number of candidates who were on the top 100 merit list. In 2009, it is the only province which realized gender parity in the performance of male and female candidates who appeared on the merit list. Nairobi province which had the lowest candidature after North Eastern was the best province in terms of posting the highest number of candidates on the top 100 merit list; and having the higher number of female candidates than males on the merit list. The rest of the provinces had disparities in achievement with girls failing to compete for top positions favorably with the boys. Even Central Province which had more female candidates than male ended up with fewer females than males on the merit list. In North Eastern Province, which had the lowest enrolment and candidature, no pupil appeared on the merit list.

Table 5 shows the top 100 pupils in each province in the 2009 KCPE.

**Table 5. Top 100 pupils in 2009 KCPE in each Province.**

Province	Number of male (%)	Number of female (%)	Total (%)
Coast	68 / 62.39	41 / 37.61	103 / 100
Central	69 / 66.99	34 / 33.01	109 / 100
Eastern	69 / 65.71	36 / 34.29	105 / 100
Nairobi	52 / 48.60	55 / 51.40	107 / 100
R.Valley	57 / 52.78	51 / 47.22	108 / 100
Western	60 / 55.05	49 / 44.95	109 / 100
Nyanza	77 / 71.30	31 / 28.70	108 / 100
N.Eastern	78 / 76.47	24 / 23.53	102 / 100

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council

From the above table, more than half of the top 100 pupils in each province except Nairobi were boys reinforcing the gender divide in performance in national examinations. Although Central and Eastern (table 3) had an almost equal number of boys and girls writing this examination, they however had just a few girls appearing on the top 100 provincial merit list showing how parity in enrolment doesn't translate into parity in performance.

The very poor general performance of North Eastern Province in enrolment, candidature and achievement and the dismal performance of the girls concur with earlier observations that gender disparities within a country are often greater among the poor. This is characteristic of this region. In addition it is also believed that girls don't need education to carry out wifely and motherly duties.

Gender and Regional Disparities in Enrolment and Achievement at the Secondary School Level

Table 6 presents the net enrolment rate between 1999-2004 by province and gender. The enrolment rate at secondary school is much lower than that of primary school (table 1). Probably, this is because free secondary education had not been introduced which particularly favoured day schools. Investment in secondary school education is expensive and some parents allow their children to drop out of school after primary school for lack of funds. All the same, the table reveals that there are gender and regional disparities in enrolment at the secondary school level.

**Table 6. Secondary Schools Net Enrolment Rate Province: 1999-2004.**

Province	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Coast	24.3	19.8	22.0	25.5	22.1	23.8	22.7	18.3	20.5	26.7	19.5	23.1
Central	40.6	46.8	43.7	46.0	49.5	47.8	42.4	46.4	44.4	44.8	45.1	45.0
Eastern	28.6	27.9	28.3	28.7	28.0	28.3	33.2	32.9	33.0	35.2	33.5	34.4
Nairobi	41.8	21.9	30.3	22.0	16.4	9.2	26.4	18.7	17.0	30.3	19.0	24.7
R.Valley	26.4	19.5	22.1	27.9	23.4	25.7	27.6	24.3	25.9	29.9	24.5	27.2
Western	29.4	27.7	28.6	26.2	26.1	26.1	28.3	29.5	28.9	31.9	29.0	30.5
Nyanza	29.7	23.2	26.5	32.2	23.9	28.1	32.4	28.6	30.5	39.0	23.1	31.1
N.Eastern	6.1	2.7	4.6	5.2	2.9	4.2	14.0	2.6	8.3	6.1	3.0	4.5

Source: MDGs Status Report for Kenya-2005

Like at the primary school level, Central province had a higher net enrolment for girls than boys while all the other provinces had a low enrolment rate for the girls. As indicated earlier, girls face numerous challenges at this level which hinder their progression to secondary school. Like it has been observed at the primary school level, North Eastern province had the lowest general enrolment rate across the country and by gender at the secondary level of education. This again implies that although there have been numerous campaigns and advocacy to boost enrolment and eliminate gender disparity, the progress and response are slow. This province therefore continues to lag behind in the achievement of educational MDGs threatening the overall government effort of meeting all the educational MDGs during the stipulated time.

Performance in KCSE shows that in the year 2009, among the top 100 students nationally, there were only 27 girls and 73 boys. The Provincial ranking shown in table 7 reveals the disparities gender and regional disparities in achievement.

**Table 7. Top 100 students nationally in 2009 KCSE by gender and province.**

Province	Number of males	Number of females	Total
Coast	1	1	2
Central	26	7	33
Eastern	1	3	4
Nairobi	20	7	27
R.Valley	11	8	19
Western	2	1	3
Nyanza	12	0	12
N.Eastern	0	0	0
Total	73 (73%)	27 (27%)	100 (100%)

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council.

Boys outperformed girls by a very wide margin. Only a paltry 27 girls made it to the top 100 merit ranking list. A critical look at the results reveals that, most of the students appearing on the top 100 merit list were from National schools with a few from top provincial schools. This shows that there must be resource advantage enjoyed by students who join these schools

as compared to those who join district and some provincial schools. Sadly Nyanza province didn't have any female candidate on the top 100 list. All the 12 were male. The situation was grim in North Eastern where no single student made it to the top 100 merit ranking list nationally. Since admission to the university is based on KCSE performance, the performance trend given in this table shows which region is likely to have many students qualifying for admission and which gender is likely to access the marketable courses at the university.

