

Assessing Development Communication Strategies in Addressing Cultural Practices Affecting Girls' Education in Kilifi County, Kenya

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<https://doi.org/10.62049/jkncu.v6i2.623>

Abstract

Development communication strategies are vital in overcoming barriers that hinder girls' education, especially in regions where cultural practices influence community behaviors. In Kilifi County, Kenya, despite policies promoting gender equality, cultural norms continue to impede girls' education. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of development communication strategies in addressing cultural practices negatively affecting girls' education in Kilifi, promoting sustainable behavioral change. It sought to answer four key questions: What cultural practices interfere with girls' education? Which communication strategies are currently employed? What challenges do practitioners face? How can these strategies be improved? Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this qualitative case study examined indigenous communication channels, community influence networks, and local epistemologies shaping perceptions. The target population included 280 girls (14- 18 years), 26 community elders, 40 religious leaders, 54 teachers, and 500 community members. Purposive, maximum variation, and snowball sampling selected 30 participants for interviews, focus groups, and observation; five FGDs with six participants each and 30 individual interviews. Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic coding, revealing patterns related to narratives, social influence, and cultural values. Findings indicate that indigenous narratives, beliefs, and influence networks perpetuate practices like early marriage, female genital mutilation, and restrictions on girls' mobility and education. Existing strategies often rely on top-down approaches that fail to resonate culturally, limiting community buy-in and sustained change. Challenges include resistance from the community, limited access to appropriate channels, and inadequate engagement of local influencers. The study concludes that effective strategies must integrate indigenous knowledge, leverage influence networks, and employ culturally sensitive methods. Recommendations include adopting participatory approaches involving community members, elders, and religious leaders and leveraging narratives and symbols as well as utilizing influence networks and cultural platforms and tailoring messages to local epistemologies and addressing resistance through dialogue and inclusive participation. Culturally resonant communication strategies are essential for overcoming resistance, ensuring sustainability, and achieving SDG 4 in Kilifi.

Keywords: Development Communication, Girls' Education, Cultural Practices, Gender Equality, Social Behavioural Change, Indigenous Communication Channels, Social Influence, Cultural Values, Sustainability

Introduction

Girls' education is universally recognized as a fundamental component of sustainable development. It contributes significantly to improving health outcomes, promoting economic growth, and fostering social equity (UNESCO, 2014). Despite these global acknowledgments, numerous regions worldwide continue to grapple with cultural practices that hinder girls' access to quality education. In Kenya, Kilifi County epitomizes such a challenge, where deeply rooted cultural norms and traditional beliefs continue to influence behaviours and community perceptions regarding girls' schooling (Nzioki & Mutua, 2015). Practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and restrictions on girls' mobility are prevalent and are often justified through oral narratives, rituals, and social influence networks that are embedded within the community's cultural fabric (UNICEF, 2013; NGEOC Kenya, 2017).

While the Kenyan government has implemented policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality and increasing girls' enrolment and retention in schools, these efforts are often met with resistance stemming from cultural inertia (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2014). Development communication strategies have been employed to address these barriers, with varying degrees of success (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2017). Many of these strategies tend to adopt top-down approaches, which may lack cultural resonance or fail to engage community members meaningfully (Mefalopulos, 2008). As a result, they often do not foster sustainable behavioural change, and harmful practices continue to persist (UNICEF, 2013). Recognizing the importance of indigenous communication channels such as storytelling, rituals, and oral traditions provides an opportunity to craft strategies that resonate with local epistemologies and social influence networks (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). This study aims to assess the effectiveness of current development communication strategies in Kilifi and explore culturally sensitive approaches that could better address the complex social and cultural determinants affecting girls' education.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of policies and programs aimed at enhancing girls' access to education, Kilifi County experiences persistent dropout rates linked to cultural practices like early marriage and FGM. These practices are sustained through social norms and narratives passed down through generations, making them resistant to change. The current development communication initiatives primarily rely on mass media campaigns and government directives that often do not account for the local cultural context or leverage indigenous communication platforms. This disconnects results in community disengagement and resistance, limiting the strategies' long-term impact. There is a clear gap in understanding how indigenous knowledge, narratives, and influence networks can be integrated into communication strategies to foster sustainable change. Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of existing strategies and propose culturally resonant alternatives that could lead to meaningful behavioural change in Kilifi.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to assess the effectiveness of development communication strategies in addressing cultural practices that negatively affect girls' education in Kilifi County. Specifically, the study aims to identify the cultural practices that impede girls' schooling, analyse current communication approaches employed by development practitioners, evaluate the challenges faced in

