

# PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS ON CONSTRUCTIONS MASCULINITIES AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOLBOYS KIRINYAGA AND NAIROBI COUNTIES, KENYA

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This paper focuses on perceptions of teachers and parents on the constructions of masculinities among schoolboys *vis-a-vis* schoolgirls in Kirinyaga and Nairobi counties. The paper is derived from a study conducted 2011 and 2012 titled “*Girl-specific education focus and boys’ participation, performance and construction of masculinities in selected Kenyan schools*”. The guiding objective of the research was to interrogate how boys engaged with schooling as they constructed masculinities during their transition to adulthood within the gendered contexts of schooling. The basic feminist standpoint theories that present men as a group as benefactors of a power structure that oppressed women as a group was challenged through this study. This study departed from the traditional Kenyan gender research which often foregrounds girls’ education without problematising the schooling of their male peers -the boys. Our findings revealed that the family and community contexts bore considerable influence on the way that masculine identities were constructed among schoolboys and schoolgirls. While construction of femininities emerged as benefitting from an implicit and sometime explicit complementarity between home and school cultures. For many parents and teachers, schooling tended to offer less practical frameworks for construction of masculine identities compared with frameworks available for girls and femininities. *(Total words 197)*

**Key words:** *perceptions; gender identities; masculinities; Femininities; school cultures; family cultures;*

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## **Introduction**

This paper addressed perceptions of parents and teachers on construction of masculinities within the process of schooling. The paper comprises four main sections excluding the Introduction and Conclusions and Recommendations. The first section focuses on the Background of the Research Problem as well as the Problem Statement itself. This is followed by a Conceptual Elucidations and Theoretical Framing. The Methodology of the study is then presented followed by an expose of the Study Findings. Finally is Conclusion accompanied by the major Recommendations.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

### *The background & context*

This study is positioned within the context of various international instruments that underscore gender equality and equity within and through education. These include, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000), the Dakar Framework for Action Education for All Goals (2000) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999) among others. While girls and boys are essentially rights claimers for equal rights to education, within education and through education, state governments as well as parents and teachers (male and female) are the duty bearers who are mandated by law to ensure that such rights are accorded without discrimination that would influence negative constructions of masculinities and femininities.

Since Year 2003 when the current Free Primary Education (FPE) was introduced, a continuously steady survival rate was noted at primary Grade Five (5) (MoE, EMIS, 2007). In our study locations of Central and Nairobi Provinces, more girls than boys completed Grade Five. In the same period boys in Central Province dropped out of primary school at a higher rate (2.2%) compared to the girls at 1.6%. By Year 2007, girls' survival rate in primary Five (5) in Central Province was recorded at 88.9% compared with that of the boys at 79.6% (MoE EMIS, 2007). In Nairobi, however, the trend was slightly different with the girls trailing behind the boys by 1.2 percentage points –but nonetheless remaining in school to complete Class 8 at a higher rate than the boys who apparently had higher dropout rate (4.2%) compared with 4.0% among the girls. With the increased urgency to accelerate achievement of overall EFA goals as well as the gender equality MDG targets of Year 2015, any activity that is perceived as a risk in this mission needs to be investigated accordingly. In contemporary Kenya, the perceptions that boys were beginning to trail behind girls in various aspects of schooling calls for systematic investigation from a gender perspective with the aim of establishing any effects of schooling on constructions of masculinities *vis-à-vis* femininities in a country where boys had traditionally outperformed girls in education. Importantly, for this paper, the perceptions of parents (male and female) as well as teachers (male and female) are critical in this discourse because these are the duty bearers whose custodianship of children in their families or schools is sanctioned by law. Initially, parents were not part of the research design. However, as the study unfolded and preliminary findings began to take shape, it became clear that parents as duty bearers are key to the constructions of gender identities of both their female and male offspring. The researchers were persuaded within the qualitative research paradigm that the

inclusion of parents would add value in addressing the issue of identity construction among their sons in school and also their sons who had become were school-dropouts.

