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To cite this article: Fatuma N. Chege & Madeleine Arnot (2012) The gender–education–poverty nexus: Kenyan youth's perspective on being young, gendered and poor, *Comparative Education*, 48:2, 195-209, DOI: [10.1080/03050068.2011.608897](https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.608897)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.608897>



Published online: 12 Jan 2012.



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The gender–education–poverty nexus: Kenyan youth’s perspective on being young, gendered and poor

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This article argues that the role of education within the gender–poverty debate needs to be reconceptualised. It stresses the importance of conceptualising the gender–education–poverty nexus as a cluster of complex interactive combinations and bonds in which education outcomes are shaped by, and shape, both poverty and gender. The aim of the paper is to contribute towards a greater understanding of this set of interrelations. It does so by drawing on findings from research in Kenya in which a sample of 24 young people (brothers and sisters aged 16–25) living in 18 poor households were interviewed. These young men and women with varying levels of formal schooling discussed the complex relationships they perceived between their education, gender relations in the community, and the adult lives they hoped to build. Young men wished to build a life in the community whilst some of the young women were keen to marry and leave. Female and male youth were aware of gender changes in identities and roles and how they might challenge the respect associated with particular forms of masculinity. Although weakening of gender boundaries in employment was observed, these appeared to be more associated with young people’s survival strategies than with gender equality promoted by schools.

Education is not a way to escape poverty – it is a way of fighting it. (Mwalimu Julius Nyerere¹)

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the goal of creating gender equality *in* education has been associated with the creation of gender equality *through* education and linked, by the Millennium Development Goals, to the ambition of reducing poverty and creating sustainable development. Female education would not just improve female employment and hence family income but would also help reduce family size, and improve the nation’s health and well-being. Women would be key agents of development, empowered through their schooling.

However, it is now recognised that this relationship between gender, poverty and education is more complex. Development feminists have argued that the poverty agenda has to understand, at a more sophisticated level, the ways in which gender relations shape and are shaped by poverty. As Robinson-Pant observed, a crude assumption is made that if gender disparity in access to primary and secondary schooling is closed, there would be sufficient female ‘empowerment’, ‘to overcome the political, social and economic obstacles that have kept [women] in poverty’ (2004, 473).

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Since, in this context, education is seen as an incontestable good, the role that schooling plays in ‘perpetuating traditional inequalities’ and transmitting dominant values such as gender hierarchies, is often ignored (2004, 474–475). Yet schools can undermine girls’ confidence; as gendered institutions, they are linked into local constructions of gender, and to gender segregations within poverty. Further, without a more subtle critical analysis, the small changes that schooling brings into ‘normal’ gender relations may be overlooked.

Such entangled relationships between gender, education and poverty have been addressed by education feminists trying to move ‘beyond access’ models which focus exclusively on provision and retention without exploring, for example, gender cultures, school-based gender violence and patriarchal cultural conventions which determine girls’ futures (Unterhalter 2009). These parallel analyses suggest that what is needed is a recognition of the complex interactions within what we wish to call the *gender, education and poverty nexus*.² Below, we first consider how these bonds have been conceptualised before exploring how male and female Kenyan youth understand the associations between these three elements in their lives.

Conceptualising the gender–education–poverty nexus

The relationship between gender and poverty has been through many iterations. As Jackson argued, gender was caught in ‘a poverty trap’ (1998, 39); recognition of women’s acute poverty, even if mainstreamed within development agendas, was no substitute for an analysis of gender and of female subordination. When development economists and agencies positioned women and gender relations within a poverty/efficiency approach, they assumed that gender equality could be achieved through poverty reduction and *vice versa*; yet such ‘adding’ of women diverted attention from the fact that gender identities and power structures pattern all social life. This insight was ‘lost in translation’ in the poverty debate (Jackson 1998, 43).

Similarly there was a marked failure to address dominant gender ideologies in the so-called ‘new poverty agenda’ of the late 1990s which focused on promoting ‘secure and sustainable livelihoods’ (Jackson 1998, 49). Neither the dominance of metric modelling of gender and poverty nor the new participatory consultation mechanisms used to elicit the ‘true’ voice of poor women, produced greater gender awareness (Kabeer 1997, as cited in Whitehead and Lockwood 2000, 134). Not only were women’s voices not heard but women lacked support and influence in shaping poverty alleviation programmes. Gender differences which were known to exist in male and female definitions of well-being and the role of wealth were not tapped by the new, seemingly objective ‘mental-metricism’ used in consultation surveys (Jackson 1998, 55).