Table 8 presents the top 100 students in by gender in each province during the 2009 KCSE.

**Table 8. Top 100 students by gender in 2009 KCSE in each Province.**

Province	Number of males	Number of females	Total
Coast	69	31	100
Central	76	24	100
Eastern	67	33	100
Nairobi	70	30	100
R.Valley	57	43	100
Western	84	16	100
Nyanza	94	6	100
N.Eastern	98	2	100

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council.

The pattern in performance at KCSE reveals that in all the regions, there were more boys than girls on the top 100 merit ranking list. Rift Valley with 30 girls out of 100 had the highest number of girls compared to other provinces appearing on this list. In Central and Western provinces, girls registered dismal performance, While Nyanza and North Eastern had the fewest girls in their top 100 best students. Owing to this poor performance in national examinations by girls, their chances of pursuing science related and technological courses at the university are limited. The lowering of admission to a point less for female students has not achieved much because those admitted with a lower grade form part of the bulk of admissions in general and arts courses which are shunned by many.

Table 9 shows the number of students from each province who attained the minimum university requirement of C+ and above between 2003-2005. It thus gives a general picture of the number of students from each region who have joined higher education during the three years.

**Table 9. Candidates who scored C+ and above in KCSE in each Province between 2003-2005.**

Province	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	Total
Coast	65	306	595	1,054	2,020	2,507	6,547
Central	392	2,067	3,814	5,671	9,175	11,132	32,251
Eastern	154	1,315	3,196	5,544	8,192	11,983	30,384
Nairobi	480	1,617	1,930	2,334	2,474	2,653	11,488
R.Valley	250	1,990	3,426	7,307	10,578	15,048	39,499

Western	146	895	2,208	3,804	6,076	8,990	22,119
Nyanza	159	1,537	4,136	6,541	9,454	12,250	34,407
N.Eastern	0	10	28	78	139	289	544
Total	1,646	9,737	20,233	32,333	48,108	65,182	177,239

Source: Kenya National Examinations Council.

Admission to form one is based on the quota system with schools drawing most of their students from their respective districts. On the other hand, admission to university is based on merit and this means regions which post weak grades are likely to have no student qualifying for some of the most competitive courses. Another disadvantage of poor performance by some regions is that the government decentralized interviews and many people are hired to work in their own home towns. Some regions are therefore likely to suffer from lack of sufficient human resource.

### Implications for Educational Planning

Persistent low educational achievement is bound to adversely affect a woman's quality of life and overall economic development. Reducing the gender divide in academic achievement should be a national concern because improving the women's participation in the economic development of this country can only begin with ensuring that they attain quality grades in national examinations; and in the relevant subjects so that they are not rendered irrelevant in the labour market. Educational planners have a task of shifting advocacy from enrolment where near parity has been realized in many regions to academic achievement.

There is need to identify the problem in girls' academic achievement by looking at the manner in which the curriculum could be modified to meet learning needs of girls so that the imbalance in the academic achievement of girls and boys can be corrected. Generally, the education programs should be reoriented and made more responsive to gender learning challenges especially those affecting girls.

Education planners should spearhead for the setting up of science camps in order to boost the performance of girls in science and mathematics at the secondary school level where their grades are wanting. Special time need not be allocated as this can still be done during the two weeks during the holidays when private tuition is carried on in schools. The private tutoring can simply be reformed particularly in girls' schools to emphasize their weak areas and work out possible solutions with a view to raising their general performance in key subjects. Educational planners and managers should hold short frequent seminars to train academic gender experts who can collectively formulate interesting programmes that sustain the attention of girls and keep them engaged during such sessions.

Motivational speakers at such times could be utilized to raise the self esteem of the girls and spur them to greater heights in male dominated subjects. Positive public opinion and attitude on the achievement of girls should be campaigned for. This could help steer girls' achievement to higher levels. This should begin at the family level, move to the community and then take a national outlook. Girls themselves must change their attitude about their own potential.

Sponsors who in the past offered scholarships to top performing girls from poor households should now consider extending the same favour to girls who attain top grades irrespective of economic status of the family. Those who excel in science subjects and Mathematics should also be favoured in the provision of scholarships and encouraged to enter the male dominated fields of science and technology. This will act as an incentive to the other girls so that they too can work hard in challenging subjects.

## Conclusion

From the information provided in this paper, there are gender and regional disparities in enrolment and academic achievement. Although near parity in enrolment has been realized in some regions, The North Eastern part of Kenya is grossly affected. It is characterized by general low enrolment and a serious gender disparity in enrolment. The near parity enrolment in most regions notwithstanding, the disparity in academic achievement cuts across regions and gender. The gist of this paper is that, it is not enough to enroll girls in school. There must be measures to ensure that they benefit from the education system. This should be reflected in grades attained.

As the old mantra goes, educating a woman is educating the nation and similarly, transforming a woman's life is transforming a nation. More women must be encouraged to realize quality grades in national examinations so that they can access better courses, secure better paying jobs and steer the overall economic growth of the country. While the educational Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) remain visionary and pragmatic in universalising education and eliminating gender disparities, this is not sufficient when access to education fails to translate into quality grades required by the market economy. For as long the achievement of girls in national examinations remains low, their active participation in the labour market is hampered and so is the Kenya's dream in vision 2030 of becoming an industrializing country.

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