Education Equity in Kenya

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Abstract

This article is a desk research of Kenya's educational landscape focusing on equity, challenges, and opportunities. Despite significant strides in access to basic education, disparities persist in quality and completion rates, especially in marginalized regions. Key statistics reveal higher literacy rates in Kenya than regional averages but highlight low tertiary education transition rates. The challenges include regional inequalities, resource constraints, pandemic disruptions, economic barriers, and gender disparities affecting girls' education. Initiatives and recommendations encompass empowerment programs, equitable resource allocation, technology integration, community engagement, and policy reforms. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic disparities for national development and social progress, advocating for a resilient and inclusive education system in Kenya.

Keywords: Education, Education Equity, Inclusive and Quality Education, Educational Resources, Education Disparities, Educational Gains, Educational Aiding.

Introduction

The adoption of the right to development by the United Nations General Assembly in 1986 (Subedi, 2021) was a significant step towards recognizing the importance of ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from development processes. However, nearly 45 years later, the world is still grappling with significant inequalities across various dimensions, including economic, social, cultural, and political spheres. Kenya's journey toward educational equity and excellence has been marked by progress challenges, and opportunities.

Education remains one of the most consequential ways of reducing inequalities. Kenya has witnessed significant change in access to basic education since independence driven by various structural adjustments: Free primary education established in 2003 (Ogola, 2010) and Free Secondary school in 2008 (Mwangi, 2013). A shift in focus to ensure Early Childhood Education (Okiyo et al., 2021) has been key to enhancing the foundation of education in the country. Structural reforms, policy consolidation and targeting remains the fundamental steps towards a better and well-educated nation.

As the nation strives for inclusive and quality education, it must address persistent issues mostly inequalities in quality and access to education. Gendered differences, regional disparities and urban/rural divides amplifies unwarranted disadvantages some individuals and/or communities have to deal with in regards to education due to their gender, and location. This comprehensive article delves into key insights, statistics, and actionable recommendations to navigate these challenges and pave the way for a more equitable and effective education system**.**

Background

We, Kenyans, are faced with the question of passing through school versus learning, as of 2024 Kenya does not guarantee every person an opportunity to pass through school (Elfert, 2015) which although should not be the main aim of any education sector contributes to literacy and numeracy of individuals, additionally, those with a chance to access a school or institution of learning in Kenya have a possibility of not experiencing the transformative power of education(OECD, 2012).

Education empowerment should be wary of the differences in access and privileges dictated by the socio-economic scenarios of different families across the globe and in Kenya. Education is the primary tool of empowerment for the least privileged in society as it empowers kids, future adults, by honing their abilities, exposure, and pool of opportunities available to them (Zandile Myeka, 2022). We need an education sector enshrined in inclusive education rooted in the understanding of the diversity of learners and educators. Education needs to be considerate of the culture, experiences, and abilities of the target persons. A considerate education implemented with a realization of marginalization is key for all children who have historically suffered from the divide (Kozleski, 2020). The importance of education equity is based on the fact that education inequity affects people with differences experienced between genders, geographical areas, families, religions, and abilities, accumulating to impact the students after school life and this is highly misunderstood in society (Waitoller, 2020) leading to negligence until when it is too late in life for a correction mechanism to be established for the said individual.

The consequential nature of learning highlights its power to affect a society's political, social, cultural, innovativeness, and interactions. With guaranteed access to peer-to-peer learning, educators facilitated learning in addition to learning for all by all with all is key to the realization of a more equal society as echoed by Nelson Mandela (Zandile Myeka, 2022) . Societal development is anchored on exploitations of diverse abilities and curiosities, these are sparked by the power of education to expose, challenge, elicit competition and desire for a better world.

The constitution of Kenya, in 2010 (Kenya, 2010) corroborates the country's economic blueprint, Vision 2030 (Kenya Vision 2030, 2008) on the need for equitable development through cultural change to ensure gender equity in education development (Kibui et al., 2015). The female gender remains disadvantaged in education development due to cultural balkanization and injustices which push the narrative of the unimportance of educating the girl child.

