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THE CENTRE FOR COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION

GENDER IN EAST AFRICA:

The challenges of girls' retention: evidence from some Kenyan schools

Gender Report 8

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Contents

1. Introduction

This Report follows Gender Reports 1 (Warrington et al., 2011), 5 (Vohya et al., 2012a) and 6 (Voyya et al., 2012b) in discussing findings from research undertaken in Kenya between October 2009 and September 2010, with the aim of answering the question: **what keeps girls in school against the odds?**[1] The research team wanted to address a gap in the literature (Hunt, 2008) by exploring the reasons why some girls, despite coming from very poor backgrounds, or from families where formal education for girls is under-valued, nevertheless persist in school.

The first Gender in East Africa Research Report gave a brief overview of the country and its education system and outlined the development of the project, its aims, methodology and preliminary findings. Gender Reports 5 and 6 focused on findings from focus group interviews with teachers and boys respectively. This report discusses findings from interviews with 89 girls from 16 primary schools across four areas of Kenya. Following this introduction, the Report is in three main sections: the next section provides some contextual background, followed by a section which explores the factors militating against girls' retention in school. The final section preceding the conclusion focuses on those factors found to encourage and facilitate retention.

2. Contextual Background

In order to understand why girls 'against the odds' did persist in school, four case-study areas were chosen, with four schools selected in each area with the assistance of District Education Officers. The participating schools were all operating in challenging circumstances, though these varied from place to place.

Kajiado County was the site of the pilot study. Situated in the south-eastern part of the **Rift Valley Province**, the County lies south of Nairobi and borders Tanzania. It is a largely rural, semi-arid area, supporting a mainly Maasai population engaged in a traditional semi-nomadic pastoralist way of life. One school, however, was located near a quarry, which offered some alternative employment to the local people. According to the Kenyan National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development, the County is characterised by illiteracy, frequent droughts, high levels of HIV/AIDS, poor infrastructure and acute water shortages. While one school was situated on a main road only a short distance from the nearest town, the three other schools taking part in the

[1] These reports can be found here: http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/cce/publications/

research were isolated from towns of any size and were served by tracks running across dry and rocky ground and crossed by seasonal streams and rivers. While the families of some of the children who were interviewed at these schools lived in iron sheet houses, most lived in traditional manyattas built from mud and cow-dung, without electricity, using pit latrines, and firewood for cooking. Some families had radios and/or bicycles, but generally the material standard of living was very low. The average number of siblings was five, about half the children came from polygamous families, and almost all families practised female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage. One of the schools was a girls-only school and served as a rescue centre for those fleeing FGM.

Central Province lies north of Nairobi, in Central Kenya, as its name suggests. It is the ancestral home of the Kikuyu tribe and the centre of economic activity associated with the coffee, tea, sisal and flower industries. This is one of the most fertile and better-connected parts of Kenya, and according to Ndeng'e et al (2005), it ranks as Kenya's least poor province. However, the schools participating in the research – two from Kiambu County and two from Murang'a County - both in the south of the Province, served areas with some severe levels of poverty, linked to under-employment and low levels of education among parents. While some families owned small subsistence farms (shambas), which afforded them some level of food security (except during times of drought), others lived in rented housing, and the catchment area of one school served communities of squatters, dependent on seasonal work on the coffee farms, or eking out a living sand-harvesting or selling charcoal. A new fruit-processing factory near one school had begun to provide a welcome source of employment. This school was located on a main road, and two others were in villages with reasonable road networks; the other, however, was quite remote, lying 12 km up a dirt road in a very hot and dusty environment, and here teachers received hardship allowances. One school was in the heart of Mungiki gang territory, a mafia-like organisation made up of young, disaffected, angry youths specialising in extortion, murder, robbery, carjackings, rape, and so on. Insecurity was thus a major issue at the school, and all the teachers had been victims of violent robberies and threats.

Migration from rural areas, and from neighbouring war-torn countries has led to the rapid growth of Kenya's capital city, **Nairobi**, so that by 2009 it was home to approximately 8% (3.14 million) of the country's population (KNBS, 2010), including representatives of all the 42 tribes of Kenya plus significant numbers of refugees. Such migration has contributed to the proliferation of low-income and informal housing settlements (commonly referred to as 'slums'), from among which four schools were selected for the research. One school was located in a low-income neighbourhood of over-crowded, single-roomed concrete dwellings, formerly owned by the railway company. Another served a Somali refugee community who dominated the area. The third school was located in an area characterised by poverty and violence, yet had been given the award of centre of

excellence by the government, which had chosen such schools in hardship areas as vehicles to change the community. The fourth school, situated within the Korogocho slums, was a health-promoting school in partnership with UN-Habitat and the African Population and Health Research Centre. Children at this school lived in exceptionally poor circumstances, in scrap metal 'quilt' or cardboard houses, in a neighbourhood where violent criminal gangs were rife. Areas served by these four schools therefore exhibited a high incidence of urban poverty, inadequate access to basic services and high rates of infant mortality. Furthermore, as the profile of urban Kenya portrayed by UN-HABITAT (Da Cruz and Tempra, 2005) underlines, alongside a general decline in health services in Kenya, HIV/AIDS is heavily impacting on the population, and especially on women, constraining social and economic development.

The fourth case study is located in Ndhiwa constituency, Homa Bay County of **Nyanza Province.** This is predominantly home to the Luo community. Rain here falls all year round, and so the area does not suffer the drought conditions experienced in many other parts of the country. Nevertheless, Nyanza is the province with the highest levels of rural poverty in Kenya (Ndeng'e et al., 2007). The schools selected to take part in the research served communities dependent upon subsistence farming and cash-crops such as sugar-cane, bananas and maize. Some locals had modest businesses such as bicycle and motorcycle taxies (boda bodas), selling of fish (tilapia and Nile perch) from the nearby Lake Victoria, roasting of maize and sweet potatoes, and hawking confectionary, vegetables or hardware. The main road that connected Homa Bay town and Ndhiwa town was also under construction, and this provided casual labour for young people, especially young men. Several retail shops also dotted the roadsides and included grocers, bookstores, chemists, restaurants and small gas stations. There was also sand harvesting and brick making, as Ndhiwa was rich in red soil. These activities, however, were frequently insufficient to provide for basic needs, and according to Ndeng'e et al. (2005), the constituency of Ndhiwa ranks 203rd out of 210 constituencies in Kenya's poverty index. The proportion of AIDS orphans was over 50% and extreme poverty was evident in all the schools that took part in the study, with a number of children in dirty tattered uniforms, and many lacking food at lunchtimes.

