



GENDER IN EAST AFRICA:

*Differentiating between Gender and Poverty:
findings from Boys Against the Odds*

Gender Report 6

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1. Introduction

This report forms part of the findings of the research conducted by the Centre of Commonwealth Education in Kenya as part of a project entitled 'Girls Against the Odds'. The project focuses on discovering and understanding the dynamics affecting the attendance, performance and retention of girls in primary school in Kenya, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of children's lives through forging better learning environments (see Gender Report No.1). Here, however, we report on findings from focus group interviews with boys. The purpose of including boys in this study was, firstly, to find out their perceptions of girls and whether they considered girls to suffer discrimination with regards to schooling; and secondly, to elicit information about the boys' own lives so as to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and environmental contexts in which the 16 case study schools are situated. Furthermore, examining the schooling experience of boys reveals the extent to which challenges faced by children in the case study areas are common to all and hence attributed to socio-economic deprivation rather than gender discrimination – in other words, 'differentiating between gender and poverty'. This is not to ignore the way in which gender and poverty are often closely interlinked, or to deny the fact that there are unique obstacles confronting girls, but rather to verify and give greater credibility to the research results on gendered attitudes and practices in relation to education in Kenya.

Following a brief explanation of the methodology used, this report will discuss the challenges faced by boys in the home, school and community environments, revealing the universal and specific manifestations of poverty that they experience. It will then examine boys' perceptions of girls and the varied and sometimes conflicting opinions they have of them in relation to their own disadvantaged circumstances. Hence, considering that in hardship areas, boys as well as girls are in school 'against the odds', the boys' aspirations for school and the future, along with the key people who encourage and inspire them, are noted. Finally, an account of the boys' suggestions for empowering pupils is given, in order to voice their ideas and give them the opportunity of informing educational policy and practice.

2. Methodology

Focus groups consisting of three boys were carried out in each of 16 case study schools. The boys were chosen in consultation with their teachers according to the following criteria: in Class 6 (so as to be the same age as the girls being interviewed), from deprived families and able to articulate themselves well. Although pupils in Class 6 would usually be 11-12 years old, most of the male participants were 13 years old, due to starting primary school late or having to repeat a year. The focus groups were conducted by a native researcher in a mixture of Kiswahili and English, to enable the boys to express themselves freely in whichever language they were more comfortable in. Discussions followed a pre-arranged guide, in order to obtain the desired information and cover the same subject matter across the different schools. A book and pen were given to each boy at the end of the focus group, as a token of appreciation. The topics included home and family circumstances, parents' level of education and employment, career aspirations, role models, challenges they face in school, challenges girls face, and suggestions of how girls and boys can be helped.

The boys' focus groups took place in the following schools, grouped according to the geographical area in which they were situated. The participants are numbered in order to maintain anonymity:

Central Province:

Kiambu County – School 1 (Boys 1-3) and School 2 (Boys 7-9).

Murang'a County – School 3 (Boys 4-6) and School 4 (Boys 10-12).

Nairobi Province:

Nairobi County – School 5 (Boys 13-15), School 6 (Boys 16-18), School 7 (Boys 19-21) and School 8 (Boys 22-24).

Nyanza Province:

Homa Bay County – School 9 (Boys 25-27), School 10 (Boys 28-30), School 11 (Boys 31-33) and School 12 (Boys 34-36).

Rift Valley Province:

Kajiado County – School 13 (Boys 37-39), School 14 (Boys 40-42), School 15 (Boys 43-45).
(The fourth school in this County is an all-girls school.)