### *Research problem*

The overall study problem was hinged on the observation that few researches in Kenyan have interrogated the link between schooling and the social pathways of boys *vis-à-vis* girls, especially during the critical transitional stage of adolescence yet schooling is expected to play a key role in the construction of successful masculinities and femininities. The purpose of this study focused on the unpacking the evidence underlying the statistical patterns that appear to support perceived trends of boys disconnecting with schooling in pursuit of masculinities of early economic prosperity detached from masculinise constructed around academic certification. This study was guided by five objectives. However, this paper addresses only two objectives regarding teachers and parents as follows:

1. What are the basic perceptions of female and male teachers towards construction of masculinities among schoolboys in the context of gender equality?
2. What are the basic perceptions of male and female parents towards construction of masculinities among schoolboys in the context of gender equality?

## **CONCEPTUAL ELUCIDATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMING**

### *Clarification of main concepts*

The concept of **masculinity** (and masculinities), which is core in this study, is a relational one in the sense that it derives its meaning from the existence of the concept of femininity (and femininities). Both terms contribute to the broader concept popularly referred to as “gender” (see Squires, 1999). Basically, **gender** refers to the social, cultural, and psychological traits associated to men and women through specific socialisation practices and contexts. being biologically female and to men/boys being biologically male tends to prompt human beings to assigns gender to almost everything that is linked to women/girls, thus constructing feminine identities (femininities) as well as men thus constructing feminine identities (masculinities). Because gender allocation is so essentialised into human life, most people imagine gender to be natural and hence, innate. Studies of gender have shown that such essentialisation is based on a false premise of confusing biological **sex** and the associated roles with the social demands in human life see (Pattman and Chege, 2003). It is in the context of this essentialisation that a theorisation of the construction of Kenyan African masculinities is located for this paper to address parental and teacher perceptions on school under performance of boys *vis-a-vis* girls as one of the key themes of a study titled *School Participation, Performance and Construction of Masculinities among Boys in Selected Co-Education Settings in Kenya*.

### *Theoretical framing*

**Firstly**, the Discourse Theory as advocated by Foucault (1970) informed the theoretical framework of this study to a considerable extent in the sense that, according to Foucault (1970), identities such as male, female are as relational as is black and white and these exist because we have language to describe them. In addition, the Social Constructionist Theory as expounded by Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman

(2002) influenced the interpretation of this study throughout fieldwork and data analysis bearing in mind the essence of the theory that gender identities are not fixed but are continually developing according to the different ways in which individuals “construct” or perceive themselves in relation to the cultural norms and expectations. In this context, the researchers took into account that gender identities are “*not like shores that we simply step into but are negotiated*” and that identities are “*not things that we do or perform*” and are partly formed through language we use to describe ourselves and others (see Pattman and Chege, 2003).