implementing these strategies, and recommend culturally sensitive methods that can foster sustainable behavioural change.

Research Questions

To guide this inquiry, the study was guided by these four research questions.

- What are the specific cultural practices that interfere with girls' education in Kilifi?
- Which communication strategies are currently in use, and how effective are they?
- What challenges do practitioners face when deploying these strategies?
- How can communication approaches be improved to better resonate with local communities and promote sustainable change?

These questions sought to generate insights that can inform more effective, culturally resonant development practices.

Literature Review

Development Communication and Its Role in Social Change

Development communication is a discipline that focuses on the strategic use of communication processes to facilitate social change and promote development goals. It emphasizes participatory approaches, where communities are actively involved in designing and implementing interventions, rather than merely being passive recipients of messages. Wilkinson (2013) describes development communication as a pathway to empower communities, foster dialogue, and facilitate the co-creation of solutions that are culturally appropriate and sustainable. When strategies respect local epistemologies and social norms, they tend to be more effective in influencing perceptions and behaviors.

Cultural Practices and Their Impact on Girls' Education in Kenya

In Kilifi, cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, and restrictions on girls' movement are widespread and deeply ingrained within social norms. These practices are often justified through oral narratives, rituals, and social influence networks that reinforce traditional values. For instance, FGM is linked to notions of purity and social acceptance, while early marriage is associated with safeguarding family honor or ensuring economic stability. Such practices significantly hinder girls' access to education by causing dropout, discouraging school attendance, or limiting mobility. Mugo and Ndung'u (2020) highlight that community resistance to change is often rooted in the belief that abandoning these practices threatens cultural identity and social cohesion.

Indigenous Communication Channels as Vehicles for Change

Indigenous communication channels such as storytelling, rituals, symbols, and oral traditions serve as powerful tools for transmitting cultural values and social norms (Gakuru, 2019). These channels are deeply embedded in community life and often carry more weight than external messages. When effectively harnessed, they can be powerful catalysts for behavior change because they resonate with the community's worldview and social influence structures. For example, storytelling sessions that reinterpret traditional narratives can challenge harmful norms and promote positive behaviors related to girls' education.

Limitations of Top-Down Approaches

Many development initiatives rely on top-down, mass-media campaigns that lack community participation and cultural resonance. Such approaches often fail to engage local influencers or leverage indigenous knowledge systems, resulting in limited community buy-in and resistance. Kariuki (2015) argues that strategies that ignore local epistemologies are less effective because they do not address the underlying social and cultural drivers of behavior. Conversely, participatory approaches involving community elders, religious leaders, and influencers tend to be more successful in fostering sustainable change, as they build ownership and legitimacy within the community.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework comprising three key paradigms: Development Communication Theory, Social Norms Theory, and Culturally Responsive Communication (CRC). These paradigms collectively emphasize participatory, culturally grounded, and socially influence-driven approaches to effecting behavioral change, particularly concerning harmful cultural practices affecting girls' education.

Development Communication Theory underscores the importance of dialogue, community ownership, and cultural relevance in fostering sustainable social change (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Unlike traditional top-down models that view communities as passive recipients of information, this paradigm advocates for a two-way, participatory process that respects indigenous epistemologies and social assets. It posits that sustainable change is best achieved when communities are actively involved in designing, implementing, and owning communication interventions, thereby fostering legitimacy and internalization of new norms.