Further details about the schools and their surrounding areas can be found in *Gender Report No. 7*.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Challenges faced by boys

3.1.1 In the home environment

In accordance with the disadvantaged nature of the selected case study areas, all the boys interviewed had a low standard of living. The level of deprivation they experienced at home did of course vary within and between the different communities and counties, but they could nevertheless all be classified as ‘poor’ – lacking the food, clothing and amenities that equate to a good quality of life. Most of the boys in Kiambu, Murang’a and Homa Bay Counties lived in a mud or iron-sheet house comprised of two rooms; one used as a bedroom and the other as a living room, with a communal latrine and bathroom outside. Those in Nairobi County lived in even more cramped conditions in a one-room house, which served as the bedroom, kitchen, living room and bathroom. The situation in Kajiado County was very different, as the Maasai live in extended family groups that often share the same enclosed compound (fenced with bushes and large twigs) consisting of a collection of *manyattas* (huts made of clay and cow dung). Most social and domestic activities, such as cooking and eating take place outside, and boys over the age of ten years usually sleep in their own hut or out in the open. Nevertheless, a common characteristic of the boys across the case study areas was hunger. They all complained of food scarcity and poor nutrition in the home, with one main meal a day being the norm and often having to sleep hungry.

In addition to basic needs, the possession of household items and amenities were used to assess the level of deprivation in the participants’ homes. Those in Kajiado County did not own a radio or TV, but the majority of the boys from the other areas did possess a radio. TVs still appeared to be a luxury item though, as only six boys in Nairobi County had one in their homes, out of the 45 involved in the project. This is probably due to the greater availability of electricity and electronic items in urban areas and the higher value placed on such possessions, due to the influences of modernisation. However, it is not an indicator of greater wealth or comfort, as visual observation of the case study areas showed that the quality of life in Nairobi’s low-income settlements can be considered worse than that of the rural areas, due to overcrowding and the corresponding squalor. For instance, the only source of water in the Nairobi low-income communities is from communal taps, which

deliver polluted water from Nairobi's river network, and hence there is a high risk of spreading water-borne diseases (City Council of Nairobi, 2006). Water is also a problem in the rural areas of Kiambu, Murang'a Homa Bay and Kajiado Counties, but this is due to its inaccessibility and even complete scarcity, rather than its contamination. All of the participants in these counties shared that they (or another member of their family) collected water from a local river or well, which often involves having to walk long distances every day (Warrington and Kiragu, 2012). Thus, their lives were characterised by hardship and lack of basic goods and facilities.

A major cause of this state of existence was their parents' low level of education and consequent informal or unpaid labour. The overwhelming majority of parents were not educated beyond primary school level and there was a distinct gendered dynamic within this, as most mothers had not been to school at all. An exception was the two low-income estates in Nairobi, where both mothers and fathers had completed secondary school. Other anomalies in the general pattern were one mother from Homa Bay County who had a diploma in teaching, and two fathers from Kajiado County and one uncle from Kiambu County who had university degrees. Hence, in general, the data show that adult illiteracy is still pervasive in areas socio-economically or geographically isolated from the development hub of Kenya, and, as Hunt (2008: 21) points out, 'research indicates that the educational level of household members is particularly influential in determining whether and for how long children access schooling'.

Low levels of adult illiteracy have a two-fold negative effect on the welfare of both boys and girls; firstly, financial insecurity and secondly, an indifferent attitude towards education, which results in school not being prioritised over income-earning activities. With regard to the former, the boys' focus groups disclosed that a large percentage of their parents were unemployed or engaged in low-skilled, informal work. For example, in Nyanza Province, most of the parents were peasant farmers, a few fathers in Central Province had jobs such as a factory worker, construction labourer or watchman, while mothers from Nairobi Province had informal businesses as tailors, hairdressers or selling fruit or cooked food by the road (Gulyani and Talukdar, 2010). In fact, as would be expected, the only parents in formal employment were the two more highly educated fathers in Rift Valley Province, who were both in the military forces. The other parents in that region were

'unemployed', yet all owned cattle, with herds of between 25 to 130 cows. Rather than being personally involved in herding, they hired a 'shepherd boy' to look after the cattle, preferring to occupy themselves with seeking for work that could bring in cash to cater for the daily needs of the family (since the Maasai are very reluctant to sell their cows).