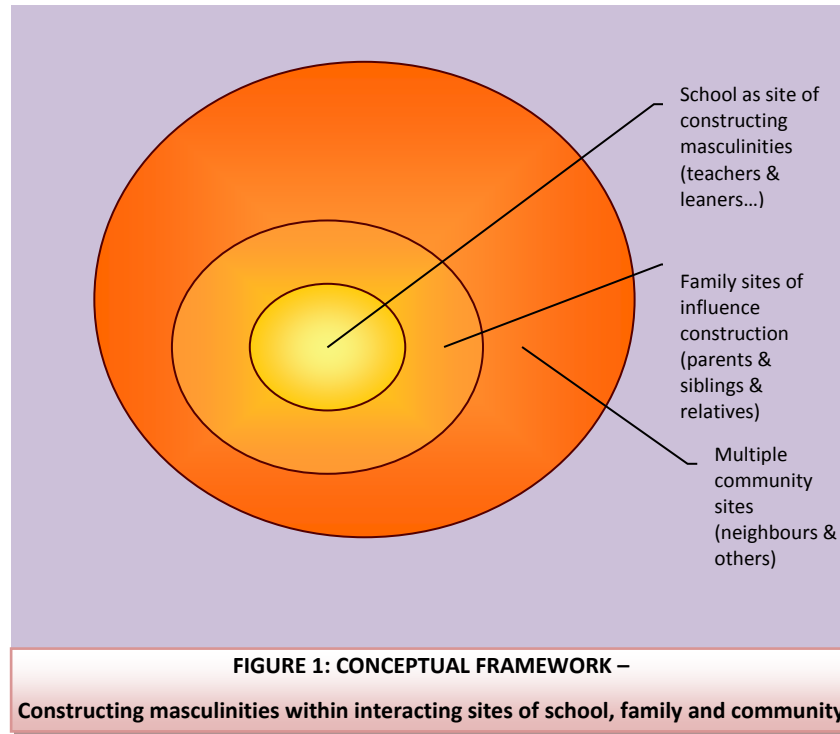
**Secondly**, Postmodern Critical Theory (PCT) which falls within Postmodernism provides the framework for theorising masculinities *vis-a-vis* femininities in the context of schooling for this study. This framework allows the critiquing and challenging of the dominant discourses that threaten the transformation of societies and hampers the pursuit for gender equality and equity. Critical theory offers a human rights-based perspective that guides generation and analysis of data and its interpretations of the actual realities and the possibilities entailed (see Horkheimer, 1937). The PCT is thus aligned to social emancipation through the uncovering of ‘aspects of society, especially ideologies that maintain a *status quo* via restricting or limiting different groups’ to the means of gaining useful knowledge’ (Humm, 1995: 50-51). In addition, this theory helps in politicizing social problems, and situating the problems in historical and cultural contexts. From a human rights perspective, Postmodern Critical Theory allows research communities to participate in the generation of knowledge through representations of meanings and interpretations of their experiences using their own voices, thus ‘relativizing the findings’ (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52) and enhancing the ownership of emergent knowledge through a process that is participant-centred.

### *Conceptual framework*

Social Constructionist informed the conceptual framework within which evidence adduced and analysed and discussed. Within this framework, gender (masculinities and femininities) are ‘socially constructed (rather than being biologically given and driven), making them subject to variation across historical and social contexts. Gender identities also interact with other factors such as poverty, urbanisation and globalization’ (Barker, 2008), resulting in fluid forms of masculinities (and femininities). Literature on masculinity reveals that for boys, the ‘understanding of how they have to act in order to be acceptably male’ is a crucial developmental undertaking (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002: 75-76). Accordingly then,

In a social constructionist perspective, gender norms emerge from prevailing patterns of hegemony/power/supremacy and patriarchy and are in turn reinforced and reconstructed by *families, communities and social institutions*. (...) [Girls and boys] also learn such norms in *schools* and other social institutions and from their peer groups, which may encourage risk-taking behaviour, competition and violence, and may ridicule boys who do not live to these social expectations (Barker, 2008:8). [*Authors' emphasis*]

In view of this conceptual framework, gender positioning entails multiple interacting social sites as observed by Scalway (2000). The following is a graphic representation of this conceptualisation.



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adapted the multiple methods as a methodological approach that combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. It was important to embrace methods that allowed respect for the humanity of participants, while remaining ‘emergent and evolving’ (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 2). Within this framework, comparative case studies were conducted between urban and rural settings as well as across the county of Nairobi and Kirinyaga with the aim of eliciting multiple social realities within specific settings while pursuing and documenting ‘in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (..) in real-life context’ (see Mugenda and Mugenda 2012: 39).

### Sampling

#### *Research locales, sites and participants*

Two counties in Kenya, namely Nairobi and Kirinyaga that located respectively in Nairobi and Central provinces of Kenya were selected purposively based on official Ministry of Education (MoE) pronouncement regarding perceived deterioration of boys’ education compared with that of the girls, especially in terms of enrolment and completion as well as in performance in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education –KCPE (MoE ministerial release, 2011).