We must laud the effort of donors to complement the nation's objective on the realization of education equity nevertheless evidence shows that donors align with their political motives which at times marginalize already marginalized communities in education aiding. The probability of aid not flowing to the neediest regions is high, according to (Ziff, 2023) the Somali community in Kenya which is among the educationally most needy communities in Kenya receives close to no aid towards education development. Political preference of both the government and donors continues to misalign aid and policies towards education equity further disadvantaging the already disadvantaged members of the society.

Education reforms require underlying infrastructures such as road connectivity, school, and learning material access, despite Kenya enjoying multiple reforms and due to its global outreach enjoying aid in technological, finance, and exchange programs its education sector has a long way to go(Ziff, 2023). (M'mboga Akala, 2021) encourages that an inclusive education reform is critical to allow all stakeholders and the public to participate in building one of the most consequential aspects of society's present and future dynamics.

Education equity is important, especially in developing nations. Research and statistical analysis have proven that education is a key influencer and predictor of an immense improvement in economic, social, and political aspects of individuals, communities, and nations as corroborated by Hanushek, 2016, Palmer, 2008 and Przeworski, 2000 (Ziff, 2023).

Education System Overview

Kenya's education system encompasses various levels, including pre-primary, primary, secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. While education is constitutionally guaranteed as free and compulsory, disparities in access, quality, and completion rates persist, particularly in marginalized communities and rural areas**.**

Key Statistics

Literacy Rate: According to the World Bank: Kenya ranks higher in literacy levels for both males and females,85.6%, and 80.3%, in comparison to Sub-Saharan Africa, 74.2,61.4% respectively. Despite these brilliant percentages we still fall short of the world rate and are faced with ineffective education as the lack

of transition to higher learning necessarily limits the utilization of the transformative power of literacy and numeracy in the country.

School enrollment: According to a join multidimensional report led by KNBS, UON, ARUA, AFD, and ACEIR there has been a tremendous increase in school enrolment of 6-18-year-old from 75.2 in 1994 to 90.7 in 2015, nevertheless there is a very low rate of Tertiary education transition.

School Completion: Completion rates vary across levels, with primary schooling boasting a completion rate of 49.8%, secondary education at 24.5%, and tertiary completion at a mere 3.5%.
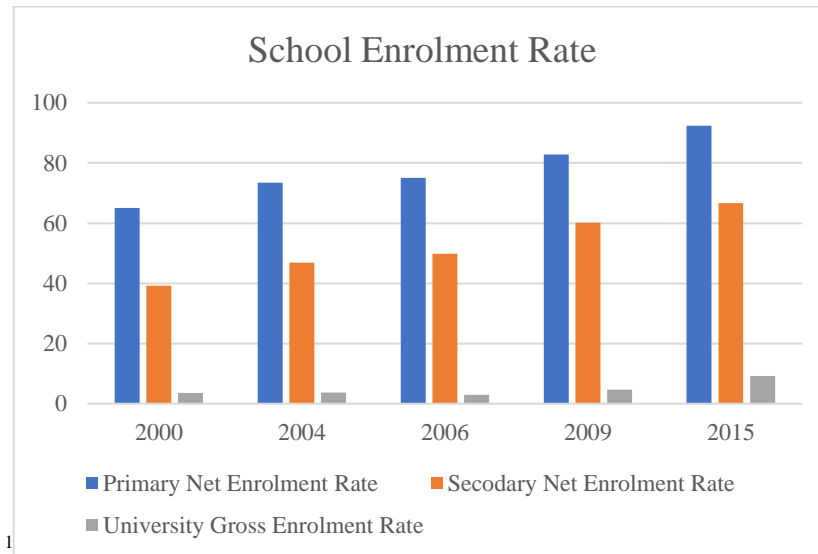