The parents' struggle to provide for the family, combined with their low level of education, created tensions in the home concerning the boys' schooling. Since they had not experienced the benefits of education in their own lives, some were ignorant of its importance for their children, while others, although apparently aware of its benefits, still valued income-generating activities over school. Hence, short-term economic insecurity deterred the parents from pursuing the long-term security of their children, and by extension, themselves too (Colclough et al., 2000). In Kiambu, Murang'a and Kajiado Counties, the boys complained of being pressured into labouring on the family farm or looking after the livestock. Such a situation is made worse during seasons of drought as boys in Kajiado were sent far from home to find green pastures for the cattle, meaning they often had to drop out of school. As one participant said in reference to his siblings, 'life's hardships have caused them not to go to school in order to survive' (B43). In contrast to the forced child labour in these two areas, boys in Nairobi and Homa Bay Counties voluntarily engaged in informal work. In the former, some missed school to collect scrap metal to sell, and in the latter, they laboured in the sand-harvesting industry. Although for most this was an irregular occurrence, some boys become 'hard-headed' (B34) when they started getting money from casual labour and refused to go back to school. Thus, informal work was a major pull-factor keeping boys from regularly attending and completing primary school, something that, as Hope (2005) points out, is likely to continue into the future in many African countries, because children or their families often rely on the income they earn to subsist.

This pressure to help provide for the family was compounded for boys who were total orphans or from one-parent families. In fact, only 13 out of the 45 participants still had both parents, (a concerning statistic although not necessarily representative of the counties as a whole). Half the boys in Central and Nairobi Provinces and three in Nyanza Province were complete orphans and lived with their grandparents or aunt/uncle. The HIV epidemic is responsible for many of these cases, showing the extent to which HIV/AIDS has ravaged

both urban and rural Kenya (Ainsworth and Filmer, 2006). Only two out of nine boys in Kajiado, Rift Valley Province had lost a parent; here HIV/AIDS was less prevalent, since although polygamy was common, it is unusual within those communities for a man or woman to sleep with anyone outside of their extended family. However, it is not just death that results in children living without the care of one or both parents, as in most of the one-parent families the problem was absent fathers. This issue appeared to be particularly prevalent in Central and Nairobi Provinces, where only one participant from each of these areas claimed to have ever known his father. Regardless of the cause, the effect is the same: greater poverty and vulnerability of the children, putting them at greater risk of never completing schooling (Nyamukapa and Gregson, 2005).

3.1.2 In the school environment

Poverty has a severe negative effect on boys' education, as the research and analysis conducted points to deprivation as the key factor underlying all of the boys' problems in school. For instance, the participants from School 2, Kiambu County, shared that they sometimes lacked money for uniform and shoes and so were sent home until they could get them. Similarly, in School 6, Nairobi County, boys were 'chased from school' (B17) when they lacked the Ksh.50 required for the end of term exams, and at School 7 they were excluded from extra tuition classes if they could not pay the tuition fee (Ksh.300/month). Many pupils throughout the different schools did not even have writing materials, as although the government is supposed to provide text books and exercise books under free primary education (FPE), there are rarely enough, and so the cost is transferred to the pupils. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that, as Plank (2007) reports, a coalition of education advocacy groups argues that school fees (both direct and indirect) are the single most important obstacle to the accomplishment of Education For All goals.

Another difficulty the boys had was concentration, as they were always hungry. In Murang'a County, the participants shared that scarcity of food in the house meant there was usually nothing left over after supper for them to carry to school the next day for lunch, and so they were hungry all day. Even in schools where there was a feeding programme, the situation was not much better - the boys from all four of the Nairobi schools complained that they were sent home when they had not paid the food contribution money (Ksh.200 - 450/term).

With frequent hunger and the frustration of lacking the school materials they needed, it is not surprising that the boys were often reprimanded for disorder and unruliness. However, in many cases the boys argued that measures of discipline taken by the staff were uncalled for, such as being caned for not understanding a topic or for not doing their homework well. One boy from School 2 claimed, 'we are beaten mercilessly for any small mistake' (B4) and another disclosed that sometimes pupils were beaten so badly that they ran home and refused to go back to school. Corporal punishment was in fact made illegal in schools in Kenya in 2001, but it is clear that its use was still widespread. Some of the boys in the Kajiado schools (who were above the normal primary school age bracket, due to starting school late) reacted violently to being beaten and even hit the teachers in return. This was not so much because they knew corporal punishment was against the law, however, but because after circumcision they considered themselves to be adults and so got angry when they felt they were being treated disrespectfully.