In each of the 2 counties of Nairobi and Kirinyaga, 2 research districts were sampled purposively based on their location as urban, peri-urban or rural, yielding a total of (4). Within each of the 4 districts, 4 co-

educational primary schools were purposively selected to comprise a total sample of 16<sup>2</sup> schools based on two criteria. *Firstly*, their location as urban, peri-urban or rural and *secondly*, their overall performance whereby half of the schools had girls outperforming boys in specific aspects such as enrolment, completion and academic performance that qualified them for transition to secondary school. Out of the targeted 15 schools covered, 8 were in Kirinyaga and 7 in Nairobi. The study selected class 7 as most appropriate as the pupils had reasonable experience of being in primary school and had relatively less pressure on preparations for the final Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE). Figure 2 portrays the sample covered in all the schools.

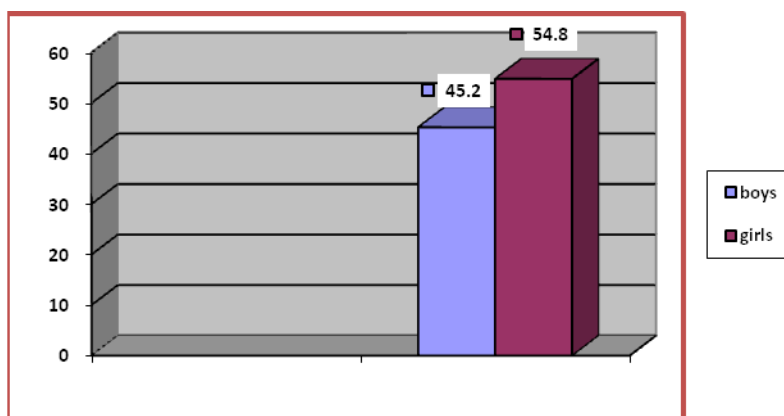


Figure 2: Pupil Sample by gender

The study also included head teachers from the sample schools (7 female and 8 male) who participated in 15 in-depth individual interviews while teachers (30 female and 30 male) of the Class 7 pupils participated in 15 mixed-sex focus group discussions (FGDs) –one in each of the schools. In addition, 30 single-sex FGDs were conducted with parents (33 mothers and 27 fathers) of participating pupils of the Class 7 pupils who accepted the invitation to be part of the study. Table 1a, b and c capture the three categories of adult sample

Table 1a: Head teachers by gender		Table 1b: Class teachers by gender		Table 1c: Parents by gender	
Gender	Frequency	Teachers	Frequency	parents	Frequency
Female	7	Female	30	Mothers	33
Male	8	Male	30	Fathers	27
Total	15	Total	60	Total	60

Key informants were sourced from among government officers namely, Education Officers (DEOs) as well as District Officers (DOs). The latter served as the entry points in each district as a matter of protocol. Their interviews focused not only on matters of enrolment, transition and performance of both

<sup>2</sup> One of the sampled schools did not participate due to persistent conflict of timing between the research team and the school.

boys and girls, but also on their perceptions regarding gender differences in the process and outcomes of schooling. Table 3 below depicts a description of the sample of the Education Officers who participated in this study.

Table 3: Government Officers by District, Designation and Gender			
District	Position	Gender	
		m	f
Kasarani	District commissioner (DC)	√	
	District education officer (DEO)		√
Langata	District Officer One (DO1)		√
Kirinyaga central	District Commissioner		√
	DEO representative		√
Mwea	DEO Representative	√	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>

### Generating the data

For the parents, the main method of generating data was the FGDs. Out of the 51 FGDs conducted in all the research sites 14 were with mothers and fathers in single-sex settings. Among teachers, 7 mixed-sex FGDs were conducted while female and male pupils also participated in single-sex FGDs. Data from the different sources was collated and triangulated in a bid to validate the issues presented.

### Data Analysis

The *atlas ti* computer software was used for analysing text data from FGD. The *Atlas ti* was key in processing thematic codes, transformation of the interview transcripts and actual analysis. In addition, the listening guide method propagated by Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) helped to enhance the analysis in terms of offering guidance on how to link what the researcher hears from verbalised discussions with what is *not said*, namely the silences.

