

The study sought to investigate the impact of the interpretations of Islam on girls' access to secondary school education in Mombasa and Kwale districts. The study shows that in principle, Islam grants equal rights to both genders. Hence the theory of intrinsic inferiority of the female gender is not supported by Islamic discourse or the biological differentiation between the sexes. The highly stereotyped imagery of a subordinated Muslim woman is perpetuated and propagated by {mis}interpretations of the teachings of Islam regarding the status of women in society. These {mis}interpretations are a product of, and beholden to culture proclivities of individual Muslims within particular socio-cultural milieus.

The study further demonstrates that Islam attaches equal importance to the education of girls as of boys. This implies that Islam is not the cause of gender imbalances in access to secondary school education. On the contrary, some {mis}interpretations of the teachings of Islam on the place and role of women in society influence the importance attached to the education of girls.

Within the context of the colonial Kenyan society, the study has demonstrated that the racial education policies influenced not only the development of Muslim education in general but that of Muslim girls in particular. It is evident that gender imbalances in education provision and opportunities existed during the colonial period. Largely, within the colonial context, the development of education tended to favour boys than girls. Therefore, girls' education did not develop at the same pace with that of boys'. The colonial education policies also reinforced some cultural beliefs, traditions and practices - that ascribed an inferior status to women - which were unfavorable to the education of girls. Hence, it is argued that the colonial legacy disadvantaged the development of Muslim girls' education. This has dogged and partly continued to shape the development of Muslim girls' education in the two districts.

The study further shows that as an Islamic tradition, *purdah* (veiling) is legitimized by the teachings of Islam. Seclusion of women on the other hand is not an Islamic practice, but a socio-cultural practice that is associated with Muslim communities. Female seclusion does not derive its *raison d'etre* from the teachings of Islam. Rather, it is a practice that is justified through misinterpretations of Qur'anic injunctions on veiling. Veiling and seclusion of women entail gender segregation in places of work, educational institutions, mosques and other social places. Depending on interpretations of Islamic sources, veiling, seclusion and gender segregation have implications on girls' access to secondary school education. In the midst of limited education opportunities and facilities for girls, some Muslims have an apathy towards non-Muslim schools or mixed schools without separate facilities for boys and girls. This is because of the Islamic teachings forbidding casual mixing of sexes.

Besides the interpretations of Islam, there are other factors that come into play, to influence a Muslim girl's access to secondary school education. These include: co-education, distance to school, school sponsor(s), *madrasa* (religious) education, poverty and the "hidden" curriculum. All the factors affect not only the girls' access to secondary school education, but also, retention and performance in examinations.

The study employed a conceptual paradigm from the three lenses of gender by Sandra Bem (1993). These are androcentrism, gender polarization and biological essentialism. The three lenses have been

used to explain the reasons behind certain socio-cultural behaviour and mode of thought that predispose some Muslims either to favour or to be in disfavour of girls' education