3.1.3 In the community environment

Poverty and vulnerability also led to many challenges for the boys in the community environment, as well as in the home and school. The participants divulged that when they were out in the town or village centre, away from the watchful eye of their parents, relatives or teachers, they were susceptible to the bad influence of older youth in the area. These teenagers and young men are school drop-outs, who do casual labour to meet their basic needs. Although their prospects for the future are low, their circumstances seem appealing to the primary school boy who is often hungry and has no money. Out of desperation to have a better quality of life, many boys succumbed to the peer pressure and started missing school. Moreover, the school boys noticed that the young casual labourers even had girlfriends, as they enticed them with trivial gifts like sweets or soda. The boys then sought to imitate them and so as to get involved in sexual relationships with girls in school. Participants from every school admitted to struggling not to enter into relationships with girls, especially as they had seen that it often resulted in a girl getting pregnant and subsequently terminating her education. A few boys also recognised the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Other negative influences in the community environment that boys are vulnerable to are drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes and taking drugs like *bhang*, which usually result in

them dropping out of school entirely. This occurred in all of the case study areas, but was more prevalent in Central and Nairobi Provinces, where traditional culture is eroding fastest and the Western modern lifestyle is being embraced in its stead. Substance abuse then often leads to petty theft and gang crime, as the boys are driven to find money to feed their addictions. Several of the participants personally knew of boys who had left school, got involved in crime and ended up in prison or shot dead by the police. This had caused them to fear the same fate happening to them, which is why so many of them expressed it as a key challenge they faced.

It is clear from the above discussion within the boys' focus groups that there are a myriad of very real hardships, struggles and temptations that boys face in their home, school and community environments. These challenges are all interlinked and are often multi-faceted in nature, but all essentially stem from, or are symptoms of, the boys' impoverished circumstances.

3.2 Boys' perception of girls

The participants' answers to several direct and indirect questions related to girls reveal the diverse perceptions that they had of the opposite sex. In some cases, the whole focus group from one school differed in opinion from the other case study schools in the same area, while in other instances there were conflicting views within a focus group, or even antithetical statements from the same boy. This demonstrates the complex interaction of socio-cultural forces within and between the home, school and community environments that shape a boy's outlook on life and his perception of women and girls. Hence, generalisations can only be made tentatively, as an appreciation of each participant's personal position must be retained.

3.2.1 Girls are the same as boys

Overall, the boys from Central and Nairobi Provinces did not deem girls to have any challenges over and above their own, probably due to the fact that they also had so many difficulties and so did not have time to worry about others. One boy even declared, 'I've not seen girls having problems' (B19). Likewise, participants from one school in Nyanza Province were not concerned about girls at all, as they regarded them as no different from themselves. One boy expressed this view by stating, 'right now in today's world people are

equal' (B31). In Central Province, however, a demise of traditional beliefs and practices has led to a corresponding decline in discrimination against women, but the struggle for survival and the negative cultural influences of modernisation have resulted in boys becoming more vulnerable. Pressure to engage in casual labour alongside schooling meant that boys' attendance was worse than girls' and drop-out rates for boys were also higher, due to substance abuse and crime. Thus, for the boys in Central Province, girls were certainly not an object of concern. In the other case study areas, several of the participants simply showed a disinterest of the opposite sex typical of younger boys. Those from School 11, Homa Bay County said, 'girls smell bad' (B31), and so they avoided having to sit next to them in class. Similarly, in School 8, Nairobi, the boys admitted that they fought with the girls when they annoyed them, just as they did with one another. However, they seemed to be a bit more intrigued about girls than the boys in Homa Bay County, as they confessed to climbing on top of the girls' toilet to watch them! Thus, beyond biological differences, boys deemed girls to be no different from themselves; poverty was the predominant struggle and so gender issues were insignificant in their minds.