Figure 1: School Enrolment

Source: UNESCO, 2018

Challenges

- Regional Disparities: Regional inequalities persist, with arid and semi-arid areas experiencing significantly lower expected years of schooling compared to urban centers. Nairobi County stands out with the standard 12 years of schooling, highlighting the need for equitable distribution of educational resources.
- Resource Constraints: Resource shortages, including infrastructure, qualified teachers, and learning materials, disproportionately affect rural and marginalized communities, exacerbating educational disparities and perpetuating cycles of poverty.
- Pandemic Disruptions: The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for millions of Kenyan students, particularly those in underserved communities lacking access to remote learning resources. School closures and the digital divide widened existing disparities, threatening to undermine educational gains.

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[1] Primary, Secondary and Tertiary enrolment constructed from UNESCO (2018) data based on the Kenya Inequality Trends Diagnostics 2020 Report

This and any future shocks that disproportionately affect individuals' well-being compromise access and uptake of education in the country which reflects on the livelihoods of their families and offspring later on.

- Economic Barriers: High poverty rates hinder access to education, with many families unable to afford school fees, uniforms, and other related expenses. Economic hardships contribute to increased dropout rates, particularly among vulnerable populations.
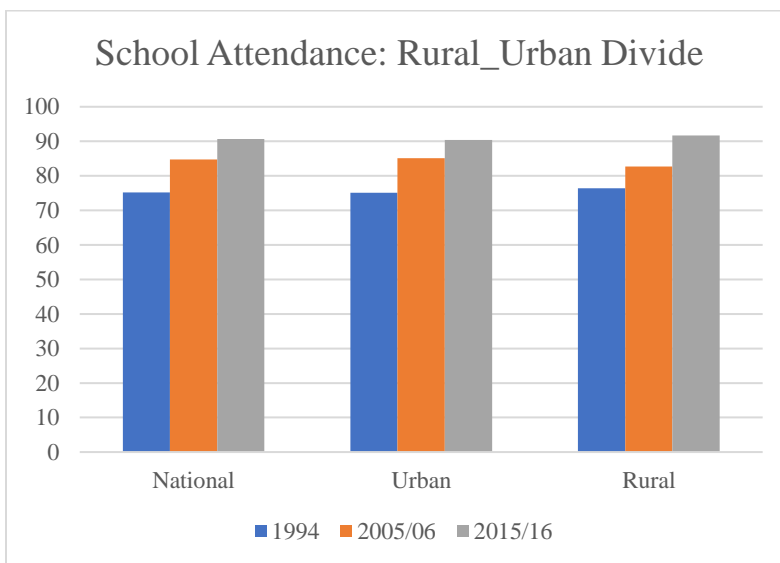

Figure 2: School attendance differentiated for rural and urban areas

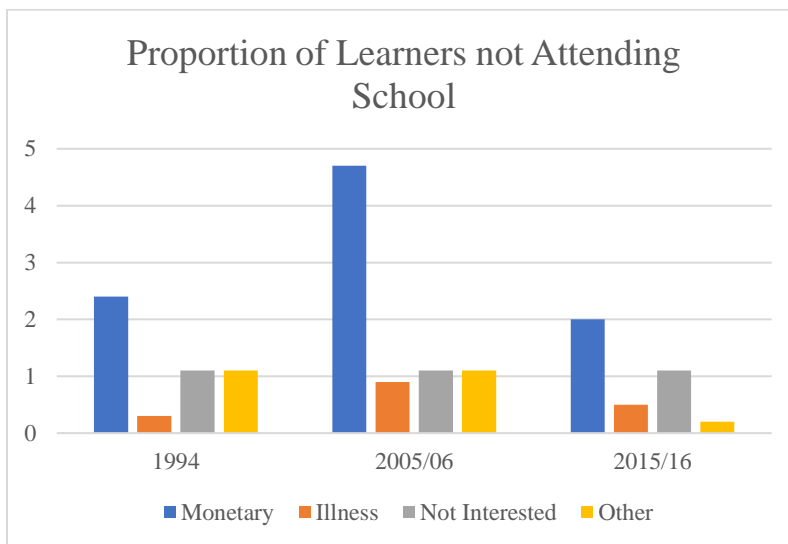*Source: WMS 1994 and KIHBS 2005/06 and 2015/16*