3. Methodological Approach

Gender Report No.1 describes the selection of case studies, schools and girls and the research ethics guiding the study; these aspects of methodology are therefore not reproduced here.[2] As in the pilot

[2] See also Kiragu & Warrington, 2012 and Warrington & Kiragu, 2012.

study, in each school five or six girls known to come from backgrounds against the odds, were selected by their class 6 teachers for individual interviews.

Altogether 89 girls were interviewed, 24 in Kajiado, 22 in each of Nairobi and Nyanza, and 21 in Central Province. Interviews sought to obtain biographical data as well as information on participants' experience of schooling, the challenges they faced, their aspirations and the factors encouraging them to remain in school. Interviews with the children took place mainly in Kiswahili, and all interview data were fully transcribed, and translated where relevant, with analysis undertaken using the software package QSR NVivo 8. The analytical process began by using the interview guides as the basis for coding, followed by inductive analysis drawing directly on the participants' own insights. The names in this report are all pseudonyms in order to protect the identities of the participants.

4. Findings

4.1 Factors militating against girls' retention

As Warrington and Kiragu (2012) have reported, girls' full participation in education is limited by personal 'unfreedoms' related to their gender (Sen, 1999), with gender inequality existing as part of the fabric of their daily lives. Our study revealed several factors which militated against girls' retention in primary school, as summarised in the diagram on p.7. In the discussions below, we expound on these unfreedoms, before exploring why the girls continued in school despite the odds they faced.

4.1.1 Household poverty

Household poverty was evident amongst all the children who were interviewed, from the extreme urban poverty of the Korogocho slums to the extreme rural poverty seen in the Ndhiwa schools. Poverty was evident amongst those whose families kept their riches in the form of cattle, in Kajiado, and among those who squatted in the fertile coffee plantations of Central Province. Poverty was manifested most clearly in the form of hunger. For example, 16 of the 21 girls interviewed in the Central Province schools said the availability of food was variable, and that they often went hungry. For these girls and others in Kajiado and Homa Bay Counties, breakfast frequently consisted simply of unsweetened black tea. The basic diet across the research sites was ugali[3] and kales, and if there was food left from the previous night's meal, children took food to school for lunch, but often this

[3] Ugali is a porridge made with maize mixed with water.

was not the case and they had nothing unless friends were willing to share what little they had. Sometimes there was no food for supper, and a few girls said there were days when they had nothing to eat at all. Most had only one meal a day, usually in the evening. One girl in Nyanza described how supper was often boiled maize and water. In Nairobi, feeding programmes in some of the schools did help by providing one meal a day, though most had to pay a small charge for this, and not all could afford to do so. Some of the children saved the lunch food to take home to their families as told by Misa below:

> My sister would carry this githeri[4] home when we had nothing to eat at home, so all of us shared that githeri in the evening.

Outside school, however, one girl in Nairobi spoke of going without food for up to a week, one talked about money for school fees being spent on food instead and one girl's family was so poor that they did not even own a cooking stove.

Hunger meant that children were unable to concentrate fully in school, and some even spoke of missing school altogether at times because of hunger. Poverty also impacted upon education in other ways. Very few households had electricity, so lamps were used for studying, but it was not uncommon for families to lack sufficient money to pay for kerosene for the lamps. Girls also lacked sufficient clothing, particularly underwear, and in one Central Province school in particular, most students had bare feet. Girls found it embarrassing to wear worn out uniforms, uniforms which were often dirty because they lacked the soap (and sometimes water) to be able to wash them. In all the schools, girls said that they lacked sanitary towels and had to use pieces of cloth, or beg pads from teachers, friends, and neighbours or manage as best they could:

> Sometimes when the pads are finished, I take a big piece of cloth and I wrap myself or I just put on my underwear and I stay like that and the next day when I come to school, I will borrow from Mrs. Mambo (Amina, Nairobi).

