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Gender Differentiation and the Role of Culture in Tertiary Level Education: Implications for Employment Opportunities and Environmental Utilization by Women in Kenya¹

Ruth N. Otunga

Introduction

Despite the United Nations declaration that every child has a right to education regardless of his or her gender, race, tribe, creed, socio-economic and political background, education is neither universal nor compulsory in most countries. The lack of access to educational opportunities for most of the world's children is mainly due to economic constraints. However, even in countries where many children have access to education, they are often unable to obtain uniform quality and equal access. One reason for such a differential is gender.

This paper looks at the role of culture in setting the stage for gender differentiation and how this influences the participation of women in tertiary-level education. It further examines how female participation in tertiary-level education translates itself into female utilization of employment opportunities and environmental exploitation. Tertiary-level education in this paper is limited to university education. The paper opens with a discussion of culture and gender differentiation followed by tertiary-level education, employment opportunities and environmental utilization. Finally, conclusions are drawn that culminate in recommendations.

Culture and Gender Differentiation

The world in which we live is dynamic and social groups change radically. However, it is astonishing that these social groups continue to produce and reproduce a social order dominated by men. What causes and continues to propagate this social order? It appears that our society, despite some attempts, has not managed to affect re-

¹ This paper was presented at the Institute for the Study of Gender in Africa's Conference, June 6 - 8, 1997, on "Gender, Power and Difference in African Societies" at the University of California, Los Angeles.

orientation in relations between men and women in the home, at places of work and of leisure.

Many cultural traditions exist in our communities: sons have been and to some extent still are preferred to girls because boys are expected to protect the community, inherit their fathers' property and extend the clan by their lineage. On the other hand, girls were and, to some extent, are largely preferred for bride-price and their reproductive activities. Traditionally, children, both boys and girls, listened to stories, songs, riddles and proverbs ('wise sayings') that described boys as brave, responsible, articulate, intelligent and sensible. They also heard stories of girls who were always cheated by ogres and strangers, were superficial, inarticulate, foolish, vain, dependent and docile. The stories also described mothers as caring, self-sacrificing and as homemakers. So, as the boys grew up they wanted their wives to be their mothers and as the girls grew up their sole desire was to be married and become mothers.² Consequently, the stage for gender stereotyping was set with a clearly defined place for women in a man's world.

Justification of the oppression of women in a man's world was further intensified by the creation of myths. For example, in Kenya among the Gikuyu of Central Province, there exists a myth about a time when women ruled as tyrants, frustrating men and treating them as slaves. Then one day, men conspired to make all the women pregnant and in their weakened state, they were overthrown, and since then the men believe they have lived in peace, love, fairness and tranquility. Among the Teso of Western Kenya, there is a myth that explains how work used to do itself until an ambitious new wife decided that women should work.³ Among the Maasai of the Rift Valley, women are taken to be inferior because of physical and intellectual weaknesses and it is believed that they are religiously polluted by the blood of childbirth and menstruation.⁴ The myths portray that life is normal and fair only when men are in the lead and women operate in the man's world. Centuries of tradition make even

² W. M. Kabira, "Gender and Ideology: The Cultural Context," in *Democratic Change in Africa: Women's Perspective* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1993).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ G.S. Were and C. Wanjala, *Kajiado District Socio-Cultural Profile*. Institute of African Studies (Nairobi: University of Nairobi, 1988).

the women themselves view their status in the family and beyond as natural and even just. Cultural politics continue and are sanctioned by society and even by physical force when necessary.⁵

This patriarchal socio-cultural context coupled with restrictive, contradictory and discriminatory legislation is evident in areas of education, training and employment. In the school and training systems, boys are encouraged to follow a curriculum that will make them men, that is articulate, responsible, independent scientists and community leaders. The girls, on the other hand, are guided through a curriculum to make them women, that is submissive, dependent mothers and homemakers. This is rationalized by the argument that "girls must be prepared to do what women do and boys to do what men do."⁶ Although a uniform curriculum is used, it is through its implementation that gender stereotypes are emphasized. In employment, each individual has already been socialized into his or her gender. This patriarchal socio-cultural context determines not only how society views men and women, but also how each gender perceives itself.

Tertiary Level Education, Employment and Environmental Utilization

Kenya's population is characterized by women constituting a slightly higher percentage than men (52% and 48% respectively). This has been true in all the census years and has not changed over the years.⁷ Despite this fact, there continues to be consistent under-representation of women at all levels. Female under-representation at the university level is quite severe (see Appendix 1). However, their representation has been increasing. The expansion of higher education facilities has contributed to increased enrollment of female students in Kenyan universities (Table 1 demonstrates this phenomenon).