### Ethical and Logistical Considerations

**Firstly**, the logistical concerns were addressed through obtaining a Kenya government research permit from the relevant Department of Science and Technology. Within the research Districts, courtesy calls to the DOs were part of the research protocol that supported accountability and transparency of the research activities. Further, within the schools, the administrators were briefed and allowed to interrogate the research objectives, relevance and potential significance.

**Secondly**, ethical considerations entailed the researcher seeking informed consent from all the research participants. Within the schools, teachers provided access to the pupils as their professional guardians while representative parents provided general consent as members of the school-parents committees. In addition, discussions regarding the nature and form of the study were held with each of the various categories of participants, including learners (girls and boys) to ensure mutual understandings. Eventually, all interviews and FGDs were tape-recorded based on informed consent and the right of

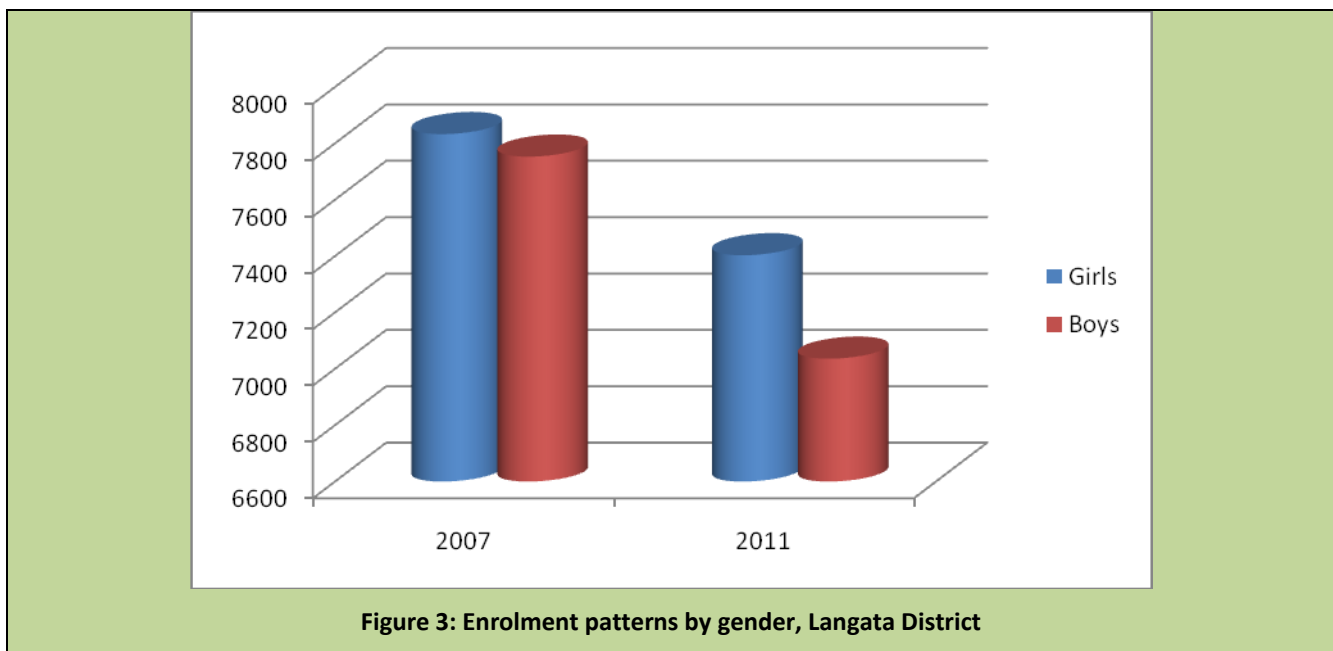
participants to withdraw from the interviews without obligation was explained. Finally, the researchers all transcriptions were identified by the pseudonyms of the participants to ensure anonymity and protection in case of unforeseen eventualities in the future.