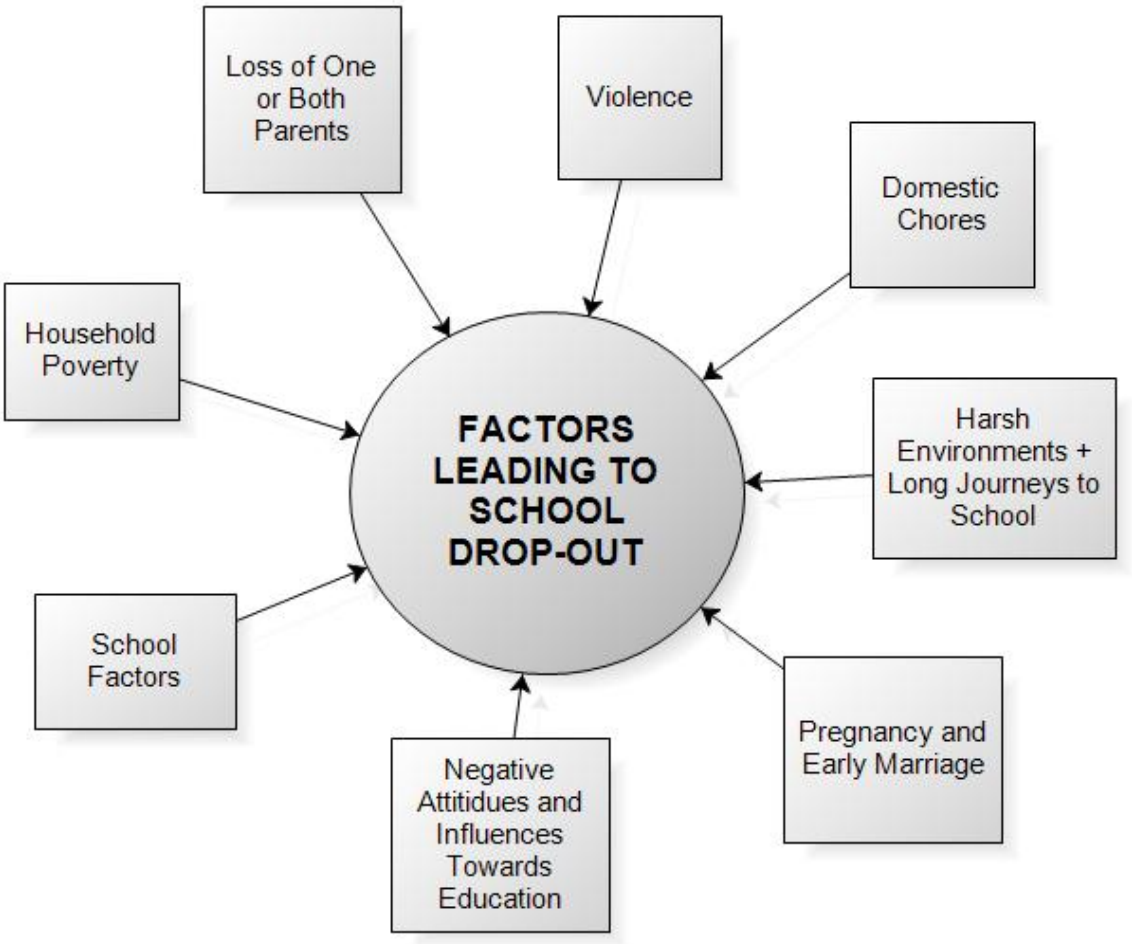
However, unlike some others, Amina said that she had never missed school because of lacking pads, showing her commitment to attending school.

Ironically, despite the teachers' awareness of the students' poverty, they sometimes made it difficult for the girls to learn. For example, in one Nyanza school Lisa stated that, 'They [the teachers] cane us because we don't have school shoes and socks'. Asked what happened if they could not afford them, she replied, 'They chase us from school for one week'. Frequently girls were unable to afford necessary scholastic materials such as pens and books: in Kajiado, for example, a

[4] Githeri is a traditional meal of maize and beans.

student talked of having to share her friend's pen; in Nairobi a girl was enabled to sit her exams when a friend paid her entry fee. In all the sites, girls talked of being sent home and denied the chance to sit exams until money for fees was found; others spoke of being denied attendance at holiday tuition classes, because these had to be paid for. Angel in Nairobi spoke about how she would often sneak back into school because even if she went home, she would not get the money as her aunt was poor. Thus despite free primary education (introduced in 2003), the girls still found their participation in education constrained by lack of money.

Factors leading to school drop-out



4.1.2 Loss of one or both parents

While the Kajiado interviewees mostly lived with both their parents (with only three instances where the death of the father had left a single-parent family), the situation was different in the other case-

study areas, where orphanhood and fragmented families were common. In Nyanza, nine of the 22 girls were orphans and a further six had lost one parent through death. One girl, Cathy, spoke of abandonment because, following her mother's remarriage, her stepfather refused to accept her, and so she had to move to live with her grandmother, who at times wept over her dead children. The emotional burden on Cathy was great:

> When she is weeping, she makes me think more about my mother. So I think to myself that if I leave her she is going to struggle and that pains me. So I think we should just live together. I help her.

Some talked about caring for a dying parent, and missing school as a result. Bel, for example, spoke of starting school two years late because the burden of care for her mother and four siblings had fallen upon her, 'because I was the only one that was able to bath her'. Others spoke of abandonment by their sole surviving parent, or by their inheritor – the male relative who had inherited their widowed mother as was the case for Flo, Vicky and Cathy in Nyanza; and some even expressed a wish to live in an orphanage because they provided basic necessities such as clothing, as well as more opportunities to get an education.

In Central Province none of the 21 girls interviewed lived with both parents, with only six living in households containing an adult male. Several girls had lost one or both parents through death, some parents had separated and some girls had never known their fathers. The highest proportion of orphans, however, was in the Nairobi schools, where 16 of the 22 girls interviewed were orphans. The decisions about their lives and what they would do were in the hands of guardians, who frequently saw the girls as domestic workers rather than as children with rights to study and play. Thus orphaned girls generally carried a greater burden of domestic work and were often physically and emotionally abused to the extent that two girls in Nairobi had run away from home at one point. Five girls in Nairobi described a daily routine where they woke up at dawn and readied their small cousins for school first, before preparing breakfast and dropping the children off to their school or kindergarten first, before they themselves went to school. Two complained that they were often late getting to school because of this. In emotionally-charged interviews, Jen and Beto described how they had suffered in the hands of their aunts:

> She was mistreating me. In the morning I was waking up early to make sure the house was clean before leaving for school. I would go to sleep late and wake up at 4.00am to tidy the house, mop, clean utensils. At lunch time I would have to leave school to go home and cook fresh food for her and her children. That made me come back to school late for the afternoon classes. Sometimes [if I overslept] she poured cold water on me to wake me up.

> When her husband asked her why she was doing this to her brother's child, she said 'it is her problem. I am not the one who told her mother to die'. She has thrown me to the wall and I got hurt. She told me to go to look for my mother, so I asked my brother where my mother was and he told me she was dead (Jen, Nairobi).
>
> She [my aunt] beats me without a good reason, and when I tell her that I am still hungry and would like to eat some more, she tells me to go and look for my own food and cook it, and even throws me out of the house sometimes. When she does this, I go to sleep at my grand-mother's house. My aunt will come for me in the morning, and she beats me with her slipper. The other day, I was cooking, and then I fell asleep, and then the food got burnt and she beat me with a piece of wood and hit me on my legs (Beto, Central).