An equivalent lack of a critical gender analysis in poverty alleviation policy has been found by, for example, Whitehead (2003)³ when she examined four Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), in Zuckerman’s (2002) study of five PRSPs,⁴ Whitehead and Lockwood’s (2000) analysis of six World Bank African Poverty Assessments (PAs) and Takyi-Amoako’s (2008) study of Ghana’s Poverty Assessment. Taken together, these studies suggest that there was no agreement on what the term ‘gender’ or gender analysis meant and that there was a relatively weak commitment to explore gender relations. Even assessments that explored gender in the household failed to provide evidence of the connections between household poverty, restricted domestic systems and women’s lives (Whitehead and Lockwood 2000, 122; Takyi-Amoako 2008, 196). This ‘subtle and pervasive malaise’ in poverty alleviation

strategies meant that ‘gender appears and is made invisible in the evidence on poverty’ (Whitehead and Lockwood 2000, 123). Significantly, Zuckerman (2002) found that, even though gender equality was correlated with ‘greater poverty reduction and economic growth’, as ‘ungendered’ (non-gender sensitive) poverty reduction strategies PRSPs did not in fact promote gender equality. Indeed such gender-blindness meant anti-poverty strategies were more likely to slow economic development, deepen and perpetuate gender inequalities and reinforce gender patterns.

Whitehead’s (2003) investigations of PRSPs worryingly also found that women’s vulnerability, voicelessness and powerlessness had not been integrated into the qualitative dimensions of PRSPs’ analysis. Firstly, voices of male and female members of poor communities were ‘stifled in the contested space between government and civil society organizations (CSOs)’. Female citizens were hardly consulted at all and gender advocates within CSOs appeared not to have had success in influencing policy. Secondly, the overarching concern in development programmes to represent the solidarity and common values of the poor seemed to result in consultative methodologies such as Participatory Research Assessment (PRA) which overrode the need to report on gender inequality, women’s oppression and female resistance. Without hearing women’s voices, they missed out the significance of gender conformity as a means, not of obedience, but of self-respect. A full critical gender analysis would also be much more cautious about the findings of local representations of poverty (particularly since women may have different definitions of poverty). Consultative approaches need to consider carefully, as Jackson argued:

What women *can want*, what it is thinkable to desire, differs from what it is culturally thinkable for men to want; what women *can say*, what a muted ‘vocabulary’ allows, also differs and finally, what women *will say* in the context of a public PRA exercise bears a gender imprint. (Jackson 1998, 57)

Researching subjective perceptions of gendered social relations within poverty contexts allows different notions of ‘freedoms’, gender power and forms of discrimination to be brought out. As a consequence, concepts of human agency and personhood might even be redefined (Whitehead and Lockwood 2000, 125–126). However, there are also many warnings that PRA, as a method of community research, represents a particular ‘gendered politics of communication’ in which local knowledge is affected by the interactive relationship between researcher and researched (Sen 2000). Jackson warns researchers that ‘women’s voices are profoundly shaped by context, intra-community struggles, and the politics of (multiple identities) and there is . . . a danger of offering highly selective presentations of opinions, perceptions and representations’ (1998, 58–59).

Bringing education into the gender–poverty nexus

If we now place education within this gender–poverty nexus, it is important that formal schooling is not represented as an independent variable but as an institutional expression of gender relations and poverty impacts, as well as a contributor to gender and poverty in adult life. The interconnections and bonds described above between gender and poverty shape the nature of these educational mediations. As such, we are only starting to understand the nature of those experiential mediations in diverse cultural contexts. In educational access debates, it is clear that underlying patterns of wealth organised through and between families deeply influence what young

men and women living in poverty are able to achieve educationally. In terms of educational outcomes, Colclough et al., for example, found, in their study of nine African countries, that such outcomes were affected by extensive gendered wage discrimination, job reservations and differences in promotion practices that ‘consistently favour males’ (2003, 249). These gendered divisions of labour, as well as those in the home (for example, the dependency on female caring work, the customs relating to marriage, childbearing and transitions to adulthood), differentially shape both access to and outcomes of schooling for young men and women. There are ‘different social conventions which influence the returns to education differently for boys and girls’ (Colclough et al. 2003, 250). Similarly, as Unterhalter observes:

... gender structures the policy economy and social conditions surrounding schools. The gender politics of power have particular consequences for children’s well-being and gender dynamics often mean the outcomes of schooling are distributed unfairly. (2007, 6)

Consequently one cannot assume that the benefits of schooling accrued, or perceived to be accrued, are the same at any time for both sexes. The official representation of the benefits of girls’ education arguably fails to capture the significance of the role that education plays in reproducing or challenging structural gender inequalities over the course of young people’s lives, or to explore the ways in which better returns on investment in female education can be ‘hijacked’ without warning by unequal gender power within society. More schooling does not always lead to more female autonomy, economic independence or even changes in fertility behaviour (Jeffery and Jeffery 1998). Therefore deeper qualitative analysis is needed in order for the daily encounters between gender, education and poverty to be understood. Arguably, poverty analysis should explore how gender relations within households and the labour market come into relation with education and personal identities, relations and values (Kabeer 1997).

Drawing on this literature, our conceptualisation of the relevant factors within the gender–education–poverty nexus are described diagrammatically in Figure 1 below. The value of this concept of a gender–education–poverty nexus is that it signals that a different kind of research approach and policy focus is needed if educationally oriented anti-poverty strategies are to be informed by gender and are to reduce gender inequalities (and *vice versa*). The arrows indicate that the real life interactions between all three elements are as important as the elements themselves (cf. Unterhalter 2007). Within the aim of exploring such interactions, and bearing in mind the concerns about qualitative research on gender and poverty raised earlier, we have explored what it meant for young people with variable amounts of formal schooling to be ‘young, gendered and poor’. Below we report on some of the findings from our interviews with a sample of male and female Kenyan youth.

The study

The aim was to contribute to the gender–education–poverty nexus and poverty alleviation agenda by purposively exploring the interface between the perspectives of youth and their parents living in diverse households. The project established its own participatory research approaches. By designing an inter-generational study within a sample of local households, we were able to ensure that mothers and daughters, and fathers and

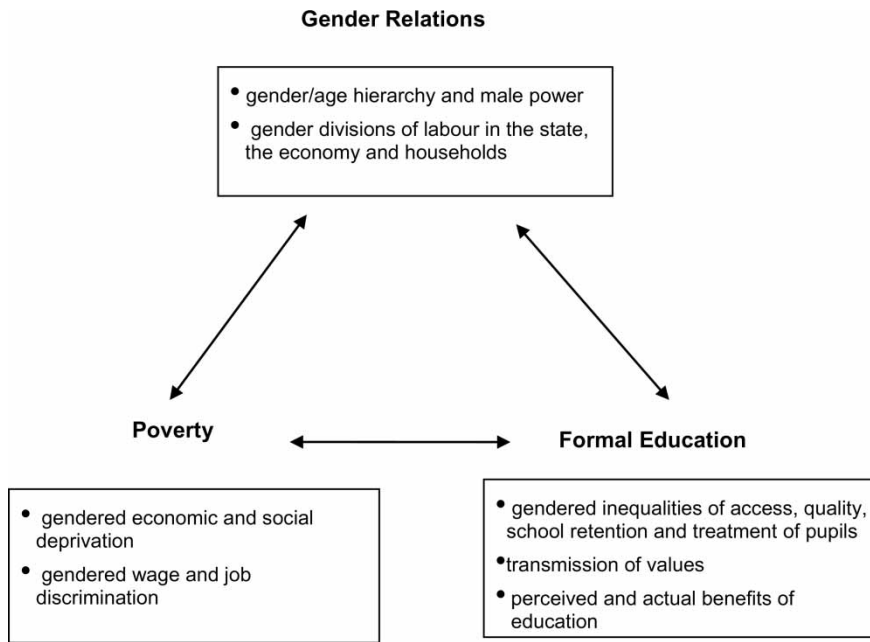


Figure 1. Gender–education–poverty nexus.

sons, were included in the study and that comparisons could be made between the different conceptualisations of the education/poverty/gender relationship.

Taking into account the difficulty of interpreting voices across cultures and language (Mosse 1994), the project prioritised the training in qualitative methodologies of six local linguistically and socially matched young researchers (three male and three female) who conducted the fieldwork. Five researchers were parents who had young people within the age bracket of the youth sample; one of the female researchers was a mother of a young child. For each interview, the team constantly tried to ensure that researchers and participants were paired by language, gender and age.⁵

The research design

The urban element of the project was conducted in Kibera, a sprawling informal settlement in the heart of Nairobi ranked among the largest and poorest human settlements in sub-Saharan Africa. The location of our investigations was Hohoni (pseudonym), one of 10 sub-villages characterised by ethnic diversity that includes the original inhabitants of Kibera – the Muslim Nubians whose ancestors are Southern Sudanese. The majority of Kiberans live in conditions of considerable material deprivation – in mud/earth-walled or paper-walled homes. There is a severe lack of amenities including sanitation facilities, sewage disposal, clean water, road networks and electricity.