## PRESENTATION OF STUDY FINDINGS

### School-based evidence of declining male performances that negate the successful masculinity

Data that were available confirmed, unequivocally the general perceptions that boys were indeed lagging behind girls in half of the schools in the two study counties. In addition, even where data were not available, girls were still portrayed as being more pro-school compared with their male peers who were described often as “not too keen” with schooling in almost all areas that include enrolment, transition and performance.

In Langata District of Nairobi County for example, our findings show that more girls than boys remained in the primary school system during the 5 years leading to the study period. In 2007, the boys in this county were 8,047 which was 6% fewer than the girls at 8,153. By 2011, however, the boys had decreased by nearly 9 percentage points to stand at 7,293 compared to the girls whose enrolment had declined by 5 percentage points to stand at 7,403 as depicted in Figure 3 below.



This section focuses on parental and teacher perceptions on the role of schooling and community in the construction of masculinity for schoolboys.

In Kirinyaga Central District of Kirinyaga County, the trend of girls maintaining relatively higher rates in school enrolment was noteworthy in half of the 8 participating schools. However, even in schools where the boys were more, their retention rate was lower than that of the girls as the boys tended to



leave school earlier than the girls. According to Government officials in the two Districts in Kirinyaga County, boys lacked male role models whom they could identify with educational achievement.

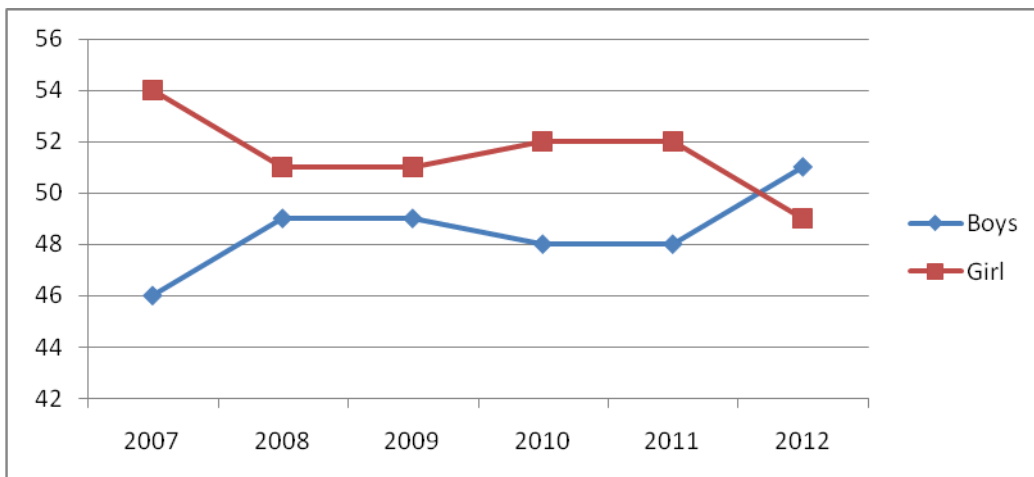
**The government officer from one district explained:**

*Most of the men considered to be successful in the vicinity of where these boys come from are not highly educated and many of them are known to have failed miserably in school; yet they are the wealthiest and hence successful in the eyes of the people.*

**The other officer observed the following:**

*There are many parents who encourage their sons to aim at becoming rich early by doing business and earning money, but the same parent are keen in supporting the success of daughters through education. This situation encourages boys not to focus on schooling but instead they leave school while still in primary school while girls continue.*

As the teachers from these two districts discussed this scenario with explicitly expressed concern, it was noteworthy that very few schools seemed to have a policy in place to address the issue of boys leaving school early. Indeed, in all the 15 school in both Kirinyaga and Nairobi counties, there was only one school located in Kirinyaga Central where the head teacher explained the school unwritten policy of trying to motivate girls and boys equally to complete school and compete equally. Despite the efforts in this school, the gender disaggregated data still portrayed that the proportion of girls in school had remained more than that of the boys for 5 consecutive years since Year 2007 to Year 2011 as depicted in the Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4:** Urban school in Kirinyaga Central District