3.2.2 Girls are marginalized and mistreated

On the other hand, boys from half of the schools in Homa Bay, Kiambu and Murang'a Counties, although not acknowledging any part played by themselves in the violence that prevents the development of equitable relationships between girls and boys (Bhana et al., 2011), recognised ways in which girls were mistreated and exploited. They told of young men from the community who 'catch' girls as they walk to school and raped them (B26). Or they spoke of girls who were enticed by youth who were smartly dressed to have sex with them. As a result, many got pregnant and dropped out of school by Class 6. Another common factor pulling girls away from school was early marriage. They were either told by their parents to 'look for a husband to live with and stop going to school' (B35) or the girls 'chose' to get married. However, the boys disclosed that in the latter case it is essentially deception or at best an ill-informed decision: 'girls are easily cheated into marriage' (B36) by men who promised to provide all their needs. Despair and misery were thought to blind the girls from seeing the reality of the situation and so they agreed to marriage in the hope that life would be better for them. Not only were the girls' dreams of completing education then thwarted, but they usually ended up in greater poverty and distress. In the light of their

vulnerability, some participants from School 3, Murang'a County advised that girls should be counselled on such matters before they arose, to prevent them from falling prey to men's schemes of rape, relationships or marriage. Nevertheless, counselling was seen as not sufficient to protect girls from these acts of violence and suppression in Kajiado County, as gender discrimination is endemic in Maasai culture. The participants from the Kajiado schools were highly aware of the challenges that confronted every girl, particularly FGM (female genital mutilation) and early marriage. For this reason, they proposed that dormitories should be built for girls, since in school they would be shielded from the harmful practices of the home and community environments. The boys furthermore recognised that in many families boys are still valued over girls and so the education of girls is not prioritised. They therefore thought that girls required greater financial assistance from the government or well-wishers to enable them to continue on to secondary school and university. Notwithstanding, the participants also noticed some improvement in that now several 'parents have realised that if the girl is also educated they can be of the same help and benefit' (B39).

3.2.3 Girls are just girls

While the participants expressed mixed perceptions of girls; some regarding them as having no unique challenges above those faced by boys and others recognising the existence of gender discrimination in the home, school and community environments; underlying all these responses was a pervasive normalised gendered attitude. In other words, the boys unconsciously harboured beliefs and opinions of girls that concur with the stereotypes perpetuated in Kenya's patriarchal society. For instance, they viewed girls as weak, helpless, and desperate to have a man to love and provide for her. The participants in Nairobi County viewed girls as constantly trying to get a boyfriend who could meet her material needs, which although possibly true to an extent, ignores the part of the man scheming to get a girl to sleep with. They furthermore blamed girls for getting themselves pregnant by sleeping around and condemned them when they 'throw away their babies' (B18), not acknowledging that the baby is not just the responsibility of the girl, but also of the boy who impregnated her. One boy in School 11, Homa Bay County expressed a similar attitude, saying that teachers should counsel the girls and 'tell them to leave the loose life out there with these men' (B32). Hence, he also blamed girls for lacking self-control, regarding them

as victims of their own immorality. The extent to which women being sexually immoral is normalised was revealed by some of the participants' nonchalant reference to girls dropping out of school to engage in prostitution. It is such a common practice in the city's informal settlements and low-income estates that many boys grow up thinking it is natural and acceptable for women to sell their bodies. Even in the rural communities where the issue is not so much prostitution as early marriage, the role of a woman (a girl is considered to be a woman after circumcision) is seen as being to satisfy the sexual desires of a man and ensure the posterity of his family through childbirth. Therefore, despite many of the participants identifying and condemning biased beliefs and unjust practices against girls, they are so indoctrinated in the patriarchal society in which they live, that they also unconsciously possess gendered attitudes.

3.3 Boys' aspirations

It is apparent from the above discussion that boys, just like girls in hardship areas, do not have an easy schooling experience. A combination of push and pull factors affects boys' attendance, performance and retention in school. It is therefore important to ask the same question for boys as for girls: 'why are boys in school against the odds?' Part of the answer is found in a collection of people whom they know or have heard about, who encourage and inspire them to stay in school and work hard, so that they can have a better quality of life and impact the lives of those around them.

