

To what extent are Girls' Boarding Primary Schools in North- Horr sub county, Marsabit County of Kenya, Girl-friendly?

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Abstract

Girls' only boarding schools have recently cropped up with the objective of increasing girls' access to education. This study investigates presence of characteristics of girl friendly schools in the case study school. The results should assist policy makers and development partners in ensuring that schools are girl friendly to maximize their impact on girls' education. Focused group discussions and interviews carried out with teachers, parents and girls from the case study school revealed the following, no enough female teachers, absence of clean running water and fence, non- relevant Curriculum. Girls' boarding schools are appropriate in increasing access to education but need to be girl friendly.

Key words: boarding schools, girl friendly, primary schools

1. Introduction

This study focuses on finding out to what extent girls boarding primary schools in North Horr Sub County of Marsabit county of Kenya are girl-friendly in addition to guaranteeing that girls don't have to walk for long distances any more. It aims to find out the presence of girl friendly components in a girls only boarding school and its significance in narrowing the gender gap in a community that is predominantly nomadic pastoralists and inhabit parts of Kenya that receives very little rainfall prompting them to move from place to place in search of pasture and water for their livestock hence limiting girl's access to education. Prior to establishment of boarding schools for girls there were boarding facilities available only for boys while girls were day scholars. Most of the girls dropped out of school during dry seasons when their families move with their livestock.

Currently, there are about four boarding primary schools in the sub-county that were built by the government with the aim of increasing enrolment of girls in primary schools.

Nomadic pastoralist are people who keep livestock and migrate from one place to another depending on the needs of their livestock which include water and pasture

(Kandagor; 2005). Ensuring that nomadic people get access to education is a very challenging task for many governments (GOK; 2006). This is due to their mobile nature as they move about with their animals. In Kenya there are many pastoralists communities living in the Arid and Semi arid (ASAL) parts of the country making up about 10 percent of the total population (ADB/UNESCOIIEP;2005). The pastoralist communities of Kenya live in 22 out of the 79 districts and they occupy 80 percent of the total land mass of the country which is composed of the harshest regions and are termed as ASAL (ADB/UNESCO-IIEP; 2005). Marsabit county being one of these.

There has been tremendous growth of education sector in Kenya since independence in terms of enrolments and number of primary schools (Eshiwani; 1993 in Aikman and Unterhalter; 2005) as result of improved policies and targeted use of public funds towards attainment of policies in education (Abwagi & Olweya; 1999, Makau; 1995 in Aikman and Unterhalter; 2005). This expansion left behind the pastoralist communities of North and North Eastern parts of Kenya (Nkinyangi; 1982, Narman 1990 in Aikman and Unterhalter; 2005).

Immediately after independence, it was identified that the low participation of the pastoral communities in education was a serious problem that needed to be addressed urgently by the government and to deal with this problem the government proposed the establishment of boarding schools in areas that are inhabited by the pastoralists (Sifuna, D;2005). This seems to be a persistent problem in these areas based on the statement in the 1970-1974 development plan that boarding facilities was to be provided for the pastoral communities. The government later set up low cost boarding primary schools in pastoral areas with assistance from the World Bank so that these children are able to continue with their education without any interruption. A study like this one which is carried out in rural part of Marsabit county, and specifically targeting girls only boarding schools, will be useful because previous development plans address boarding schools among pastoralists in general and mention about their success only in urban areas of arid and semi –arid lands in Kenya. For example the 1974-1978 development plans. Also no specific reference is made to girls only boarding schools even though it is acknowledged that the government was dissatisfied with boarding schools. (Sifuna 2005) **However, these boarding schools were only successful in urban areas of the Arid and Semi arid Lands and in the 1974-1978 development plans, the government expressed dissatisfaction with such schools in increasing enrolment among the pastoralists, blaming the low enrolment to lack of interest by the communities to embrace social change but in reality the main reason behind low enrolments in these boarding schools was their high costs which many parents could not afford (Sifuna, D; 2005).**

Another notable observation is that despite this provision , their participation in education was worsened by the structural adjustments programs from the world Bank in the 1980s which placed the burden of financing capital development of education on the parents (Sifuna, D; 2005).