In addition, the quality of education for an orphan seemed not to matter to some of the guardians. For example, Angel in Nairobi explained how her aunt had initially enrolled her in a private school but transferred her to the municipal school because the extra tuition and extracurricular activities offered by the private school meant Angel had less time for the housework. Her cousins, however, continued going to the private school. Macy (Nairobi) was sent by her uncle to work on his farm for a week, while his own children continued going to school as normal. Some of the girls also experienced verbal abuse from their guardians. For example Pata sobbed as she told of her grandmother calling her a prostitute and other names.

The examples above highlight the discrimination between the guardian's children and the orphaned girl. The orphan's life was summed up by Angel:

> An orphan child feels lonely, and she knows she cannot see the parents again because they are dead. Sometimes when one picks a quarrel with me, I remember if I had my mother and she quarrelled with me, I would understand; but when I see someone quarrelling with me, I see it as someone who is mistreating me and I wish I had my mother with me. When I get such feelings I take a book and read it so that I forget what I am feeling, because I know my mother will not come back again.

4.1.3 Violence

However, it was not only orphans who suffered, with some girls violated by their own parents. One girl's mother had regularly abused her verbally, including 'some abuses that I can't repeat', one of which she whispered in the interviewer's ear. However, it was after an incident of sexual violence that she was removed by her grandmother:

> There was this time my mother told me to go with my father, and when we got to the bush, he caught me by force (raped me), and when I screamed, nobody heard me or came to my rescue (Tipa, Central).

Tipa told nobody except her grandmother about this, and the incident was not reported to the police or community elders. Kerry (Central) also reported excessive violence from her mother, who threatened:

> to take a panga (machete) and cut my legs into pieces - like when she comes home and finds that the food that was left has been eaten, she starts beating me saying that I am the one who has given my siblings that food to eat.

In Nairobi, Phyllis's father had beaten her badly on her chest when she was 7-years-old, and throughout the interview she was coughing and wheezing:

> When my mother died, my father was beating me every day in the chest. It is my aunt who removed me from there.

In Priti's case, a family dispute over land led to continual harassment from her two uncles, who did not want their family living on the same compound, so, for example,

> 'if we are cooking, they remove the burning firewood so that it goes off and we can't cook. They also burnt my sister.

She described how on Sundays her uncles, 'who are drug addicts', started abusing her, throwing stones at their house, driving them out and beating them with sticks and canes. Describing the impact of all this on her school work, and how she had dropped to twenty-third position in class, Priti said:

> You know when I came here, I was very clever, and I used to be position four in class. Before we came here, we didn't have such kind of problems, but when we came here, the problems began.

For many girls, the surrounding environment was also not safe. In Nairobi in particular, the girls reported incidents of rape and violence. Anika, for example, spoke of the time a neighbour's daughter was killed by a stray bullet because people fighting had guns. Others told of the dangers of walking alone at night, and Angel was particularly upset that her aunt still sent her to the shops at night, despite the danger. Two of the girls recounted direct experience of rape in their communities:

> I saw a girl who was walking like she was raped and I asked her what happened to her, and she told me that there was a man who had raped her. I took her to another house and told the people there to give her some clothes, and allow her to rest and then she can go home

after resting. Everybody was fearing her. When I asked [the men around] why they could not help her, they told me that they feared the girl would say 'this man raped me' (Amina).

I have seen a girl being pinned down by men in the slums and getting raped: they covered her mouth so that she is not heard. Then they pinned her down, gagged her mouth with a cloth and put ash in her eyes. However, I was able to call other ladies and they were able to come out and help the girl (Fendi).

Unsafe neighbourhoods did not only exist in Nairobi, however. In one school in Central, a woman had had her throat cut on the coffee plantation the previous year. As a result, children who had to pass through the plantation on their way to school now went in groups which included boys, for protection. Another girl at the same school said that the area was not very safe, and girls always went in groups to fetch water for fear of attack and rape if they were on their own. She also described 'thugs who come from outside and steal from us'. Raha said she had to shower outside, and since the iron sheets providing cover had been stolen, the blanket she tried to use instead failed to provide much cover, and boys and men watched her. A neighbour who had complained to them had been beaten. In Kajiado, girls from the most rural schools spoke of 'Morans' (young Maasai warriors) hiding in the woods to chase after them and abuse them on their way to and from school.

4.1.4 Domestic chores

It was not only orphans who suffered hard labour at home. Girls across the case study areas described the domestic labour they engaged in both at home and at school. This included fetching firewood and water (from a well or river), which involved carrying heavy loads, sometimes for many miles, sometimes over difficult terrain. They also spoke of sweeping and cleaning the house, cleaning communal toilets, cooking meals, washing dishes, washing their own and other family members' clothes, digging or other farm labour such as picking coffee, and washing and looking after younger siblings. Across the schools, it was common for girls to get up as early as 5 am to light a fire and prepare tea, sometimes completing other tasks before school, as previously described.

Girls in Nyanza talked of the gendered division of labour in their homes and were of the view that as a result of this, they found the chores demanding. For example, Annette explained that as a girl, she was expected to cook, wash dishes and fetch water, while her brothers took the cattle to graze. A further analysis of these tasks would show that the boys could read while the cows were grazing. In contrast, the tasks the girls did kept their hands busy making it difficult to read at the same time. However one girl in Central Province said that she and her brothers shared the domestic tasks, with her brothers collecting firewood while she fetched water and washed the dishes. In Kajiado, however, even the boys' traditional chores, such as herding and watering the animals, were

sometimes passed on to girls. For some, the domestic chores were further compounded by having to take care of ailing parents. For example in Nyanza, Flo said she had to leave school for a full term to take care of her sick mother, 'because she couldn't do anything. I was bathing her, cooking food and fetching water and washing dishes and clothes'. She also budgeted and shopped for the family with the little money that her mother's partner gave her. In Nairobi, Misa said she had missed school for a week as she nursed her aunt back to health after she had been stabbed by her husband in a domestic dispute. Fatima, who was 16-years-old, lived with her two nephews in a single roomed house. Her elder sister (the boys' mother) worked in Sudan and sent her money for their upkeep. As carers for other family members, these girls had hardly any time for study.