In order to generate a sense of the community a census of households was conducted, revealing that Hohoni in 2006 had a population of 1923 (51% male and 49% female) residents who were organised into 283 households.⁶ Detailed information on household members which revealed the age distribution, gender, education level, certification, occupation and marital status allowed us to identify the location of young

men and women aged between 16 and 25 years in some 21% of households and the six households in which there were siblings of the opposite sex in this age group with at least one common parent.⁷ Eighteen households were sampled (six with siblings and 12 with non-sibling youth). These households yielded 24 young people. The youth were sampled regardless of their marital or child-bearing statuses; of the sample two young women and two young men were parents.

The sample comprised 24 (10 Christian and 14 Muslim) youth; six young men and four young women had only received a primary education. Two of the young women had dropped out at Year 4 or 5 but others achieved the eight years of primary schooling. Another five young women and nine young men had completed some secondary education; all were continuing with their schooling but one girl had left school at Year 11, married, had two children, and was completing the final Year 12 during the study. This sample profile reflects the characteristics revealed by the household survey of ethno-religious, gender and educational diversity in the area.

Two interviews were conducted (in local languages) with each of the 12 female and 12 male youth and their parents (12 mothers and eight fathers). The Kenyan and UK team analysed the data using a variety of techniques that included applying atlas ti coding frames, and multiple listenings of untranslated and translated transcripts. Below we tentatively demonstrate some of the ways in which young men and women represented the connections between gender, education and poverty – in particular their views on the role of education in their fight against poverty then and in the future.

Gender differences, education and the fight against poverty

Although the rapid expansion of post-independence Kenyan education was linked to individual well-being and economic development (Wainaina, Chege and Arnot 2011), acquiring some level of formal education was not a guarantee of escaping poverty. The relationship between education and poverty took a particular turn in the mid-1980s when economic crises and decreased job opportunities led the government to encourage young Kenyans to engage in self-employment. Directing young people towards the informal sector and promoting self-reliance was an objective embedded in the design and implementation of the current Kenyan education system (eight years of primary, four years of secondary and four years of university). Self-employment is mostly characterised through the '*Jua Kali*' (scorching sun) – the sector that is popularly known as a major employer of the 'working poor'. Here jobs are typically low-paid, thus inadequate in terms of pulling people out of poverty. Self-employment is associated with unstable and unsafe working conditions, infringements of workers' rights and tendencies toward a temporary status that fan the vicious cycle of unemployment.⁸

Predictably, youth in our study were either such casual labourers or unemployed; the majority claimed they spent considerable time '*hustling*' as their daily occupation. Nevertheless, despite having little practical knowledge to help with employment, male and female youth expressed faith in the ability of education to better their lives; if only taken a step further through skills development. Such faith in education is a prevalent theme in many studies.⁹ Here youth had high expectations of what the government could do to help them. For example, 25-year-old Hussein – a married young man who had completed Std 8 – asserted that it was important for the Kenyan government

to ensure that 'idle' youth who had completed primary school were helped to become self-reliant:

If they [government] can provide us with funds to do business, or . . . open a place for people or institutions for learning at least to upgrade our education, in certain courses, and know when you learn this and go to certain companies, I will be employed. If I do this [get educated] and go to a certain person, when he sees my papers he will employ me. At least we could not be dormant . . .

Young men and women stressed the need for educational testimonials that reflected their educational attainments of knowledge and skills, arguing that these were critical tools for charting their route to success in life. Like his peers, Hussein lamented his lack of such documents which confined him to carrying bricks on construction sites until the day an accident cause him to break a limb.