Despite the government's dissatisfaction with the performance of boarding schools among the pastoralists it seems that the idea kept cropping up every time education problems in ASAL areas needed to be addressed. For example, in the draft national policy of 2005 it is clearly stated that the government will support boarding schools where pastoral cultures will be encouraged among teachers and the pupils. This became necessary after it was identified that policy change was needed to bring about development in ASAL areas. (Government of Kenya; 2005). Low cost boarding schools are found to be suitable for the educational needs of pastoral communities (Sara, zipporah & John; 2009).

The main goals of education sector in Kenya is to achieve EFA by 2015 and to accomplish this the government strives to ensure that all children get access to free and compulsory education by 2010. These targeted groups include girls, children in difficult circumstances and those from marginalized or vulnerable groups. (Republic of Kenya; 2007).

The Kenya Education Sector Support Programme is composed of 21 investments

Programs and one of them which is entirely dedicated to ASAL is to ensure that educational opportunities are expanded in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands. (Republic of Kenya; 2005, Sara et al ; 2009). This is a clear indication that the government is committed to ameliorating provision of education in ASAL areas. Although the government introduced FPE in the year 2003 which led to increase in the number of children in primary school, there remained regional disparities and cultural issues that affected the girls' access and retention especially among the marginalized communities (Aikman and Unterhailer; 2005). Previous research has addressed benefits of boarding facilities, for example as reducing the distance that children have to cover to reach the nearest school hence increasing the enrolment rate, single sex schools for girls leading to improved school performance since they participate more in learning than when they are in mixed school (Kane; 2004). Boarding primary schools that specifically target girls are common among pastoral communities of Kenya due low enrolment of girls in primary schools. (Aikman and Unterhailer; 2005). I think it is in order to address this issue of girl-friendly schools in this study mainly because of two reasons, firstly, the government's policy provision that aim to ensure schools and learning centers are accessible and friendly to girls with specific reference to provision of sanitary facilities that are appropriate and adequate as well as guaranteed security for those in boarding schools (Republic of Kenya; 2010). Secondly, as Sara et al (2009) states, In Marsabit county, where the case study school is located, girls only boarding schools is one of the solutions that has been found to be making it easier for girls to access school.

Having mentioned issues addressed in previous researches and the government policy that addresses girl friendly schools, this study therefore can be a starting point in identifying what the specific communities that these schools seek to serve feel about the girl friendly components of girls boarding primary schools. Having an assessment of the extent to which the girls' boarding schools are girl friendly is critical in not just developing policies that incorporate components of girl friendly schools in advancing education for girls in northern Kenya but also in gauging the performance of these schools against these components.

As in the case among all nomadic pastoralist communities in Kenya, Girls education is usually affected more than that of boys because of distance from school. Girls also tend to be more vulnerable if they either stay away from home or walk for long distance to school. Boarding schools for boys have also been in place for a long time now but those for girls have in the recent past been identified as a strategy to improve education of girls from nomadic pastoralist communities in Kenya. Due to the fact that girls have diverse needs from boys, they require boarding schools that are tailored to meet these unique needs and hence making their educational experiences enjoyable leading to increase enrollment and completion rates.

Based on the available literature on girl friendly schools, this study complements previous research that has lauded girl friendly schools specifically among pastoralists in Kenya where cultural beliefs and practices hinder girls from accessing education in addition to issues such as cattle rustling and persistent drought. It is against the backdrop of these issues that are unique to pastoralist in Kenya that this study seeks to find out whether the schools are girl friendly or not.

1.2 The Concept of girl-friendly schools.

There are quite a number of merits of educating girls some of which include healthy and better educated families, having a voice in marriage, seeking health care and avoiding HIV/AIDS. Ensuring that schools are girl-friendly is one of the ways that can be used to improve education of girls (Herz; 2006). According to Herz (2006) some of the factors that can make schools to be girl-friendly include the following,

Ensuring that latrines and toilets are provided for girls, Making sure those communities are mobilized to assist in education of all children, Employment of female teachers., making sure that teachers use teaching methods that do not discourage girls and Providing separate hours or schools for boys and girls where there is need.

The provision of girls only school is an approach that can steer increased enrolments, However, it is recommended that in addition to this, efforts have to be made to ensure that schools are girl-friendly so that girls are enrolled and remain in school in order to complete the full cycle of primary education (Herz and Sperling;2004).