Chores were also done in schools. Across the sites, we observed the students (both boys and girls) engaged in cleaning the schools after school hours. Tasks also involved picking up litter in the compound, and sweeping and mopping the classrooms. In some schools, students brought water and brooms from home, as the schools had neither. In one Kajiado school we also saw boys engaged in constructing a new path, and children of both sexes were making bales of hay to be sold to local farmers to augment school funds. It was in Nyanza, however, where these chores extended beyond the school gates, with some girls working in their teachers' homes. Ironically, the students concerned seemed to see this as a form of recognition by their teachers, while in actuality it is a form of child labour.

4.1.5 Harsh environments and long journeys to school

As already mentioned, three of the four Kajiado schools were in remote areas, with students attending the schools from a radius of around 10 km, walking to and from school each day with journeys sometimes taking two or three hours or more. The most isolated school, 30 km from the nearest small settlement, and 45 km from the nearest paved road, had no boarding accommodation, necessitating exceptionally long journeys to school. As one girl described:

> I leave at 4.10pm and I get home at 8pm. Because I'm tired, I walk slowly and when I get home my mum asks me to cook and by the time I'm through its 9pm. I'm tired, I sleep, there's no time to study.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the Nairobi schools, where journeys to school were short. In Central Province too, just under half the girls lived near their schools, though eight took around an hour to reach school. This kind of distance was taken as a matter of course, with one girl insisting that 'it's not very far' and another saying she got tired 'but not too tired'. In Nyanza 15 girls claimed to walk for an hour or more to school, thereby raising questions about their readiness and ability to learn when they got to school. Yet despite the long distances some girls walked, in

some places they were still expected to walk home and back for lunch. Coupled with lack of food, such walking famished the child and it would be difficult to be alert in class.

4.1.6 Pregnancy and early marriage

Pregnancy was also a problem. In Nyanza, the girls talked of the large number of girls in their families, communities or schools who had dropped out of school because of pregnancy. They also singled out this as an issue which affected the physical and psycho-social well-being of such girls. One of our study participants, Cathy, had become pregnant and been forced to transfer schools in Class 5. She talked of the subsequent rejection and abandonment she experienced:

> I had a baby so the headmaster did not want me there. The man (father of the baby) was a school going person. He was in class 7. He ran away and left me; he just left me there. He was afraid he would be arrested. He ran off and has never come back.

In Nyanza and Central, certain cultural practices also encouraged the high levels of pregnancy among the school-going girls. For example, the girls identified the cultural practice of having dances during funeral wakes as occasions for girls and boys 'to go into the bushes and do bad things', resulting in pregnancies and consequently dropping out of school. Annette added that sometimes the boys threatened girls with violence if they did not give in to the sexual demands made by the boys.

The girls were also confronted with the issue of early marriages. All of them identified girls (including their sisters) in their schools or community, who had dropped out of school to get married. These girls had been forced into marriage because of pregnancy. For example, Eve talked of her 15-year-old sister who had dropped out of Class 8 to get married because she was pregnant. Frequently such girls got married to young men who were a class or so ahead of them at school. In Kajiado, cultural practices such as the Morans' traditional right to sex from women, and girls being forced to sleep outside because they were not allowed to sleep under the same roof as their fathers, exposed them to sexual activity and pregnancy. Here, the practice of FGM and the marrying off of girls as young as 10 to older men, also contributed to school drop-out.

4.1.7 Negative attitudes and influences towards education

Another challenge faced by the girls was the prevalent anti-school attitude among members of their families and sometimes peers. In Kajiado, the exchange of girls for cattle on marriage meant that the economic cost of educating girls was often not thought worthwhile:

> They say in the Maasai community that when a girl is circumcised she is now a women and she can get married. And not only that, but they want her to be married off because they

> want to exchange you with cows. Maybe for me they want to exchange me with maybe 10 cows (Violet).

Several of the Kajiado girls therefore spoke of their battle to attend school, with mothers intervening with fathers, and in some instances the local chief stepping in to persuade a father to send his daughter to school. In Central, Kerry's mother discouraged her from school, even threatening to give away her uniform. In Nyanza, Eliza, an orphan who lived with an older married sister, also talked of how her sister would often tell her, 'if I don't want school I should leave it', implying that it was not her concern whether Eliza stayed on in school or not. This situation was also echoed by Angel who said she did not discuss her education with her aunt and uncle:

> I don't tell them because they are least bothered with my education. I am the one who is concerned with my education because I know it will help me one day. That is why I try to do chores at home speedily so that I can get to school on time.

This shows self-determination despite the suffering she experienced, and her belief that education could improve her life. In fact Angel's aunt told her that she would end up as a hairdresser, but she believed she would make it to university despite the odds being stacked against her. As with another girl in Nyanza, Angel described how her aunt would not attend any of the school meetings or functions because she did not value the girl or her education:

> When you are an orphan and the person you stay with dislikes you, if they call parents in the school, that person cannot come to school. You may not like it, and it makes you sad, but I am afraid because sometimes if you talk to her she can abuse you. Maybe if you find her at home she can tell you, "don't tell me this nonsense, I am not going because of you".

The girls were also affected by the actions of their peers, some of whom simply dropped out of school and disappeared. For example, Betty explained how her two close friends 'hid and left school'. Similarly, Nelly also talked of her sister:

> She dropped out of school. She used to disappear with boys. Mum went to look for her. She found her and came back with her. She disappeared again.

She further pointed out that three girls in Class 5 had also run away once they had established relationships with boys:

> Once they are with their boyfriends they just gallivant around. Even when they leave home saying they are going to school, they don't go. They take another road and get lost.

4.1.8 School factors

In addition to the challenges within their home and community contexts which militated against girls attending school, were some instances of occurrences at school that challenged their determination to continue with their education. We have already mentioned the fact that children in some schools were sent home for periods of time because they lacked various payments. Furthermore, many girls developed negative attitudes towards school because of corporal punishment, which took place in most of the case-study schools. Examples given were of children being beaten for being late for school, for not finishing their homework, for playing roughly in the playground. In one school in Central, the interviewer was told that prefects made lists of children who were then beaten by the teachers. Nevertheless, whilst some girls clearly felt hostile towards teachers who beat them, a few saw beatings as a necessary form of punishment in order to teach self-discipline and good behaviour.