- *Successful male identities constructed outside the norms and mission of schooling*

During interviews and FGDs, the head teachers as well as class teachers respectively expressed the assumption that girls *–more than the boys- were increasingly getting motivated to complete school*. Many of them argued that the *trend of having fewer boys in school was likely to continue because, the family as well as school cultures tended to support girls more than they did boys*. This tendency had potential to enhance the construction of masculinities that are anti school as has been established among Jamaican boys as well as boys in south west states of Nigeria whereby boys left school early because they found its mission irrelevant to the construction of successful masculinities.

According to most of the most of the female teachers, the increase in girls' enrolment and retention in the school was directly linked to *both in-school as well as out-of school social and economic factors that influenced girls and boys in different but explicitly gendered ways*.

All the head teachers and the class teachers, without exception, were of the view that *the contemporary family was characterised by parents, mainly mother, who made explicit efforts to not only keep their daughters –more than their sons- in school but also motivate them and support them to attain educational success both in the process of the school cycle and in the benefits or outcomes*. It was argued that many parents apparently

- *Failing returns in education investment male*

There was an emergent perception that investment in male education through schooling was *failing in demonstrating commensurate returns to the investor (parents)*. This portrayal negates the traditional expectations of men in many Kenyan communities which historically relied on the male off-springs to support the family, and especially parents, in their old age. Historically, investment on male heirs was a reasonable thing to do. However, this perception of male *support has been dwindling over time whereby, more men than women have been known to neglect their aging parents*. Interviews with parents as will be noted later on in this paper explained this fact.

The fact that society expectations of the boy child was also dwindling was a dominant theme among the teachers and head teachers. One of the teachers in Kirinyaga pointed the blame finger towards the parents and the society at large suggesting that the disconnect between schooling of boys and successful masculinities lies within the family.

It is the way the society views at home. At home we are having men. They are not doing their duties so these boys have got nobody to look up to (Kirinyaga Central–teachers FGD)

In Nairobi, one school administrator was of the view that schools, was failing the boys in their construction of masculinities. She explained:

We should continue concentrating on this side (of girls) but also *bring the other (the boys) on board so that we can have (equality for) boys and girls...* because I tend to think maybe we concentrate on the girl so much but you find that our girls will not have any men to marry them. Later on you have these same (unschooled) men who will marry them (female deputy head teacher, Nairobi... *emphasis added*).

Role modelling was yet another theme that emerged. In almost all the schools, *male role models were described as clearly lacking*. **Firstly**, distribution of the female teaching workforce raised questions even to the male school administrators whose expressed perceptions clearly indicated that they believed the boys apparently lacked male figureheads in the schools. They argued that male teachers in the school needed to be empowered with skills on how to guide and counsel boys on matters of schooling as well as on matters of becoming men in the same way as female teachers did with the girls especially in preparing them for womanhood. It is therefore logical to assume that many of the boys may have felt socially inadequate or frustrated with the way schools failed to explicitly address their needs in a holistic manner. One of the Kirinyaga County head teachers expounded on this matter as he reflected on relevant historical milestones for his school:

When I came to this school, incidentally I was the only man out of 20 teachers ... 19 were ladies and I felt there was a lot of imbalance. So I kept on asking the DEO (District Education Officer) to post a few men here so that my boys... the men teachers can also be good role models to the boys. The DEO has done a lot because out of the 1, we are now 4 male teachers and the ladies are quite many. But one thing that makes me happy is that ladies are good workers despite many, many other problems (they encounter).