The unavailability of girl friendly schools is one of the reasons that lead to low enrolment of girls in primary schools in many African countries. In addition to the necessary physical infrastructure, girl friendly schools are meant to create a conducive environment by providing separate toilets and running water for the girls, the teachers themselves should give equal attention to the girls and boys, having female teachers in the school as role models and providing a curriculum which is gender sensitive (Aikman and Untrehalter;2005). Some considerable achievements have been made in many African countries in the above mentioned areas, However, teachers methods of teaching, gender sensitive curriculum and employment of female teachers need to be addressed fully in order to make a considerable difference in girls access to basic education (Aikman and Unterhalter ;2005). Herz and Sperling;2004 explain that girls enrolment increase if they are taught by female teachers especially as they approach adolescence because if that is not the case, their parents may

feel that the girls may be exposed to sexual harassment in school. Herz and Sperling; 2004 further clarify that female teachers have been found to be role models in Africa and Middle East although the problem of hiring enough female teachers to teach in rural schools is persistent due to lack of qualified teachers and the problem of not getting urban female teachers to teach in rural areas. Kratli; 2001 illustrate that creating a familiar and friendly environment is one way of ensuring that boarding schools succeed. The following concepts of girl friendly schools which have been mentioned above by both Herz (2006) and Aikman and Unterhualter (2005) will be used in the analysis of whether the case study school is girl friendly or not. Girl-friendly schools should have;

Appropriate infrastructure,
Gender responsive curriculum, Clean running water and Presence of Female teachers as role models.

2. 0. Methodology.

The methods of data collection that I used are interviews and focus groups discussion. My decision to use interviews and not other methods such as questionnaires is based on the fact that interviews are adaptable and provide researchers with the opportunities to follow up responses and explore reasons (Bell; 2005). The case study school was chosen based on convenience while quota principle with reference to sex for the parents and ages for the girls was used in choosing the members of the focus group discussion. This was to ensure that I get a range of opinions from the participants (Denscombe; 2007)

I opted for a one to one semi-structured interview because it was easier to organize (Denscombe; 2007).It was also appropriate to use one to one interview because the participants will not feel intimidated by presence of others .The interviews were conducted in English language and notes taken using direct quotations of their responses to each question.

I also used structured focused group discussions as another method in addition to interviews. Focus groups discussion is valuable to this study because of my interest “in in-depth information” about the issue at hand. (Bell; 2005:162)

The members of the focus group discussions share and compare opinions and understanding coming up with one shared opinion on the topic of discussion. This in return will explain not only what people think but also why they think so (Denscombe; 2007).However, power relations in the group may also affect who takes part in the discussions and what each may say (Robson; 2002), for example in this case not all members of the group aired their opinions freely but instead some of them tend to agree with what the most assertive members had say (Bell; 2005).

3.0. Results

3.1.0. Is the school girl friendly?

3.1.1. Female teachers as role models.

The school has only one female teacher employed by the government .She is the only local female teacher in the division. The fact that female teachers act as role models was strongly raised by all

the participants in the study. They also stressed the need and their desire to have more female teachers. The role of female teachers in this case has two perspectives according to the participants, one is that their physical presence in the school motivates the girls to achieve their goals in life for example by aspiring to be like them and the other one is that female teachers can freely interact with the girls and hence share with them their experiences including how they achieved their goals.

One of teachers gave the following comment in response to how the presence of female teachers may influence the education of girls in the education in the school.

“Female teachers from the local community are able to share with the girls that they themselves passed through the same process in accessing education , especially the challenges, and managed to achieve what they currently have achieved through education, that is to be able to complete school and train as teachers”.

The above comment stresses the importance of interaction between the girls and the local female teachers which serves as motivation to the girls because they will work towards overcoming the challenges they face as they pursue education either at home or at school. They will understand that the same challenges were not only encountered by others girls before them but they overcame them and were able to achieve their goals in life. In relation to the above, Aikman and Unterhalter; 2005 stress the fact that girls need female teachers so that they can confide in them and identify with them as role models.

The only female teacher in the school explained that the presence of female teachers in the school can help build trust that the community members have of the school especially because they will feel that their daughters are safe at school and according to her this mean a lot since it can lead to increase in enrolment and in the end increase the level of the girls participation in education in the community. She further stressed this point by narrating her personal ordeal as the female teacher in the school.

“Many parents sometimes call out to me when I walk around the shopping centre for my own personal business, for example on weekends, they start telling me about problems that their daughters face in school and request me to assist the girls. And they usually don’t talk about this to other male teachers in the school. Sometimes even the head teacher refers the parents to me when they come to school to discuss about their daughters problems and even progress in school”.