Figure 3: Proportion of learners missing school under different reasons

Source: WMS 1994 and KIHBS 2005/06 and 2015/16

Gender Disparities:

Girls' Education: Despite a huge decline in the female non-attendance to learning institution the decline has not achieved a complete attendance of girls to schools this exacerbated by different shocks that affect the nuclear and ext girls continue to face multifaceted barriers, including domestic responsibilities, menstrual health challenges, and early pregnancies, leading to high dropout rates. The closure of boarding schools during the pandemic further disadvantaged rural girls, depriving them of crucial support structures and educational opportunities**.**
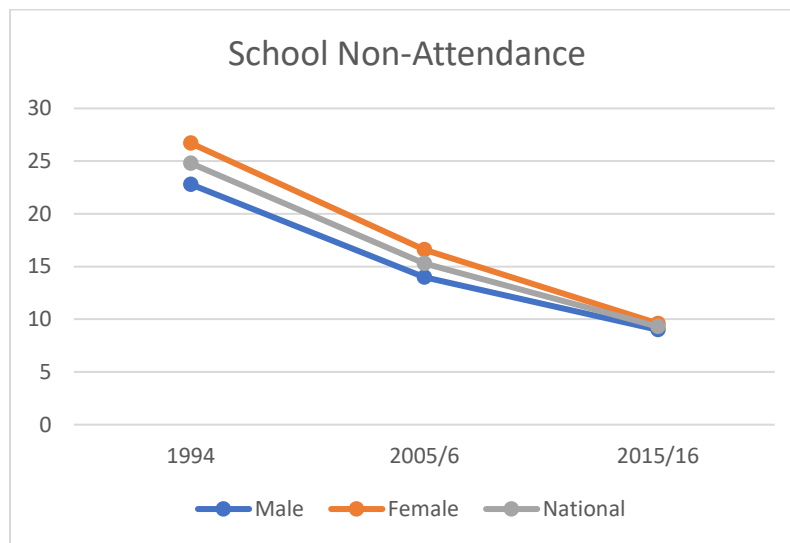

Figure 4: School non-attendance by gender

Source: WMS 1994 and KIHBS 2005/06 and 2015/16

Conclusions

Kenya's pursuit of educational equity and excellence is indispensable for national development and social progress. By addressing systemic disparities, investing in targeted interventions, and fostering collaboration across sectors, Kenya can build a more inclusive and resilient education system that empowers all individuals to realize their full potential. Through concerted efforts and sustained commitment, Kenya can transform its education landscape, ensuring that every child has access to quality education, regardless of background or circumstance

Initiatives and Recommendations:

- Empowerment Programs: Support organizations that champion female education and gender equality through targeted interventions, including sexual education, mentorship, and material support.
- Equitable Resource Allocation: Prioritize resource distribution to underserved regions, ensuring adequate infrastructure, qualified teachers, and learning materials to address regional disparities effectively.

- Technology Integration: Invest in technological infrastructure and digital literacy programs to facilitate remote learning and bridge the digital divide, particularly in remote and marginalized communities.
- Community Engagement: Foster partnerships with local communities to address sociocultural barriers hindering girls' education, promote awareness, challenge harmful norms, and mobilize support for educational initiatives.
- Policy Reforms: Enact policies aimed at alleviating economic barriers to education, such as targeted financial assistance, school feeding programs, and incentives for vulnerable families to prioritize education amidst competing demands.

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