3.3.1 'Encouragers'

All the participants cited family members as people who played a significant role in encouraging them in their education. For those who lived with their parents, their mothers and fathers urged them to work hard and continue to secondary school, while for the orphaned boys it was their grandmothers, aunts and uncles who played that role. Notwithstanding their importance, older siblings who had finished school and found employment could be more influential. Several participants pointed to their brothers and sisters as having the greatest impact on their attitude towards school, since the testimony of their lives gave more authority and credibility to their words (unlike their parents and relatives who generally had low literacy levels). In the same manner, other youth in the community who were in secondary school or college helped the boys to envision themselves

following the same trajectory. This was particularly true in Kajiado County, where in previous generations boys were expected to become *Morans* (young Maasai warriors) from the age of 12 years and lead a nomadic lifestyle herding the cattle. Thus, seeing young men who had refused to go through the process of *Moranism* gave the boys insight into an alternative way to live. Aside from family members, in all of the schools in Homa Bay and Kajiado Counties, the boys stated that their teachers encouraged them to do well in school so that they could succeed in life and also warned them of the dangers of dropping out, like becoming a street child or a thief. The headmasters of Schools 13 and 15 in Kajiado County were especially commended for being supportive of the pupils' studies, which highlights the impact that a good head-teacher can have. Perhaps one of the reasons why the participants in Nairobi and Central Provinces did not consider teachers as 'encouragers' was due to their apparently ineffective disciplining method. They tended to use an out-dated system of punishing for poor performance, including caning, rather than encouraging pupils that they could do better. Thus, what the boys needed and desired were authority figures who believed in them and patiently helped them to reach their academic potential. This might be people at home, in school, or even key individuals in the community, such as a local pastor in the case of School 10, Homa Bay County.

3.3.2 'Inspirers'

While the aforementioned encouragers also inspired the boys to complete school and get a good job, the boys mentioned a different set of individuals whom they wished to emulate. Whilst the boys had more of a personal relationship with 'encouragers', who can be seen as mentors rather than role models, examples of 'inspirers' included local celebrities, such as musicians (B16-18) and a football coach (B15) who had made strong impressions on the boys in Nairobi County. They wanted to be like them, because of these individuals' talents and success, and the respect and honour they received from the community. The stars also shone a ray of hope, proving that it was possible to rise above the deprivation of the slum and achieve one's capability. Correspondingly, B1 from Kiambu County admired Samuel Wanjiru, a gold medal athlete, who 'grew up in poverty, but has now succeeded in life'. Most of the participants from Homa Bay County looked up to influential political figures, such as Prime Minister Raila and the local M.P of Ndhiwa constituency, Orwa Ojode. This was not so much that they aspired to be in government themselves, but rather that they

perceived these two ministers to have benefited their lives by providing food (in form of sacks of maize), infrastructure, resources and generally improving the development of the county. Likewise, the boys from School 4, Murang'a County were inspired by President Kibaki, who 'has the power to arrest wrong-doers' (B10) and they respected the police force for using their authority and power to 'maintain law and order within the community by arresting drunkards and the people who abuse *bhang*' (B11). Hence, the boys' role models were authority figures with the ability to positively affect society. Similarly, another category of 'inspirers' were philanthropists or people who 'do good' (B13). Several boys from across the different counties named professionals they considered as humanitarian in nature, such as a doctor (B34), pastor (B36), school nurse (B39), aid donors like the UN and Unilever who 'help in relief food in our school' (B13), as well as the environmental activist and Nobel peace prize winner Professor Wangari Maathai (B2). Their aspiration to emulate such people was probably born out of their own experiences of suffering, and hence their desire to ameliorate poverty, sickness and despair for others.