Parents, especially the ladies strongly expressed their desire to have more local female teachers in the school since they believed that their daughters will be in safe hands. They Explained that this is important because they feel their daughters will be advised accordingly especially on matters sexual matters. This is valued by the mothers very much because their community does not accept any girl who gets pregnant outside wedlock and they explained no mother would like to see her daughter being cast out from the community as a consequence of getting pregnant before marriage.

3.1.2 Clean Running Water.

The unavailability of clean running water was highlighted by all the participant despite the fact water is a necessity for the girls in the school. The water that is used in the school is fetched from nearby wells by women who are paid by the school. It is used for cooking and other purposes in the school kitchen but not by the girls for their personal use such as washing clothes and bathing.

In the focus group discussions that I had with the girls I asked them how and where they get water for personal use like bathing and their responses were as follows;

Girl 1.

“We fetch water for ourselves from the wells for our use, like for example we fetch it on Saturdays and in the evenings after school and we use it for bathing and washing our Uniforms throughout the week”

Girl 2

“We try to fetch as much water on weekend and use it to bathe may be twice or three times per week but sometimes we bathe once per week and wash uniform only on weekend, especially if it not enough for our use the whole week”

Fetching water from the wells is a tiring and time consuming exercise for the girls and the time spent by the girls to get the water would have utilized in studying.

Parents in the focus groups discussion also identified clean running as a necessity but unavailable in the school. They agreed that running water should be provided for the girls if they are to learn without any interruptions and worries about how to get water for their personal uses. They believed that a lot of time is wasted in getting water from the borehole by the girls.

3.1.3 Gender Friendly Curriculum.

The teachers who took part in the study agreed that the curriculum that is used in the school is suitable for the girls. When I asked whether the curriculum is suitable for the girls one of the male teachers had the following to say,

“ Yes, the curriculum is good for the girls because like for example if you look at some of the subjects you find that there are topics that are related to the life of the girls, for example like in science we have topic like the sexually transmitted diseases” (male teacher 1)

As a response to the same question, a male teacher responded,

“curriculum we use in the school is good for the girls, for example in science they are taught about physical changes in the body and so it prepares them for the changes in the own bodies, that is to accept these changes and even to know what to do to cope”(male teacher 2)

The above statements from the teachers confirms that the curriculum is suitable for the girls since it addresses the issues that are important to the girls by equipping them with the knowledge and skills that they require in life, like in the example given by the teachers it helps them to be able to cope

with the changes in their bodies which is an important issue for the girls. This is important because it shows that the curriculum recognizes that boys and girls face different challenges as they grow up and reach maturity and that they require different ways of responding to these challenges and this is what the curriculum provides.

The girls were particularly excited to talk about what they learn in school that is similar to those that they or their friends experience in the process of pursuing their education. Some of the stories that they read in class depict some cultural practices in their own community that hinder girls from completing school or get access to school. One of the girls in the focus group discussion said the following with a lot of excitement in response to which lessons they enjoy most and why.

“English, and a story about a girl called Rukia who was in standard eight and got engaged and she did her examinations and passed well but the parents wanted her to get married. Then Rukia refused and took them to court.” (Girl 1).

To explain why they enjoy the story, the following responses came up,

“We like the story because it is like what happens in our community many of the girls are engaged while in school and some get married before they finish school and go to secondary school. We learn that there courts where girls can take their parents or people who take care of us when we are forced to get married” (girl 2)

The girls contribution to the above subjects on curriculum clearly indicate that they enjoy learning what is relevant to their lives and especially what equips them with knowledge on how to deal with problems that they encounter in the community as girls in pursuing education. This Particular story of the girl who was forced to get married that the girls chose reveal that it is what touches their lives or what they associate themselves with that they enjoy learning. This confirms the need to ensure that curriculum used in schools is relevant to both boys and girls (Oxfam GB; 2005). However, there are conflicting opinions about the relevance of the curriculum because unlike what is stated in this paragraph earlier on, some teachers feel that there is still a problem with the curriculum especially when it comes to the content of text books. The male teachers feel that curriculum is suitable for the girls citing topics such as sexuality as an example while the female teacher feels there are still some areas that need to be worked on as shown in the following response.

“In some text books, we still have problems that appear in texts when the pronoun he is used in examples and not she. This is bad; you know it can discourage the girls because they think that is only boys who can do certain things and I think this bad” (female teacher)

From the above response by the teacher the examples used in the text books do not motivate girls and it can affect their career choice because it may be unlikely for them to choose those careers that are shown by the use of the pronoun he. This is because the girls will grow up believing that certain careers are only meant for boys and not girls.