Sexual overtures from teachers and boys also spelt awkwardness for the girls. In Central, Kelis complained about a maths teacher who 'likes girls very much', and who talked to her 'about other things' instead of maths. This teacher had given the girl his telephone number and suggested she called him, but she had refused, though she clearly continued to feel awkwardness over this harassment. In Nairobi, Anika and Fendi said that boys also bullied girls in school. For example, Anika explained that,

> Some boys like touching girls when they are out playing. They cheat you that you are just playing and yet they just want to play with you so that they can touch your private parts - it's common. For example, there are some boys who started that habit when we were in Class 4. Like a boy would grab a girl, and make her fall so that he could lie on top of her. When we reported it to the teacher, they punished both the boy and the girl; the teacher caned them and called their parents.

In Nyanza, some of the girls also talked of being teased about their state of growth by boys in their classes, which made them self-conscious and uncomfortable. In several schools girls were also jeered at by other children for having tattered or incomplete uniforms, and felt a real sense of shame because of this. This bullying and embarrassment made schooling difficult for the girls, and affected their self esteem.

4.2 Why are these girls in school?

In spite of the many challenges described above, without exception the girls seemed keen on getting an education and were still in school. This section looks at why these girls, despite such hardships, seemed determined to stay at school.

4.2.1 Persistence and self-determination

The girls' voices revealed strong persistence and determination. Though mostly for extrinsic reasons, as discussed below, they decided to stay in school as a route to a successful life. In Nairobi, Aisha said:

> I am in school for nobody but myself. I came here to learn, to do my own thing, and learn what other people are doing in the world, and I have to listen to the teacher.

Beto added, 'I do not come to school because education will benefit anyone else; the education I receive is for me'. Aisha and Beto's words echoed across the research sites where many girls expressed similar views. There was a resilience and desire to learn. For example, Supuu, who missed school because she was HIV positive and was often hospitalised, said that when she resumed school, she persistently followed the teachers, asking them to update her on what they had taught while she was away. She wanted to catch up and was grateful that her teachers explained to her what she had missed. Missing school had caused her to be a class behind her peers, but she was determined to study and finish her primary education: 'no matter what, I am personally motivated to work hard always. It is challenging, but I am still strong'. These girls withstood the challenges of being too tired, or too hungry, or not well enough to attend and succeed in school. A number even had to overcome the negative attitude from their parents/guardians as discussed earlier.

Some girls put into effect some strategies to help themselves do well. Brenda, for example, said she spent time revising subjects 'so that I can excel in them'. Tipa had made herself a timetable to ensure that she studied all subjects in turn. Patana worked hard because she wanted 'to learn as much as I can'. In Nyanza, several girls talked of 'reading hard' so as to do well. For Mary, reading hard meant using a lamp, whilst for others it meant making the most of the daylight before it became too dark to read.

Almost without exception the girls participating in the study expressed a desire to go on to university, notwithstanding the challenges that stood in their way. Angel, despite the difficulties of orphanhood, hunger and living in the slums with a hostile guardian, was able to express a real zeal for education, and faith in a vision for the future. Her words sum up the aspirations of many in this respect:

> I want to go on until University and I want to work hard so that I can achieve my dream. We know good things can come to us through education because education is the foundation for a bright future. Even if the funds for my education are scarce, I know I will study until I am in university. My aunt told me that once I sit for my class 8 exams[5], I will be taken to a hairdressing college. I do not want that! I have a strong belief that even if there is no money; I will go to university one day. ... I will not lose hope. I will put my hope in my education so that I can succeed and better my life and that of my family (Angel, Nairobi).

4.2.2 A belief in the value of education to change lives

Perhaps the zeal and determination mentioned above was partly because girls saw education as the [only] way to change their lives, through conversing in English, obtaining lucrative employment and hence increasing their opportunities to travel locally and internationally. Their value for education was mostly extrinsic, a means to an end, and derived from what was also told to them repeatedly by their teachers and sometimes parents. In this section, we try to tease out some reasons why these girls valued their education and schooling.

Firstly, they saw education as equipping them to help their families and draw them out of poverty. Most of the girls dreamt of the day when they would have lucrative employment, independence and the money that came with it, to help boost the quality of life of their struggling parents and siblings. For example, Queen in Nyanza wanted to get an education so that she could

> get a good job, build a better house for my family, and pay school fees for my younger sister so that she can also secure her future.

The girls also wanted a good life for any children they might eventually have. However, there was some vagueness between what they wanted to become, and what they needed to study in order to realise those ambitions. Or sometimes they were not even sure what the job they said they wanted to do entailed. For example, one girl in Central Province said she wanted to be a surgeon but changed her mind once the researcher explained to her that it meant cutting people and seeing blood. In Nyanza, performance scores in the exams seemed pretty dismal and were in contrast to the careers girls aspired to. One girl who aspired to be a doctor, for example, reported that she had only obtained 25% in Maths and 52% in Science, subjects that are crucial in determining whether one can be a doctor or not. Trudy also dreamed of being rich but had no idea as to how this would come about:

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[5] National exam marking the end of primary school in Kenya.

Trudy: When you are educated, you become rich.

Researcher: How do you become rich?

Trudy: You just become rich.

However, she was clear about the kind of work she did not want:

> I want to have money and be free of problems like the ones that women go through, like having to wash clothes and be paid little money.

Secondly, schooling provided them with a safe space to grow up and mature, and was thus security against early marriage and other cultural practices such as female circumcision and wife inheritance. The out-of-school girl was more vulnerable to sexual abuse, pregnancy and early marriage. Girls across the sites saw marriage as interfering with their pursuit of education. They had seen women endure domestic violence and they wanted to have enough money to be independent, to take care of themselves and their future families. Most of the girls dreamed of only getting married after finishing their education and getting employed:

> I just want to go to school and get a job; after that, I will judge for myself then whether I should get married, but only after I have made a life for myself (Cathy).

The girls had seen their mothers and other women in their villages suffer and work long hours on the farms or, for example, burning wood for charcoal for paltry pay, and they partly attributed this to lack of an education preventing them from obtaining a good job.