Using education to fight poverty was a gendered strategy. Employability, especially for young men, was construed as the key to their independence but not necessarily for young women. Hashim, a 22-year-old primary school graduate, was aware that his three sisters had different routes to success, whatever their levels of education. Unlike him, his sisters could use their sexual powers to win a marriage that could potentially remove them from their poverty-stricken lives:

(. . .) you know a *girl is like a bow and an arrow*. Once she is done with Class 8 and sees no way forward to continue with her studies, she gets a man who eventually marries her. They (girls) normally *find life to be very easy*, but us men we have to learn more (in school). . . . But for us men we must reach to a higher level. (Hashim, Muslim, Std 8)

This gender difference however led some young men to talk about themselves as better equipped to deal with a life of poverty compared with their sisters – whom they perceived as less entrepreneurial and potentially dependent on willing spouses. Young men construed themselves as the stronger, harder-working sex whilst in contrast, girls were described as 'lazy', 'chatting', 'plotting' and 'idle story-tellers' waiting for men to earn money and to trap them into marriage by getting pregnant, and then continuing with their lives without concern for the children. Conversely, the more generous young men tried to help their sisters with their schooling. Zacharia, a 21-year-old Muslim who described himself as 'a youth and a businessman', was one such brother who, having completed Form 4 a year before his sister, 'chose to give her that opportunity to continue schooling for I am a young man I will know how I will cope with life'.

Young men talked about being in control of their lives especially in their future role as providers for the family and their dependent wives – despite the fact that their fathers were reported to have played little or no part in their childhood. Masculinity was associated with the concept of 'working hard', getting on in life. Leaving their slum residence to escape poverty did not feature; rather they sought to remain in the community. A number of young men (and a few young women) were active in waste collection, joining youth clubs or even local political parties: their aim was to bring change to their community (see Arnot, Wawire and Chege 2012). The young men talked fondly about Kibera as 'home' where they would raise their families even though most youth described Kibera as physically unattractive, with 'drunkards' and 'lunatics', and where life was a daily struggle for survival.

In contrast, most of the young women we interviewed self-identified with their mothers whom they had witnessed struggling to bring up families in difficult

circumstances. Contrary to the masculine ‘provider’ image developed by their male peers, the young women described men in their community as absent and even incapable of providing for their families. Their relationship to schooling, regardless of their educational level, was framed through their own close affinity to motherhood and the role mothers play in supporting children’s schooling. Jamila – a 21-year-old young married mother who dropped out of school because her parents could no longer afford her fees – described how she was

brought up by my mother. She was my everything, she took me to school and catered for my needs. My father is the kind of man who don’t care, he neglected all his duties to my mother. So ... I belong to my mother because she provides everything to me. (Jamila, Muslim, dropped out at Form 3)

Perhaps because of the perceived strength of mothers, and because of fears of bringing up children in a dangerous setting, some of the young women we interviewed were prepared to leave Kibera and their sources of support to venture outside their community. Raising their children in the more affluent adjacent neighbourhoods which had such ‘foreign’ British sounding names as Woodley or Hurlingham, young secondary schooled women talked about escaping poverty by re-locating to other ‘more promising’, ‘better lives’. This strategy did not involve the much-coveted certification or schooling testimonials. The only requirement was apparently a willingness to accept the status of wife and mother. It helped that Jamila, for example, was able to cite actual examples of girls leaving the community:

- Jamila: The fact that I have been brought up in Kibera I won’t prefer to bring up my children here ... I have seen several things in Kibera and I would not want my children to experience the same. [Girls] will work hard at least to continue in life, but for the boys they will just marry in Kibera and his life will be in Kibera. But you know girls can get married at a distance ...
- Female interviewer: And you have seen than happening?
- Jamila: Yeah, I have seen even one of my cousins, she was brought up in Kibera, she hated men from Kibera, and preferred one from outside the community ... she’s got a husband and now living a good life ... you cannot believe she was brought up in Kibera if you see her with her car. (Jamila, Muslim, secondary F3)

Secondary educated 21-year-old Hanna (another young Muslim unmarried mother) had also recognised that she had to work out a future considering, as she put it: ‘I am single and having a baby ... am jobless ... and [am] trying to make ends meet’.

These data suggest that, whilst both sexes share poverty, the fight against poverty was gendered. For many young men, this meant trying to use educational credentials to retain their role as protector, provider and the concept of masculinity within the community. In both cases, resilience is linked to gendered notions of male and female roles, tempered only to a limited extent by levels of schooling.

