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Educational challenges and diminishing family safety net faced by high-school girls in a slum residence, Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

In 2010, there was a slight decrease in the number of out-of school adolescents from 75 million in 2009 (UNESCO, 2009) to 71 million in 2010, of which 55% are girls (UNESCO, 2010). In Kenya, only 17% of girls have secondary education (CBS, 2004). This paper analyzes the role of families in girls' secondary education in two schools within Nairobi province, Kenya. Data were obtained from interviews with adolescent girls attending Kamu and Lafama[1] schools in Nairobi province, the dropouts, and a sample of teachers. Results show girls' lives and opportunities were socially constructed and this permeated into the families, influencing the way parents treated their daughters. This further provided a fertile ground for sexual harassment that plagued girls within their own families. The Kenyan Government needs to influence women and girls perceptions, through *increasing campaigns from the grassroots* on the importance of being committed to girls' education.

1. Introduction

Research has consistently shown that girls' schooling is beneficial to their success and to society (Beoku-Betts et al., 1998; Heward and Bunwaree, 1999; Jejeebhoy, 1995; Rihani, 2006). However, research shows that equally important are the benefits that occur to the girls beyond primary education as they transition to secondary school. This is what Rihani (2006) calls the "virtuous cycle." She argues that the mere presence of secondary schools has an effect on greater primary school enrollment as well as completion of primary school partly due to the anticipation of attending secondary school.

Girls' secondary education is associated with increased social benefits to the society through increased political and civic participation, reduced instances of sexual harassment, and a lowered probability of young women being trafficked for labor and sex (Rihani, 2006); delayed age at marriage resulting in reduced family sizes because of contraception (Asiimwe, 2008; Jensen and Thornton, 2003). Secondary education offers girls greater ability to deal with HIV/AIDS (Rihani, 2006; Visser, 2007), by having the information required not only to reduce their risk of contracting HIV, but also to alter the way of thinking, and indirectly increase their chances of adapting to self protective behaviors. Thus, the "virtuous cycle" indirectly leads to increased secondary enrollment in an intergenerational effect (Rihani, 2006), which transcends beyond the immediate societal effects that accrue to girls' primary education.

Moreover, with secondary education and beyond, girls get a renewed sense of responsibility—one that enables them to take charge of shaping their own future, without leaving it in the hands of their fathers or future husbands (Murphy and Carr, 2007). Despite the realization that educating girls has immense benefits, girls continue to face constraints in various contexts—the school, within their families, in their communities/neighborhood, and their societies in general. The constraints, an outcome of the way girls have been *constructed* in the broader society, influence investment in their education, and negate the positive impact of girls on their respective societies. For purposes of this paper, we focus on those barriers and protective factors that negated girls within the family context.

2. The link between the family and girls' schooling

The role of families in the educational attainment of girls has been widely documented (Blake, 1981, 1989; Chernichovsky, 1985; Downey, 1995; Fuller et al., 1994; Knodel and Jones, 1996; Lam and Marteleto, 2002; Lloyd and Blanc, 1996; Lloyd and Gage-Brandon, 1994; Muganda-Onyando and Omondi, 2008; Parish and Willis, 1993). Scholars have argued that girls are at risk of low educational attainment in large families, but when the families are small, the girls should be at par with the boys (Blake, 1989). Blake

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[1] Kamu and Lafama are pseudonyms for the study sites/schools.

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(1989) further asserts that the disadvantages girls encounter are not only embedded in "dilution of parental resources" but also in the way sex roles/gender are defined, putting emphasis on marriage and childbearing at the center of girls' upbringing. Downey (1995) argues that even with the similarity of parents, children in large families will get fewer resources from their parents than children from families with fewer children. He further asserts that certain resources may be double diluted by, "simply being less available as sibship size increases and second by being of less benefit to children in the large families even if they are provided" (p. 758).

Other scholars argue that sibship size affects education attainment of girls in large families because of the time taken by girls to care for younger siblings (Fuller et al., 1994; Muganda-Onyando and Omondi, 2008). Therefore, girls who have younger siblings have a lower chance of ever enrolling in school compared to boys who have younger siblings (Buchmann and Hannum, 2001; Lloyd and Blanc, 1996; Lloyd and Gage-Brandon, 1994; Muganda-Onyando and Omondi, 2008).

