

Determinants of Female Participation in Primary Education: A Study of Kwale and Taita Taveta Districts, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors that determine female participation in primary education in Kwale and Taita-Taveta District of the Coast Province of Kenya. The study was based on a conceptual framework which centres on a gender structuring theory in which it is argued that culturally determined ways of defining women and men and their roles in a given society shape gender specific opportunities and constraints. It influences the manner in which the society orders its relations of production and the distribution of resources including education that result in gender differences. Seven research tasks guided the study. They included:(i) participation rate of girls in primary education in the two districts, (ii) participation rate as related to socio-economic factors, (iii) the influence of the educational level of family members, (iv) socio-cultural attitudes towards education, (v) the effect of household labour activities, (vi) school based factors and the perceptions on the importance of girl's primary education. The sample population of the study consisted of 120 household heads, 20 headteachers, 10 Islamic religious leaders, 2035 pupils from standard six, seven and eight of whom 1037 were girls. Data was collected through documentary review, in-depth interviews with household heads, headteachers and Islamic religious leaders, while primary school pupils completed a questionnaire. Participatory observation was also carried out in a small number of schools and households selected from within the main sample. Research findings established that there exist serious disparities which date back to the colonial period. Taita-Taveta which was fully integrated into the colonial economy and is relatively among the rich districts in the country has more educational resources than Kwale and girls' participation rates in primary education are higher. Boys and girls ratios in this district are equal. Government intervention in through the abolition of the so called school fees benefited girls only marginally with a small rise in enrollment, but did not significantly alter the boy-girl ratio in Kwale. Girls' participation is not only affected by low enrolments, but also by promotion or progression rates. It was established that with the expansion of primary education after independence, dropout rates rose from about 20 to 40 per cent for Kwale, while in Taita-Taveta the range was from 11 to 20 per cent. Although dropout rates appeared high for both boys and girls in Kwale it affected the latter more seriously than the former. Dropout rates for girls are not only high throughout the classes, but become more pronounced in the upper classes. Taita-Taveta does not only register low dropout rates but also retains more girls in the primary school system through repetition. Research findings also established that in terms of socio-economic factors, a large proportion of the community is involved in productive a economic activity that enables them to meet the high cost of their children's education as compared to Kwale. Closely related to the parental socio-economic background is the educational level of the family members. It is an important factor

influencing the participation of girls in primary education, for parents who themselves are educated; impart a positive view of schooling among their children. Taita-Taveta has a high percentage of parents who attained basic education than Kwale. The study also concludes that although a vast majority of parents in both Kwale and Taita-Taveta, have positive attitudes of educating both boys and girls, they are generally less inclined to educate girls than boys and harbour some traditional values that discourage the former's active participation in primary education. Religion that constitutes part of the socio-cultural factors was found to have a strong impact on girl's education. In Kwale where the population is predominantly Muslim, religious leaders who hold a strong sway are not only opposed to schooling in general, but to girls' education in particular. Western education is believed to have a disruptive effect on Islamic institutions. The socio-cultural attitudes that tend to discourage girl's schooling encourage them to participate more in domestic and farm work, thereby reducing their participation in education. With respect to school factors, although on the overall headteachers did not think that the school environment is discriminative against girls, it was established that the primary school teaching force is male dominated in the two districts and holds very negative views about girls schooling which adversely influence their participation. Finally the study concludes that the communities in both Kwale and Taita-Taveta hold positive views about the importance of providing basic education to girls. The provision of literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills in primary education enhances women's ability to perform the multitude functions that contribute to the social and economic development. A number of factors identified in the study are readily subject to alteration through policy intervention. It is therefore recommended that the literacy campaign that the government has been waging should be stepped up as well as public awareness strategy to change gender stereotypes about female education.

Keywords: Female participation, Primary education, Kenya

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