Poverty, education and gender transformations

These associations between education, gender and poverty take particular form within an urban context (Arnot, Chege and Casely-Hayford 2012) with both conventions and modernising influences playing their part. Urban environments can provide new

opportunities for young men and women to escape or divert cultural forms of discrimination, lift restrictions on working outside the home, get access to some education, income and health service and perhaps even participate in public/political life. Yet such areas are also exceptionally difficult places for women living in poverty. As a group, they are exposed to new forms of discrimination, exploitation and greater environmental risks (Mora 2008, 235). In these circumstances, it is difficult to know whether any weakening of conventional gender divisions result from the interventions of urban schools or from individuals' coping strategies. The causal sequencing associated with educational outcomes is hard to unravel.

Our study suggests that the secondary educated young women employed ways of reflecting on local gender relations which resonate with Longwe's (1998) notion of gender-sensitivity and empowerment. Formal and informal education, along with media contact, may have taught them that highly differentiated gender roles, expectations and boundaries are outdated. The young women we interviewed argued that there was no difference between women and men regarding the type of work they could do so long as they were equipped with an education. In this context Naema, a 19-year-old secondary educated Muslim, suggested a strong role for schooling:

Naema: *I told you education is good. If you are educated . . . everyone has a purpose which is in his life. (. . .) Maybe someone wants to become an engineer of a plane . . . yes a lady. I also wanted to be an engineer. There isn't a job for a man and a woman in this world.*

Female interviewer: So a man can do what a woman can do?

Naema: Yes. There are those [men] who work as housemaids [for example] a bachelor, like the one who has no wife. He does the work a woman can do; he cooks, washes, wipes. Maybe he has a wife and the wife has died and has been left with children. He has nothing otherwise but does the chores, washing the children, doing everything. So I see it is better for someone to work with one heart [willingly].

The concept that '*education is good*' indicates a strong connection between schooling and the reduction in the narrow-mindedness associated with stereotypical beliefs. Naema here struggled to make sense of competing notions of equal rights, female safety and respect for men even though some men treat women badly.

There are rights for men and girls. . . . Women should respect men. When men talk women should listen and not despise them. There are those who can beat up their husbands, it's not appropriate. We should respect them because they are men. If you are rude he will kill you . . . there are those [men] who take that if a woman is to respect [them] they are not sure if to beat them or what; it should be men [who should] respect woman. If there is a quarrel, they should sit and talk.

Men's desire to be respected by women was a constant theme which linked contemporary constructions of masculinity and femininity and framed the parameters of the gender–poverty–education nexus. For example, a 20-year-old secondary educated Christian, Mumbi countered the discourse of respectability in relation to masculinity, arguing that in order to redress family poverty both sexes should do the same domestic work (cooking, washing utensils and clothes, fetching water); that anyone can do such tasks since, in her words, 'the gender does not matter'. However Mumbi noted that men could not take care of the children because the 'husband will not be

respected very much' if he undertook this work. Instead, young women suggested that if men worked to take care of the family by earning money, then wives would respect their husbands. In this respect, wives were different from the girls working in bars who tried to attract their menfolk. Some young men such as 18-year-old secondary educated Tony argued that, even when women were 'welding the metals' (which he claimed to be a man's job) or working as a security guard, they needed to respect their husbands and that [women] needed to be 'something lower than the husband'.

Eighteen-year-old secondary schooled Catherine observed that people were surprised to see women engaging in non-traditional activities or behaviours with regard to things such as challenging dress codes or occupations such as operating lawn mowers, slashing grass on lawns, or touting for passengers in public commuter vehicles. Touting by women was also used to exemplify the crossing of gender boundaries, apparently because of its precarious nature which involved the ability to hang on the outside of a moving public vehicle, persuading commuters to hop in while at the same time doubling up as conductors who collected fares from rowdy, tired and abusive commuters.

A powerful sense of self was displayed, for example, by 18-year-old Jamila who supported women's changing attitude towards their allocated spaces in the domestic arena, especially in order to support their families:

At the moment you can do [any job] because if there are girls who are touts. *There is nothing we [women] cannot do at the moment.* ... You should know how to go out and fend for your partner. (...) You are alone at home, ... will you not work just like a man in that house? You shall just go and fend knowing that your relatives are there; they need to eat, they need to go to school. (Jamila, dropped secondary at F3, italics our emphasis)

In these gendered constructions, arguments about men's advantage in physical strength were not lost. According to Jamila, there were jobs such as construction which 'I cannot do [because] it's for men' because men were 'energetic' and stronger than women. Young women and men, in our sample, were unanimous that women could not do manual jobs such as the construction of buildings or digging graves, yet despite this, Yuna, a 20-year-old primary educated Christian young woman, had seen men up high on scaffolding and women 'down supplying the men with more concrete or mud even though this was a man's job'. Yuna's view was that women's presence was not a result of physical strength but their failure to find any other type of work. Gender boundaries had shifted because of circumstance rather than education.