⁵ Kabira.

⁶ B.N. Anderson, *A Manual for Integrating the Gender Factor into Basic Education and Vocational Training Projects* (Washington DC: AID/WID, 1986) 17.

⁷ Women's Bureau, *Women and Men in Kenya: Facts and Figures* (Nairobi: Women's Bureau, 1995).

Table 1: Female Enrollment at University in Kenya

Academic year	Female Student Population	Number of Universities
1976/77	848	1
1977/78	914	1
1981/82	2569	1
1983/84	2798	1
1984/85	2520	2
1985/86	2906	3
1986/87	3176	3
1988/89	6921	4
1989/90	8118	4

Source: E. Mukudi, "Women and Education," in *Democratic Change in Africa*, 86.

The increase in female student representation at this level of education is impressive. However, a pertinent question needs to be raised: are the figures representative of the eligible female population? It is notable that the female population exceeds that of men by a ratio of 5:6 (based on the 1979 population census). Female representation at the university level has only risen from 17% in 1976-77 academic year to a mere 29% in 1989-90 academic year.⁸

In addition to female under-representation at the university level, they are badly under-represented in Science and Technical fields (Table 2 shows these differences in selected disciplines).

⁸ Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and National Development, *Economic Surveys, 1978-1990* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1990).

Kenya in the wake of the world economic recession, government assistance to all schools has had to be reduced with the result that many such schools lack the facilities required to prepare students for practical-oriented subjects. This explains partly the low enrollment of girls for more scientific and practical-oriented subjects at university level. It also explains the high wastage of girls (about 98%) who fail to attain university entry points.¹⁴

An important issue is how this situation translates into employment opportunities and eventual utilization of the environment by women. The civil service in Kenya is the biggest employer at all levels (Appendix 2 provides information on the representation of both genders in the civil service employment structure). Most university graduates enter the civil service at point 'H'. At this job level, the female representation is a mere 19.1%. The percentage of female representation then becomes smaller and smaller and eventually falls to 0% at job groups 'S' and 'T'. Job group 'S' involves the following positions: Chairman - Public Service Commission, Controller and Auditor-General, Auditor-General (Office of the Vice President), Permanent Secretary - Office of the President and Ministry of Finance. While job group 'T' involves these positions: Permanent Secretary - Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of Public Service Commission and Attorney General. All these top jobs and others of the same caliber are acquired through Presidential appointment. Between 1996 and 1997, three women have been appointed as permanent secretaries (P.S.) which is impressive and historic. However, the appointments are very much influenced not only by qualification and output but by one's political orientation.¹⁵

With education, people are expected to enjoy benefits such as a good job and salary. Educated people are usually better informed about a host of social, economic and political aspects of life. Limitation of women's education in terms of accessibility and participation at tertiary levels consequently limits their exploitation of the social, economic and political environments. The few women who have a university education are found in traditional women's

¹⁴ University entry points range from an average of 60 marks and above in at least eight subjects, a minimum of C+.

¹⁵ Those who are pro-KANU (Kenya African National Union) are generally favored. KANU is the ruling political party.

occupations such as teaching and other social service jobs. This set-up, in a way, propagates the continued marginalization of women as they have no access to other lucrative job opportunities that provide national and international exposure and advantages.

The political structure in the country is such that women are largely marginalized. For example, there is only one woman cabinet minister, one assistant minister and a total of five members of parliament out of about 270 MPs. This is a representation of only 1.9% women in parliament. At provincial and district administration levels, there is no woman provincial commissioner (P.C.) out of the eight provinces in Kenya and only one District Commissioner (D.C.), who was appointed in 1997, out of the 45 districts in the country (women therefore represent only 2.2% at this level).

More recently, a motion presented in parliament by the Karachuonyo M.P., Phoebe Asiyu (a woman), seeking to change the electoral law to give women one third of the seats in parliament was thrown out, with men presenting very strong opposition.¹⁶ One male M.P. argued that since women are the majority, they should use their numerical advantage to vote women into parliament, rather than seeking affirmative action. Acknowledging the disadvantaged position of women in terms of education and policy-making fora, this is demonstrative of the deliberate marginalization of women in Kenya, even in very high circles.