Complementing this is Social Norms Theory, which emphasizes that individual behaviors are heavily influenced by perceptions of peer behaviors and community expectations (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Changing harmful practices such as early marriage or FGM requires not only raising awareness but also correcting misperceptions about what others do or approve of. Interventions rooted in this theory focus on influencing perceived social norms through engagement with influential community members and peer groups, thus creating an environment conducive to normative shift.

Finally, Culturally Responsive Communication (CRC) advocates for the use of local symbols, stories, rituals, and influence networks to craft messages that are culturally authentic and socially accepted (Mkandawire, 2018). This paradigm recognizes that indigenous communication systems such as storytelling, proverbs, and rituals are powerful tools for socialization and norm reinforcement or contestation. Embedding messages within these cultural assets enhances community trust, legitimacy, and internalization, making behavioral change more sustainable.

By synthesizing these paradigms, the framework posits that effective social norm change in Kilifi hinges on three interconnected components: (1) community engagement and ownership; (2) culturally resonant messaging through indigenous communication channels; and (3) systematic engagement of influence networks comprising elders, religious leaders, and peer groups. Interventions that operate at the intersection of these components respecting local epistemologies, leveraging social influence, and fostering participatory dialogue are more likely to produce long-term, sustainable behavioral change. This integrated framework guides the study's exploration of how development communication strategies can be

systematically designed and implemented within Kilifi's unique socio-cultural landscape to address harmful practices and promote girls' education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-life context.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were purposively selected based on their influence and direct involvement in community decisions regarding girls' education. The sample included 280 adolescent girls aged 14–18 years, 26 community elders, 40 religious leaders, 54 teachers, and 500 community members. Purposive, maximum variation, and snowball sampling selected 30 participants for interviews, focus groups, and observation; 5 FGDs with 6 participants each and 30 individual interviews.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. Interviews with elders, religious leaders, and teachers provided insights into community norms and communication practices. FGDs with girls and community members facilitated understanding of perceptions, beliefs, and narratives concerning cultural practices and education. Observations during community events, rituals, and meetings offered contextual understanding of indigenous communication channels in action.

Data Analysis

Collected data were transcribed and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. This involved coding data, identifying patterns, and developing themes related to narratives, social networks, and perceptions influencing girls' education. The analysis aimed to reveal how indigenous communication channels are used and how they can be leveraged for change.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and respecting cultural sensitivities. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and measures were taken to minimize harm and ensure voluntary participation.

Findings and Analysis

Cultural Practices That Interfere with Girls' Education

The research identified that early marriage, female genital mutilation, and mobility restrictions are prevalent cultural practices that directly impede girls' access to education. These practices are sustained through narratives that associate female purity, honor, and social acceptance with adherence to tradition. For instance, early marriage is often viewed as a means of protecting family reputation, while FGM is seen as a rite of passage that confers social status. Restrictions on mobility, such as prohibitions on girls attending

school beyond certain ages or distances, are reinforced through oral stories emphasizing gender roles and social expectations. These narratives are transmitted through social networks, rituals, and community gatherings, creating a resilient cultural fabric that resists change.

Current Communication Strategies and Their Limitations

Most existing strategies employed by development practitioners focus on mass media campaigns, awareness creation, and policy enforcement. While these approaches raise awareness, they often lack cultural resonance, making them less effective in changing deeply embedded beliefs and practices. Community resistance remains high because messages do not engage local influencers or leverage indigenous communication channels. Furthermore, such strategies overlook the importance of social influence networks, which are critical in shaping perceptions and behaviors within the community. As a result, many community members continue to uphold harmful practices despite awareness campaigns, highlighting the need for more participatory and culturally embedded approaches.