Conversely, the remaining two groups of role models mentioned by the participants reveal more self-centred ambitions of upgrading their own standard of living and enjoying a care-free life. For example, the boys at School 8, Nairobi County, coveted the lifestyle of rich people they knew in the community, such as a man whose house was filled with 'exquisite things', like 'a very big television, a fridge... [and] the bathroom has a tap'. B42 from School 14, Kajiado County wanted to be like his neighbour who was rich and apparently had a private airstrip and helicopter that he used to travel to Nairobi. One boy in School 2 even claimed that a stranger in the community was his role model, simply because from 'the way he walks...you can tell that he has a lot of money and he is educated' (B5). Lastly, many of the boys were inspired by wealthy relatives, who were successful professionals. For example, boys mentioned an uncle living in England (B25), an uncle who was an electrical engineer and had three cars (B40), an uncle who was a doctor (B5) and an aunt who was a doctor and had 'a very nice life without lack' (B20). Hence, for some of the participants, financial insecurity had caused them to regard affluence as the ultimate goal in life.

3.3.3 Educational and career ambitions

The correlation between formal employment, prosperity and education was clear in the boys' minds, as they all spoke enthusiastically about wanting to finish primary and secondary school and even go on to do further studies. In fact, nearly every participant answered the question, 'what do you like doing most inside or outside school?' by saying, 'I like studying'. Whether this response was just an attempt to give the 'right' answer to the interviewer or whether it truly reflected their attitude towards school cannot be known conclusively, but it nevertheless suggests that the boys did value education. They saw it is a necessary foundation to get a good job or 'start and manage a business' (B10), which would then empower them to 'build a house' (B12), 'assist my guardians' (B11) and 'help people' (B10). As B25 stated, the avenue of school is 'how I am going to find my way in life. That is how my life will be good'. Similarly, B27 declared, 'I love school because it can help me get different types of work'. By this he meant high-earning, respectable employment; the converse of the occupations of his family members. Out of the participants who shared their career aspirations, eleven wanted to be doctors, seven pilots, two mechanical engineers, two policemen, one a pastor and one the President! Their motives for being employed in such professions were a combination of the desire to help people and the longing to have a better quality of life.

However, they recognised that it was not easy to get such prestigious jobs, as one must gain the necessary qualifications first. Hence, the boys talked a lot about the importance of working hard to get high enough grades to attain a place at secondary school and later at college or university. As the boys at School 7, Nairobi County said, 'if you work hard you will have a bright future' (B21) and 'everything will come your way, like a job and things you need' (B20). When another boy from School 8 got this revelation from observing people in the community, he 'promised myself that I should not waste time loitering and admiring what others have but should work hard in school so that I too can look for my own wealth' (B22). Besides obtaining financial security, a few of the boys highlighted the social benefits of being educated and having a respectable career: it 'gives you a say in society' (B10) and 'people fear you' (B26). Thus, the participants all had high educational and career ambitions, demonstrating their determination to overcome the obstacles that confronted them and leave their disadvantaged background behind.

3.4 Boys' suggestions for empowering pupils

The participants generally displayed a positive attitude towards life, believing that their situations would change. Instead of dwelling on their challenges, they had already thought through what needed to be done to help them finish school and trusted that the right people would come along to empower them. The following is a summary of the suggestions they made.

3.4.1 Financial, physical and material support

Firstly, the participants' principal need was money to cater for the costs of schooling, which is ironic considering that FPE was introduced in 2003. However, while the basic school fee is covered by the government, tuition fees, exam fees, lunch money, uniform and writing materials must be provided by the pupils' parents. These costs are often too great for families in hardship areas and so the boys proposed that the government should also 'support parents who cannot afford to send their children to school' (B31). Essentially, what they wanted to see was truly 'free education', as the boys from Nairobi County clearly stated. This would ensure that pupils were not sent away from school due to lack of tuition fees (B21) or other extra payments required. In addition, they thought boys and girls should be financially assisted to continue on to secondary school (B38), as not only does lack of money result in pupils terminating their education at the end of primary school, but it also often leads to children dropping out before this, since they have nothing to motivate them to continue.