Thirdly, schooling provided the girls with an opportunity to engage with their talents through extra-curricular activities, in contrast to the home environment where their free time would be absorbed doing housework as discussed earlier. Thus the school provided a chance to escape and to be a child, as well as an opportunity to explore and build up one's talents. Certain aspects of school seemed to influence the girls' desire to stay on in school, especially in Nyanza. Annette, for example, was the school's games captain and this motivated her to stay in school because she was given the opportunity to participate in sport every day as well as play against other schools in the county or province. Whitney, on the other hand, liked her school because she had learnt how to sculpt.

Fourthly, the physical appearance of the school was another factor that made the girls value their education. Even though the schools lacked facilities such as running water and electricity, with some being in dilapidated, overcrowded buildings, they were still far better and more spacious than most of the homes. For example, some pupils lived in grass and mud huts in Nyanza and Central, manyattas in Kajiado, and overcrowded single rooms in Nairobi. Jane (Nyanza), for example, found her school attractive because 'here the floors are cemented, and not dusty, as that makes people

cough'. Across the sites, the head teachers and teachers tried to nurture a culture to make the school pupil-friendly by planting flowers and trees, sweeping dirt from the compound and corridors, tending the fences, and so on. One boarding school in Kajiado even had 'street signs' on the paved paths and a diesel-fuelled generator for electricity at night.

Fifthly, the girls valued school because it gave them access to the authority, guidance, care and sometimes even love, from adults, all of which they often lacked at home. Across the schools, girls admired their teachers, who sometimes helped them practically, providing materials such as pens, books, food, money, sanitary towels, uniform, shoes, clothing, and sometimes even shelter for the girls, to ensure that they stayed in school. One of the participants identified the pieces of advice constantly given to them by their teachers as one of the reasons why she liked school. Teachers also gave encouragement:

> our teachers tell us that girls should strive and complete their education; strive more than the boys so that they can help their parents (Jane).

The quality of teaching and availability of teachers also made girls value their education and schooling experience. For example, in describing her science teacher, Wendy (Nyanza) stated, 'he works with us, he teaches slowly; when he teaches, you can ask him questions'. Similarly, Sally said that,

> in class if you have a question you are free to ask the question and your teacher will not beat you if you give the wrong answer - he or she will help you to say that thing correctly.

Often, the girls would mention a good teacher's subject as their favourite subject. The availability of teachers in the classroom was another factor that the girls identified as keeping them in school. As Betty explained, 'there are very many teachers here. In the other schools, there are few. I get good education here'. Expounding on this, Tina stated that 'we are taught every day, there is no day that we have not been taught'. In the same vein, some of them felt encouraged to stay in school because they thought that their school did well academically. Some teachers in Central and Nyanza were even cited as not caning students, something that was much appreciated among the girls, although as mentioned earlier, some did see caning as a necessary corrective strategy that helped them to be disciplined as well as to learn.

The concern of some of the head teachers was cited as another positive aspect of school. For example, they provided girls with a second chance to pursue education after becoming pregnant as was the case with Cathy, or they encouraged girls to return to school after being married. Some head teachers also intervened with parents or guardians on a girl's behalf. As Whitney (Nyanza) explained:

> If your parent is mistreating you he [the headmaster] can call your parent and warn them against it, or if your parent is doing bad things to you he can call your parent and warn them and they stop doing it.

This was also true in Kajiado where head teachers fronted the campaign against female circumcision and early marriage, providing a safer environment for the girl.

A closer look into the girls' reasons above for valuing education thus reveals more than an extrinsic value for education: it exposes the desire for choice and freedom that education offers, a choice for exploitation of talents, for further education, independence, travel, delayed marriage, choice of spouse, as well as empowerment to make the decisions of life. It reveals the passion among the girls to become better human beings, demonstrating a more sophisticated understanding of the value and presence of education, rather than seeing it simply as a means to an end.

4.2.3 Inspiration from role models and mentors

Another factor that encouraged girls to stay on in school despite the odds was the encouragement and support that they received from role models and mentors, whether financial, psychological or emotional support. The girls mentioned receiving encouragement from several key figures such as members of their family, members of their local community, peers, teachers, and visitors from outside.

Different **family members** were mentioned as supporting the girls in their education. Female members of the family like sisters and mothers were frequently cited as giving encouragement and support. For example, in Central, 13 of the 21 girls said it was their mothers who, despite their financial problems, supported their attendance at school. They wanted their daughters to 'succeed in life', with several saying that they did not want them to end up in the same position as they were themselves, with poorly paid, insecure work, or no jobs at all. As Noha's mother told her: 'it's only education that will deliver you from these problems'. These mothers saw the benefits of education in terms of the difference it would make to their own lives too, wanting their daughters to do well so that they could get good jobs and provide financial assistance for them. Fendi's mother, a widow who had lost her property to her in-laws when her husband died, encouraged Fendi to work hard in school:

> She told me that my father's wealth is not mine. I should work hard in school so that I can acquire my own wealth from my sweat. When he died my father's property was taken by other people.

Her grandmother also encouraged her to work hard in school and think big,

so that one day I can buy my own piece of land, and not wait for her piece of land (through inheritance). When I buy a piece of land, I should build a house made of stone, not a mud house like hers and that I should also buy a car.

Despite not being educated herself, Fendi's grandmother believed in education and its possibility to provide a good life. She wanted better for her granddaughter, perhaps the life she had wanted for herself but never had.

However, male family members were also sometimes mentioned as supporting a girl's education. One girl in Nyanza, for example, cited her grandfather as giving her wise counsel about her education, while Faida said that her brother, who had a job washing cars, kept encouraging her to work hard so that she could have a better life than him. Male family members were more likely to be in a position to give material support, paying fees or buying school equipment such as uniform, books and pens, or paying for food and for school trips. In Kajiado, however, where girls' education was often found to be pointless (see above), we found evidence of brothers playing an important role in advocating for their sisters. In one instance a younger brother had been instrumental in enabling his sister to obtain help from an NGO to avoid FGM and early marriage and instead be sent to a rescue centre where she could continue with her education.