3. The context of free secondary education

Free secondary education was introduced in Kenya in January 2008 by abolishing school fees (Ohba, 2009). This was because many children from Kenyan households who had completed primary schools were not gaining entry into the secondary schools. According to Ohba (2009) the government was to subsidize the cost of schooling per child to the tune of Ksh10, 265 (US$164) per year for all the children attending government secondary schools. But the subsidies did not include, 'caution money' for new students, 'development fund' charges and 'lunch fees' that were still charged to parents. What this meant was that levies continued to be charged in school despite the free secondary education policy going against what the vision of Kenya's president when he said the following at the launch of the free secondary education reform:

> . . .the main objective of providing free secondary education is to ensure that children from poor households acquire a quality education that enables them to access opportunities for self-advancement and become productive members of society (Speech by President Kibaki, February 2008).

The study findings by Ohba (2009) shows that government schools continue to charge levy fees for lunch, school buildings and in the case of boarding schools, fees/levies are charged for boarding equipment. In addition parents are supposed to provide items such as school uniforms, sports uniforms, books, and stationery. Thus, to prepare a child to join a day school as a form one costs about eight times the monthly income of an employed parent, 12–17 times of a self-employed parent, and 19–20 times of a peasant parent engaged in casual work. In essence, poor households in Kenya and in urban slum neighborhoods continue to face significant challenges in meeting the costs of free secondary education.

4. Conceptual framework

In conceptualizing the hindrances and educational resilience of adolescent girls within families, we adopted the risk and resilience framework. Many scholars have devoted their effort to understanding factors that can protect students against risks associated with poor outcomes (Arrington and Wilson, 2000; Connell et al., 1994; Mandleco and Peery, 2000; Nettles and Pleck, 1994; Spencer et al., 1996; Wang and Gordon, 1994; Winfield, 1991; Zimmerman and ArunKumar, 1994). The risk and resilience framework seeks to explain how children and young adults in hardship and distress exhibit positive academic outcomes, emotional attributes, and show social competence (Nettles et al., 2000). On the left side of the framework are the risk factors that make students vulnerable to an unfavorable outcome. On the right side of the framework are resilience factors—protective factors that decrease the likelihood that an adverse outcome will occur, even when children and young adults are exposed to life stressors. Therefore, resilience denotes that children can overcome severe hardship and have positive adult outcomes (Murray, 2003).

For the purpose of this paper, we adapted the Gore and Eckenrode (1996) definition of risk, which referred to risk as the presence of various life events and the effects of these life events on various groups. The definition encompassed the view that "negative life events" may be experienced differently among different groups and may be perceived as posing different stress levels among individuals or across groups. In keeping with this definition, hardships experienced by adolescent girls within families may be different from those experienced by boys. Likewise, the experiences of adolescent girls from families living in the disadvantaged settings may be different from those experienced by girls residing in more affluent families. In addition, the experiences of adolescent girls residing within the slum and attending secondary schools in poor neighborhoods may be typical to these neighborhoods and different from experiences of those attending school in relatively affluent neighborhoods.

On the contrary, the process of resilience is enhanced by the protective factors present in both the individual and the environment. Inherent in this definition is the notion that resilience is enhanced by an individual, his or her interaction with the environment, and the presence of protective processes that buffer the impact of risk on the individual. Scholars have advanced the notion that resilience can "enable people to develop social competency, skills in problem solving, and critical consciousness in relation to oppression, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. . .resilience involves traits such as self esteem, self efficacy, autonomy, and optimism" (Benard, 1995, cited in Arrington and Wilson, 2000, p. 225).

In explaining adolescent Kenyan girls' persistence in secondary school in the urban context, the dynamic definition of resilience focused on both the individual girls' interaction with their different environments and how this interaction may have led to the development of attributes to persist in school. In addition, their persistence led them to develop qualities that continued to make them stay in and complete school. Therefore, the risk and resilience framework frames our investigation into the role of families as either a risk or a protective factor in their secondary schooling.

In order to be resilient in school, girls would need to be buffered by protective factors. Protective factors are defined by Rutter (1985) as those "influences that modify, ameliorate, or alter a person's response to some environmental hazard that predisposes one to maladaptive outcome" (p. 100). For instance, family factors which includes, (1) having at least a parent who encourages a warm relationship and is supportive and (2) being exposed to parenting styles that are effective would be expected to boost schooling outcomes for girls. Therefore, the differences in the quality of families, the school (and peers in the same school), and the communities may either be protective or negate girls' schooling. When these factors are negative they become a hindrance. Furthermore, when they are protective, these factors promote adjustment to life stressors and persistence in school (see Fig. 1).

In addition, the ability of some of the girls to persist in school depends on whether the protective factors within the family outweigh the risks that other environments (school, and community) posed. Secondly, it will also depend on how much the other "environments" compensate for the risks that the girls experienced from the various "environments." For instance, it may be possible that certain girls persist in school because the school can