### **Mothers and fathers' perceptions on construction of masculinities and schooling**

Many mothers in both Nairobi and Kirinyaga expressed value in investing in both girls and boys equally. However they also expressed *categorically that they had lost faith in investing in boys' education specifically because they had noted that boys did not support their families in the future*. One mother in an FGD was quick to explain that boys were greatly disadvantaged in schooling when family finances were scarce; a view that was supported almost unanimously in all FGDs with parents as exemplified below

(...) you know us parents discourage our children... if I have a boy who is in primary, then I tell him, if he gets to class 8, I won't have money to take him to secondary school...this affects the boy so much that he begins thinking of other worldly things" (Kasarani, Mothers FGD),

#### *Male child labour, social entertainment and schooling (the blame game)*

In both Nairobi and Kirinyaga, *teachers and parents concurred that boys had more distracters from schooling compared to the girls*. While Nairobi boys were attracted by daily entertainment places where they could watch daytime videos or play a game of pool, the Kirinyaga boys were attracted by both entertainment and increased child labour opportunities through which they could earn ready money by working as casual labourers in the transport industry, farming and farm trade. According to one father from Kirinyaga:

Rice farming and selling are the main businesses in Mwea District and it takes control of boy child. If the boy is sent away from school for any reason, he knows he can easily be employed in the rice paddies. Some boys also hire farm plots and if sent away from school, they just leave and usually would not resume learning. Other boys find it more beneficial to get employed in the

farms by these rice tycoons and when they get a taste the payment, the value of going to school evaporates... I mean... why then would the boy want to be in school when he knows that eventually it is the money he earns that counts; yet he can earn without any formal education. You see... this is what brings about problems for boys [Parent's FGD, Kirinyaga).

Both the parents and the teachers were unanimous that rice farming presented high competition for boys' labour as they were perceived to be readily available compared to the girls and also capable to bend in the paddies for longer hours compared to adult labourers. This practice may have contributed to the boys reported overwhelming dis-interest in schooling as the viable pathway to becoming successful adults, and more so economically successful men compared to economically poor but schooled men. In Nairobi County, on the other hand, teachers reported that they had little control if any, on the activities in which the boys (or even girls) engaged outside the school. These would include motor bike taxis and donkey cart water ferrying business.



Acquiring the “cool pose” of a boda-boda motobike rider –a marker of masculinity



The potential for boys owning donkeys for water vending as income generating activity

Further, some of the male parents in Nairobi's peri-urban setting agreed that they (parents) were to blame for discriminating against boys in ways that made the latter disillusioned with schooling. One of the fathers argued that parents who did not support boys as much as they did girls especially with regard to motivating them with schooling were considered as the major contributors to poor performance and low transition rates to higher classes. The Nairobi father said:

The boys really feel they are discriminated at home because when parents are shopping, they give more preference to the girl: But when the boys also demand to be considered, they are told to shut up; they are not girls (...). What we as parents don't realize is these

boys have brains and they can see how we are segregating them at home...so he decides to look for other means to provide for himself. (Peri-urban Nairobi school, FGD-Father)

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, and focusing on the perceptions of parents and teachers, the researchers deduced four main conclusions and related recommendations.

**Firstly**, the general perception of both male and female parents that schooling was becoming less explicitly supportive of boys was a key theme. In this context, the researchers recommends a replication of this study in similar education context with the aim of establishing the spread and pattern of this perception which may affect the kind of masculinities that school boys are constructing.

**Secondly**, the study findings suggest two main factors that did not favour schooling of boys in the construction of successful masculinities. These include the yearning for material and economic wealth as the material for construction of successful masculinities. They also include the yearning for leisure and easy life outside classrooms and schools which appeared to have more attention on girls while ignoring the boys. The study recommends that schools employ rights perspectives that would give meaning of being valued in every activity whereby gender equality and equity would be accorded in the interest of both boys and girls.

**Thirdly**, the findings that boys were often left to fend for themselves means that boys were driven to seek economic independence at an earlier age than their female peers. This would mean that boys begin to earn a living early and construct their identities as bread winners and providers of themselves and their families. Such observations necessarily call for renewed focus within the families to construct boys as they view girls needing role modelling and provision of basic needs.

**Fourthly**, because of the apparent absence of successful male role models who would be positively be identified with educational successes from schools, schools could invite either alumni or national figures to provide living examples and to motivate especially the boys.

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