However, it is important to appreciate at this point that what the girls feel is relevant to them is not necessarily the case for the teachers because the girls feel relevant curriculum meant it relates to experiences that are culturally unique to them while teachers look at it from the perspective of general experiences of girls regardless of their socio- cultural background.

3.1.4 Appropriate Infrastructure.

The available infrastructure in the school includes eight classrooms, two dormitories, dining hall, administration block and toilets. There was a general feeling among the participants that the available infrastructure is appropriate for the girls. The head teacher, who is male, gave the following comment on whether the available infrastructure is appropriate for the girls,

“Yes, the infrastructure we have in our school is appropriate for the girls. This is because we have the dormitories, bathrooms and the toilets which are required in a boarding school”

The perspective of the head teacher is that of requirement of any boarding school regardless of whether it is for girls or boys.

However there was a contrasting view from the female teacher, who had the following to say,

“I feel that the dormitories should have been divided into cubes for the purpose of privacy because there are older girls and younger ones in the school. When the girls in adolescence are on their menstrual periods they will feel free to use sanitary pads as they dress in their own cubes than when the whole dormitory is the way it is now, also toilets that are near the dormitory currently have no lights and so there is a problem at night since the girls may not be able to use them because there are no toilets within the dormitories”

This particular teacher was of the opinion that the available infrastructure should meet the needs of the girl-child like in the example she gave having not just the dormitories but the cubes to meet the needs of the those girls who are in adolescence.

In this area where lack of security is a major issue, the teachers felt that it is important for the school to have a fence.

One teacher said,

“It is important for a girls school to have a fence for the purpose of providing security and because here there are fears of attacks by bandits”

Another teacher added the following on the need of the school to have a fence,

“Because of the Turbi massacre in 2005 when school children were killed within the school compound and since this school has no fence there is fear for the security of the girls”

In this part of Kenya where this school is situated there is insecurity due to cattle rustling between communities in Kenya and from neighboring countries. In 2005, school children were killed in early morning raid while attending morning preps in Turbi primary school by bandit. This school is located in the same district. So the issue of enhancing security for the girls in the school by having the school fenced should not be underestimated, In fact one of the teachers commented that one of the reasons that lead to some girls dropping out of the school was because the parents took them away after what happened in school at Turbi primary school.

The parents feel bandits may be changing tactics targeting schools and that their daughters will be safer if the school is fenced.

4.0. Discussion

This study investigated the presence of the characteristics of girl friendly school in the case study school in bridging the gender gap among nomadic pastoralist in North-Horr sub County of Marsabit County. Girls boarding primary schools have in the recent past been set up to increase their enrollment among pastoralist in Kenya and this is what formed the basis of the need for this research in establishing if they are girl-friendly. Apart from providing the girls with boarding facilities, girl friendly schools increase the chances of success of such schools in promoting education of girls.

This study elucidates the importance of ensuring boarding schools for girls are girl-friendly based on the responses of the respondents as well as findings from previous research. it also demonstrates that it is not just enough to build boarding schools for girls but the schools need to be girl-friendly so that they are serve the intended purpose well.

In the case study school the results indicate that though the school has led to increased enrollment of girls, the components of girl friendly are either not adequate or not present at all.

This is a case study of one school in the sub-county and this means that the case being one out of many girls boarding primary school in the sub-county, generalization of the results may not be appropriate.

5.0 Conclusion.

This study found out that the girls only boarding primary school has contributed to access to education for girls in the sub-county. The school has lead to increase in the number of girls enrolled in primary school since many parents wanted their girls not attend the mixed school due to cultural beliefs that girls and boys should not be allowed to interact freely especially once they reach adolescence. The school also provides the girls with boarding facilities since most parents are nomadic pastoralists. However, the findings of this study reveal that school lacks clean running water and has only one female teacher. The case study school should be fenced so that the girls are

safe while in school. Curriculum has also been noted as not to be wholly relevant to the needs of the girls, especially the real life cultural experiences and challenges. The available infrastructure such as the dormitory needs further improvement so that they serve the needs of the girls more. Toilets too should be located near or within the dormitory so that the girls can easily access them. The girl friendly school issues discussed in this paper is pertinent and need to be addressed if education of the girls from pastoralist communities is to succeed.

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