Young men, observing the same gender changes, appeared ambivalent. There were those who were certain that both sexes were equal, especially if educated. Secondary educated 25-year-old Muslim Musa, drew on his religious beliefs to argue that 'you can see God created everybody equal. That is why I don't feel that He (God) said now from today men will be pilots and women will be cooking. No. Even women can be pilots'. A 22-year-old Muslim primary graduate Abeid described women motor mechanics, footballers, and electricians 'who climbed up electrical poles' and men who were working as hotel chefs and taking care of children. However Hashim (a similarly aged Muslim primary educated youth) advanced the idea that single women and men crossed gender boundaries really because of need:

It all depends on the living standards, how difficult is the situation. A parent [man] is not supposed to do a woman's work once he has children and *vice versa*. The children should therefore try their level best even if it means selling groundnuts, and help their parents. This is because when your mother is of age, she is not supposed to do a man's work.

While the young women and men in our study appeared to have no problem with women crossing gender boundaries, it was clear that men crossing to the 'feminine' domestic side was less acceptable, particularly by male peers who apparently teased the 'effeminate' male. According to secondary educated Anne (an 18-year-old Christian), men who washed clothes received insults from other men. In contrast, men in conventionally feminine occupations that were physically removed from the domestic arena were better received. Examples were given of men selling vegetables and tomatoes on the roadside, working in hair salons cutting men's hair and plaiting women's, and cooking pilau rice to sell. Some young men in the study owned up to engaging in this sort of women's work. For example, Obura (Hanna's brother) a 25-year-old and secondary educated Christian, described his readiness to perform domestic chores such as washing dishes, cooking and cleaning up while Mukhebi, a 22-year-old primary school graduate, admitted to changing nappies. Other young men revealed their involvement in petty trade selling wrappers and women's clothing on the street and fetching water, slicing cabbages and kale. Significantly, many of these young men pointed out that 'although this was "woman's work"', men had to do it 'so as to survive'. There was little suggestion here that schooling had taught them that this sort of work was permissible in the name of gender equality.

In sum, education appeared to play only a part in shaping these cross-gendered survival strategies. As Naema argued, gender and the need to support families controlled gender relations and their relationship to poverty. Although 'education is good', Naema argued that family survival was imperative:

You have to look for money, because what will your children eat if you start choosing jobs? ... If you know is you are hard working you would not be choosing jobs, you can roast maize, cook chips 'githeri' to help your children get education but if you just sit, children will start stealing and they get burnt. It's not right. Everyone should work. [But] there is no work for a man or a woman in Kenya.

These data suggest that the gender–education–poverty nexus for these young people is framed within a complex melange involving gender boundaries, respect, rights, duty to family and community, and fighting poverty. The need to survive on a daily basis is tempered with the need to help their own children in the long term get an education. This other element in the gender–education–poverty nexus cannot be ignored as a motivation that is both shaped by young people's own schooling and new notions of gender equality.

Educating the next generation

Given what they have observed in their own impoverished lives, all the young people and their parents in our study seemed keen to degender the schooling process, although primary educated youth appeared more indecisive and possibly less insightful about the role of schooling in empowering both sexes. When asked to state their preference in educating their sons or daughters, the secondary graduates responded with the following phrases:

I can't choose because there is no difference.

I can make sure both have gone to school equally.

They can go to school up to where I can manage, because for now I cannot differentiate them.

Now I cannot say that a boy is good and a girl is bad or the girl is good and boy is bad. They are all equal.

This discourse portrayed a sense of conviction in ensuring gender equality through schooling, yet the youth themselves were living testimony that education had failed them, especially in earning a living and gaining human dignity. Similarly Hana (secondary educated, Form 4) stressed the difficulties of discriminating between genders, preferring almost to leave the decision to the children:

I pray that God will not allow that to happen to me because (Pause . . . Laughs) I will have neglected – I cannot because – I will only take the boy to school . . . I can't really tell. I won't choose on either of them. I'll really have to sit and talk to them. . . . Maybe if they come with that decision themselves. Not from me (Laughs). With me it will be hard . . . because I want the best for both of them.