Challenges Faced by Practitioners

Practitioners face a range of challenges, primarily stemming from community resistance rooted in cultural beliefs. Limited access to culturally appropriate communication channels and the absence of engagement with local influencers further hinder effectiveness. Many strategies are perceived as external impositions that threaten cultural identity, leading to outright rejection or superficial compliance. Additionally, practitioners often lack deep understanding of indigenous narratives, symbols, and rituals that could be harnessed for positive change. These challenges underscore the importance of designing culturally sensitive interventions that involve community members from the outset.

The Role of Indigenous Narratives and Influence Networks

Indigenous narratives, oral storytelling, and rituals serve as powerful tools for transmitting social norms and shaping perceptions. Elders and religious leaders hold significant influence and can either sustain or challenge harmful practices. When these influencers are engaged and equipped with culturally resonant messages, they can become agents of change. Conversely, if they uphold traditional narratives that justify harmful practices, resistance to change intensifies. Therefore, understanding and leveraging these influence networks is crucial for designing effective communication strategies that aim to promote girls' education while respecting local cultural contexts.

Recommendations for Culturally Resonant Strategies

Participants emphasized that engaging local influencers, such as elders and religious leaders, in participatory dialogue is essential. These influencers should be empowered to reinterpret indigenous narratives and symbols in ways that support girls' education. For example, rituals and stories that emphasize the value of female education and empowerment can be used to challenge harmful norms. Strategies should involve community-led discussions, storytelling sessions, and cultural events that foster ownership and legitimacy. Such approaches are more likely to lead to sustainable behavioral change because they align with community values and social influence structures.

Discussion

Socio-Cultural Roots and the Limitation of Exogenous Strategies

The findings indicate that cultural practices hindering girls' education are deeply rooted in social norms transmitted through indigenous narratives and influence networks. This aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing that gendered expectations and practices such as early marriage or the prioritisation of domestic labor are not static traditions but are dynamically negotiated processes maintained by localized social environments (Marcus et al., 2022). Existing strategies that rely heavily on mass media and top-down policy enforcement often lack the cultural resonance needed to effect lasting change.

As noted by development communication scholars, mass media frameworks often function as "exogenous communication," which exhibits a limited structural reach and lower localized credibility compared to organic community networks (Mundy & Compton, 1991). While legislative bans and national policy enforcement are critical instruments, empirical evidence from the African Union's International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA, 2023) reveals that statutory mechanisms often fail to disrupt deeply socialized definitions of girlhood unless accompanied by grassroots norm shifts.

The Power of Indigenous Communication Channels (ICS)

This underscores the absolute importance of integrating Indigenous Communication Systems (ICS) such as storytelling, rituals, proverbs, and symbols into intervention strategies. When these channels are harnessed effectively, they serve as powerful tools for reframing perceptions and challenging harmful norms by operating within a language and symbolic landscape that the local community understands and respects (Wang, 2021). Rather than presenting external, foreign ideals, utilizing live storytelling and local allegories fosters a deep emotional and mutual connection that can transform survival narratives into active demands for social change.

However, a critical nuance must be noted: while literature broadly supports the use of ICS, early warnings by Mundy and Compton (1991) indicate that indigenous channels can sometimes be inherently conservative, historically acting to *preserve* and hand down existing power dynamics rather than disrupt them. Therefore, intervention strategies must deliberately focus on *hybridizing* or synchronizing traditional narrative forms with transformative, rights-based content to achieve true emancipatory outcomes.