Family members also gave advice, particularly with respect to avoiding sexual relationships so as not to get pregnant and drop out of school. For example, Annette**'s** grandmother had told her that 'some girls drop out of school and become prostitutes and contract AIDS, so she tells me not to have sex'. Patana said her brother, who was also her guardian, paid for her schooling and generally advised her to 'strive hard and not engage in bad things like drug abuse and being cheated by men'.

Occasionally girls cited role models from the extended family whom they did not know very well, or whom they had not seen for many years, showing the power of role-modelling across time and distance. Misa, for example, had an uncle who had been to university and was an engineer with Kenya Airways. Though she had only talked to him when she was much younger, she still remembered his success and wanted to be like him. Phyllis's role model was her cousin in high school, who, 'when she closes school, she stays indoors reading, and never roams about aimlessly like other girls'.

Some girls received support from **the community**. For example, in Nairobi, Kerry's support came from her neighbour who sometimes lent her the money for fees, and gave her somewhere to stay when her mother turned her out of the house. Sue's education was sponsored by an elderly man on the school committee who had been her late mother's friend. He made sure that she was not sent home for any reason, and if she was, he would come and talk to the teacher on her behalf.

Fendi said that her neighbours in the Mathare slums had encouraged her: 'they say that since my mum does not have money, I should work very hard in school so that I help her in future'. The community also had several role models. Though Faida's role model was her 'Ustathat' (female teacher in the Muslim madras classes), whom she admired for being organised and making her lessons easy to understand, she also admired her sister's friend who studied at Kenyatta University, because it made her feel that even she could go to university. Often someone in the community was admired because of their wealth, shown in the way they dressed or through their material possessions, or for their prestige gained through holding a good job. Most of these successful people mentioned here were women, whom the girls sought to emulate.

Peers were also a source of encouragement. Across the sites, the girls' were each others' supporters because they encouraged each other to do well in school, consoled each other about the mistreatment they received at home, shared food, pens, stationery and sanitary towels with those who did not have them. Two girls even spoke of peers helping to pay their examination fees. But support was also emotional. Jen's friend Angel had encouraged her to withstand the mistreatment at home: 'she told me not to mind, the future will be better'. Brenda, who was often the recipient of verbal abuse from her aunt said, sobbing, that when she had problems her friend gave her 'hope and strength to move on'. Trudy's friend encouraged her to still come to school even when she was hungry and despondent:

> She encourages me to come to school, like sometimes, when I tell her that I don't think that I will be able to come to school because sometimes I am hungry and have not had anything to eat, so I find it hard to go to school when hungry.

Friends sometimes provided spaces where they could do their homework uninterrupted, or 'help with subjects I don't understand'. For example, Anika revised together with her friend Mauve:

> She finds education interesting just like me and we revise together -she takes her education seriously unlike others who are not serious with their education. When we sit together in class, we go through past papers together.

Sharing of food was particularly important: sometimes this was two-way, with each sharing food with a friend when they had it, or it was a one-way exchange, with their friend always having food and being willing to share it as voiced by Cheryl:

> She calls us, and shares her food with us, and gives us a little each. Maybe you have not carried food, and you are just sitting outside the class doing nothing at lunch time, she calls you and gives you the food. Sometimes she would rather go without and share it to you.

As already indicated, some **teachers** were seen as role models and facilitators of a good education. Not only were they admired for teaching well until the pupils understood, but also for acting in loco parentis in some instances, providing practical and emotional support as well as helpful advice.

There were other individuals and organisations, too, from **outside the local community,** who had encouraged some girls either consciously or unconsciously. Pupils from one Central Province school had gone for a retreat during the holidays, sponsored by the NGO World Vision, and had spent three days learning about children's rights and how to handle abuse, mistreatment and unwanted sexual advances. In Nairobi, Pamela had been inspired by

> some American social workers who came to advise us on issues to deal with HIV: I think they did a good job and I would like to be like them.

Some who lived in an orphanage attributed their apparent 'good' life to some donors from America who had established and supported it. Some of the girls admired local politicians like the area Member of Parliament and the local Councillor, as well as nationally known female politicians. As Jane explained:

> I think that I want to be like them and complete my education, because when you have your own money, you can buy what you need, unlike when you are a farmer, and you have not completed education you have to sell the vegetables to the market for people to buy. The people with money are the ones who will be giving you money.

Meanwhile, Tina, who had talked of being a professor, cited the Nobel Peace Laureate, Professor Wangari Maathai, as providing inspiration for her. She described her as 'helping the country. She provides food, money for free education. They always announce on the television'. Others were inspired by Obama, seeing him as an example of someone with a Kenyan background reaching the position of US president: 'if he has made it, why not me?'. A few girls were clearly influenced by the media, in citing pop artists as their role models, but this was unusual, in part, perhaps, because of most of the students' limited access to media sources.

5. Conclusions

The findings discussed here are drawn from the voices of eighty-nine girls from four different areas of Kenya. All of these girls shared in common the fact that they lived in conditions of endemic poverty and in households and communities characterised by fragmentation, violence and abuse and by an apparent apathy towards education. Even so, they appeared committed to being in school

and continuing with their education (insofar as it was financially viable) through secondary school and for almost all, through tertiary education. They were in school because they enjoyed being there: for many school provided an escape from the difficulties of their daily lives, and the opportunity to play with their peers and behave as children, instead of taking on the burdens of adulthood. They were there because of their persistence and self-determination and their belief in the value of education to change their lives. This belief was based on what they had observed, and what they been told, principally by teachers, but also by predominantly female relatives, and it encompassed the vision of a 'good life' in which they would have a job with an income sufficient to provide enough food, a nice house and other material things. For many their goals also included the opportunity to help others, and most saw marriage some way in the future, though not at the expense of a loss of independence. In forming their visions for the future they had also been inspired by their role models, and supported and encouraged practically and emotionally by teachers, relatives, peers and occasionally by members of the wider community. The short answer, then, to the question, 'What keeps girls in school against the odds?', is that they see education as providing the route out of poverty and the opportunity of a better life.

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