This resistance against gender discrimination was not strongly marked amongst young women with primary education. Yuna, a Christian 20-year-old primary school graduate, showed indecisiveness about which child's education to prioritise which led her to consider her old age rather than the benefits for her children's future:

I would first educate the girl because she is the one who will help me, when a man gets married he tends to follow what the wife says and so forgets the mother. It is okay because she will only help me more. (. . .) It is important to have *all of them* since *they are all children*, again you can have a good boy who will not follow the wife so much, so will help you. (Yuna, female, 20, Std 8)

Hashim, who earlier described girls as the 'bow and arrow', was also indecisive on the matter of equal opportunities. He gave mixed messages when asked to make a clear choice, initially privileging the notion of equal rights:

I will take them to school. I will treat both of them the same way, educationally . . . because both of them have a right to education, but if you think that girls have no right to education, then you will have made their lives miserable;

yet when asked if he had no money what he would do, Hashim replied 'For me, I will educate the boy, because the girl can get married anytime, and that will be their luck'.

Conclusions

This article considers how education mediates between gender and poverty, from the perspective of young people living in poverty. We have employed the notion of a gender–education–poverty nexus in order to widen and deepen the discussion about educational outcomes. Our study took up the challenge of Unterhalter's question about 'what drives actions to mobilise against poverty? What are strategies, the actions that are in [people]'s "repertoire for survival"?' (2009, 17). Our exploratory

study provides evidence of resilience, agency, a desire for independence and the value of caring for dependents, of gender boundary changes, and a pragmatism amongst these youth in adapting gender conventions to the reality of survival. There is a need for further research before stronger claims can be made about the impact of schooling. The findings suggest the importance for young men to be respected by male peers and by women in the man's private life. At stake for young women is the need to survive without adequate qualifications, employment and safety, and to bring up children in a secure environment. There is evidence of young men trying to use schooling to provide community leadership to transform 'their home' and there are indicative signs that some young women are using the language of rights and individualisation to break out of gendered dependencies and divisions of labour.

Rather than use schooling as an 'origin' and employment as a 'destination', the study reveals, albeit provisionally, that poverty is gendered in a complex way for young men and women and that schooling does not play a consistent role in framing the interrelations between gender and poverty. Differential amounts of primary or secondary education make it impossible to draw strong conclusions about what role school does play in linking youth from poor communities to the world of work, family and peer relations. The causal nature of these different levels is not easy to track in the experiential world of young poor. Changes in gender roles are not necessarily triggered by formal as opposed to informal education and nor are they necessarily beneficial – for example, the exploitation of women as casual labour exposes them to new dangers. However the very weakening or breaking of gender boundaries may indicate a shift, generated by the fact of schooling rather than what was taught, where young people may have learnt to 'recognise gender issues in their own personal experience' and are able to analyse such experience (Longwe 1998, 19). Youth appear to be addressing patriarchal interests that are 'normal'/taken for granted.

Despite the near gender parity in education in this poor community which reflects national patterns (GoK 2002–2008; Lloyd and Hewett 2009), poverty-reduction strategies urgently need to address the different ways in which the gender–education–poverty nexus affects the educational outcomes for young women and men fighting off poverty. They need to recognise the importance that gendered forms of respect and self-reliance have for such youth. Gender values which are used to help support notions of self-worth and dignity are changing in this urban culture and the boundaries between genders appear to be weakening. Formal schooling *per se* seems insufficient to achieve a better life, as the young people in our sample knew, but it appears to be seen as a necessary part of the prospects for their future families.

Notes

1. This quote is as cited by Venkatasubramanian (2001) in the Indian national newspaper, *The Hindu*.
2. See Beall's (1998) early recognition of a 'gender–poverty nexus'. A concept of a gender–energy efficiency–poverty nexus was also developed by DFID researchers.
3. Tanzania, Bolivia, Malawi and Yemen.
4. Armenia, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Uganda and Vietnam.
5. Piloting and consequent fieldwork experiences revealed that the young men and women seemed more at ease being interviewed by the relatively young researchers.
6. A household was defined as persons who 'ate from one pot cooked in the same house'.
7. Most Kibera households – apart from the Muslim Nubians – were migrants who worked as casual labourers and whose families were left behind in upcountry homes. This may explain

why there were so few pairs of siblings. The household census also revealed that siblings in the target youth population were scarce.

8. The difficulties in setting up self-employment or acquiring employment are compounded by low levels of education, a lack of skills, or disabilities (Agenor 1998).
9. See Abagi, Olweya and Otieno (2000) for similar findings.

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