Leveraging Influence Networks and Social Realities

Engaging influential community members, such as traditional elders and religious leaders, is critical, as their endorsement can legitimize new behaviors and accelerate change. This finding directly reflects Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and practical evidence from sub-Saharan African case studies, where traditional authorities have successfully utilized their institutional legitimacy to dissolve hundreds of child marriages and drive village-led campaigns for girls' literacy (Delate, 2025; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2021). [1]

The constructivist framework adopted in this study underscores the importance of respecting and working within the community's existing social realities, directly echoing Participatory Communication Theory, which asserts that meaning-making must be co-constructed using local epistemologies rather than imposed via bureaucratic mandates (Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Participatory approaches that involve community

stakeholders from the outset foster true ownership and long-term sustainability, minimizing institutional resistance (Mefalopulos, 2008). [1, 2]

Nevertheless, researchers must remain cautious of "elite capture." While leveraging traditional leaders accelerates behavior change, an over-reliance on established patriarchs can sometimes inadvertently silence the voices of the girls themselves, who should ideally retain agency and control over the communicative process (Cornwall, 2016). Therefore, future strategies should focus on cultural embedding, multi-generational community participation, and leveraging influence networks while safeguarding spaces for adolescent girls to co-create their own educational aspirations

Conclusion

This study concludes that cultural practices hindering girls' education are not static, immovable barriers, but rather dynamic processes continuously reinforced by deep-seated social norms, indigenous narratives, and localized influence networks. Conventional intervention strategies that rely heavily on mass media and bureaucratic policy enforcement run the risk of becoming ineffective "exogenous communication" tools. They frequently fall short because they lack the necessary cultural resonance and contextual credibility required to dismantle historical gender biases at the grassroots level.

To achieve sustainable social transformation, interventions must be grounded in a constructivist perspective that respects, engages, and operates within existing community social realities. Indigenous Communication Systems (ICS) such as storytelling, rituals, proverbs, and symbols are powerful, culturally authentic vehicles for co-constructing new, emancipatory narratives that promote girls' education. Furthermore, the strategic mobilization of traditional and religious influence networks provides the institutional legitimacy needed to validate and accelerate positive behavior change. Ultimately, gender equity in education cannot be sustained through top-down mandates alone; it requires organic cultural embedding, systemic community ownership, and the active preservation of adolescent girls' agency in defining their own educational futures.

Recommendations

Based on the study's empirical findings, theoretical framework, and discussion, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for policymakers, development partners, and community leaders:

1. For Development Practitioners and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

- Decentralize Communication Strategies via ICS: Shift funding and program design away from generic, top-down mass media campaigns toward hyper-local Indigenous Communication Systems (ICS). Interventions should actively employ community theater, traditional folk storytelling, local allegories, and symbolic rituals to reframe gender roles and highlight the multi-generational benefits of girls' literacy.
- Establish Guardrails Against Elite Capture: When partnering with influential elders and religious figures to validate new community behaviors, design multi-layered participation frameworks. Practitioners must establish secure, parallel platforms—such as girls' clubs or safe listening

circles—to ensure adolescent girls retain direct agency and that their specific lived experiences are not overshadowed by patriarchal leaders.

2. For Local Government and Education Ministry Policymakers

- Institutionalize Hybrid Policy Delivery Frameworks: Bridge the gap between statutory laws (such as legal bans on child marriage) and local realities by co-creating enforcement roadmaps directly with traditional community courts. Policymakers should provide traditional leaders with formal legal toolkits, allowing them to utilize their indigenous authority to uphold state education mandates.
- Integrate Culturally Responsive Curriculum Assets: Revise regional primary and secondary curricula to reflect localized, positive narratives regarding women's leadership and historical female achievements, utilizing storytelling methodologies that align with local epistemologies.

3. For Future Researchers

- Conduct Longitudinal Impact Appraisals on Hybrid Communication: Future academic studies should implement longitudinal mixed-method designs to measure the long-term effectiveness of hybridized communication models (synchronizing rights-based legal frameworks with traditional narrative structures) versus pure legal enforcement over a 5-to-10-year horizon.
- Expand Inquiries into Geographic and Intersectional Variants: Replicate this study across diverse geographic and socio-economic terrains to explore how intersectional dynamics, such as rural poverty or pastoralist migration patterns, alter the operation of local influence networks.

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