Employment has four fundamental implications for women.¹⁷ First, employment brings women into the modern sector of economic development, and thus allows them access to many of the resources directed at the formal sector. Secondly, employment provides the first step in full participation in various spheres of public life which builds confidence that can allow women to present problems that affect them. Thirdly, one of the impediments to women's participation in decision-making has been the lack of recognition emanating from socio-cultural attitudes. Salaried employment dignifies the status of women as their contributions are acknowledged and recognized. Networks are also developed around work, workmates and professions. These are

¹⁶ *Nation* (Thursday, April 24, 1997).

¹⁷ C.K.M. Masinde, "Women's Access to and Control of Production Resources in Kenya," in *Democratic Change in Africa: Women's Perspective*.

important sources of information necessary in making choices and decisions. Fourth and finally, employment implies an ability to accumulate capital for investment. This assumes that the woman has control over her income and other family demands do not jeopardize her saving abilities.¹⁸

All these are, however, influenced by the cultural environment and woman's self-perception. The fine details of how a woman functions in a given environmental situation are by and large determined by the culture in which she was born and socialized. Some cultures in Kenya do not allow women to go to school and/or even be employed. The extent to which she can take full advantage of formal employment and exploit the environment depends on how far she can operate beyond such cultural inhibitions. Higher education empowers women to operate beyond the numerous inhibitions stacked in their way culturally.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The knowledge, values, skills and attitudes acquired through education enable an individual to function effectively at any level and enhances their chances of survival. However, from the foregoing, it is clear that retrogressive cultural inhibitions in Kenya have resulted in women being relegated to an inferior position which has militated against their advancement to higher levels of education. As a result, women do not adequately utilize available employment opportunities and also lack the capacity to exploit social, economic and political environments.

It is thus recommended that, first, deliberate strategic intervention measures should be identified and implemented to eliminate gender stereotyping in education and a modification of traditional role-building emanating from retrogressive cultural orientations that relegate women to inferior positions. Women should also be adequately informed and sensitized to have a positive self-image. This can be effectively achieved through existing structures where knowledgeable women and gender-sensitive men are given an opportunity to advise young "up-coming" women on matters relating to education, careers and responsibility of the self as a woman and in relation to the family and the wider society.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Secondly, the Ministry of Education should make it a policy to provide equal places for women at tertiary levels of education, and to encourage young girls and women to utilize such opportunities. Specifically, able girls should be encouraged to seriously consider specializing in science and technical courses, motivated in part by the lucrative job opportunities at high levels.

Appendix 1

University Student Enrollment

Academic year	Under-graduate Diploma	Under-graduate Diploma	Under-graduate Diploma	Postgraduate Female	Postgraduate Male	Postgraduate Total
	Female	Male	Total			
1976/77	754	3,623	4,377	94	507	601
1977/78	761	3,583	4,344	153	672	825
1981/82	1,202	4,105	5,307	288	1,254	1,542
1983/84	1,178	4,006	5,184	352	1,274	1,626
1984/85	1,210	3,907	5,200	319	1,260	1,579
1985/86	2,309	5,512	7,821	285	968	1,253
1986/87	1,609	6,144	8,753	277	915	1,192
1988/89	6,087	15,361	21,448	362	1,096	1,458
1989/90	7,674	18,123	25,797	444	1,331	1,775

Source: Economic Surveys, 1978

Appendix 2

Number of Civil Servants by Sex and Grade as of 31 March 1991

Job Group	Male	Female	Total	%Male	% Female
A	41,477	12,060	53,537	77.5	22.5
B	9,235	2,815	12,050	76.6	23.4
C	18,257	6,004	24,261	75.3	24.7
D	24,855	10,457	35,342	70.4	29.6
E	15,122	3,318	18,440	82.0	18.0
F	62,470	14,297	76,766	81.4	18.6
G	18,249	4,595	22,844	79.6	20.1
H	9,931	2,344	12,275	80.9	19.1
J	5,460	823	6,283	86.9	13.1
K	5,032	916	5,948	84.6	15.4
L	2,748	472	3,220	85.3	14.7
M	1,203	163	1,366	88.1	11.9
N	603	47	650	92.1	7.2
P	280	15	295	94.9	5.1
Q	140	6	146	95.9	4.1
R	78	5	83	94.0	6.0
S	17	0	17	100.0	0.0
T	4	0	4	100.0	0.0
Total	215,191	58,336	273,192	78.6	21.4

Adapted from: Republic of Kenya, 1993: 28.

Note: Job Group is a classification category used for people of the same cadre in the civil service. Job Group 'A' is the lowest (includes messengers, cleaners, etc) while job group 'T' is the highest (includes Permanent Secretary, Secretary to the Cabinet and Head of Public Service).