Another area of provision that boys highlighted to prevent them from leaving school was food. As previously mentioned, the lunch feeding programme is not completely free, so a child who has not paid will either go hungry all day or even be sent home. The participants from Nairobi County disclosed that, due to their impoverished circumstances at home, many 'depend on the school food for survival' (B14). Bearing this in mind, the universal menu of *githeri* (maize and beans) is not nutritionally adequate for children to eat every day of the year. The boys at School 15 desperately wanted better and more varied food, such as rice, *ugali* (maize meal) and meat. Thus, all the participants insisted that the government should collaborate more effectively with aid agencies to provide totally free, quality food in schools.

In addition to school fees and food, the boys listed a range of facilities and materials that should be supplied to improve the quality of education; for example, more toilets, a library (School 1), an additional water tank (School 11), sports equipment and more classrooms (School 9). Even basic items like books, pens and clothes were raised as pressing needs by several of the boys from Murang'a and Homa Bay Counties. The boys at Singiraine School also recommended that 'girls should be provided with pads to keep them from being absentees while on their monthly cycle' (B37). Thus, there were a number of fundamental financial, physical and material requirements that the boys wanted and needed to be supported with in school.

3.4.2 Intellectual support

Secondly, the participants indicated that they should be given better academic support, so that they could understand everything that they were taught and therefore achieve better grades. In several schools, basic methods of pedagogy and the attitude of teachers could be improved to engender an emphasis on understanding rather than mere knowledge retention. For instance, 'teachers should answer pupils' questions when they don't understand and take time to explain well' (B40). They should 'ask pupils if they have understood' and then 'explain slowly' (B9). In addition to more effective teaching during normal class times, boys at School 15 proposed that teachers should give extra lessons to individuals who were struggling in a certain area. Taking them through past exam papers before the KCPE (Kenya Certificate of Primary Education) examination could also benefit pupils, as they would know what to expect and so be able to prepare better (School 1). These are all very practical suggestions that should be standard procedure in primary schools. Support and encouragement were what the participants were looking for, not corporal punishment.

3.4.3 Emotional support and counselling

The boys expected support and encouragement from their teachers in more personal matters as well as on an academic front. One boy simply said, 'teachers should talk to the students' (B33), so that they can know what an individual is going through. Moreover, they should counsel pupils 'to help them solve their problems' (B1) and 'give advice' on the decisions they need to make, especially for girls in issues of relationships and marriage

(School 3). They thus viewed their teachers as counsellors and moral guides, helping them to 'know what is right and what is wrong' (B31). Perhaps this was to fill a void of support and advice that the boys felt was not given to them in the home environment. Even direction on good conduct and manners appeared to be lacking at home, since participants from across the different case study areas looked to the school to teach them 'what is good and bad behaviour' (B16). This included disciplinary actions to address disorderly conduct, so that 'you do not repeat such behaviour again' (B22). Controversially, the participants at School 14 thought that effective discipline entailed caning, declaring that it 'makes boys reform to good behaviour' (B40). As formerly discussed, the pupils from the other areas were strongly against corporal punishment, suggesting that support for corporal punishment here relates to the cultural context of Kajiado where, as Archambault (2009: 299) points out, Maasai children 'need to earn their right to adulthood ... they must be corrected and moulded; they should experience pain and struggle ... corporal punishment is believed to fulfil these functions'. The boys could also have become conditioned to the belief that caning begets good behaviour, thus they unconsciously saw corporal punishment as good and advantageous to them. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the boys from each county wished to be told how to behave well, acknowledging that their conduct would affect their future prospects.

3.4.4 Legal support

In some instances, the boys recognised that counselling was not enough to curb unacceptable attitudes and actions, so higher authorities should be called upon. For example, when boys were absent from class, 'the police should be sent to force boys to go to school' (B26) and should actively work to 'stop them from stealing' (B27). They also felt that legal action should be taken against parents who transgressed the state law and denied their children the right to education. In the rural setting, where the Chief is the local government representative, the boys advocated more involvement of local Chiefs, such as when a girl has been forced to stay at home: 'the school should report absent girls to the chief so he can visit the home and summon the parents to take her to school' (B45). If it transpired that the girl had been married off, then such 'a father...should be arrested' (B31). Hence, the participants regarded the right to education as a crucial entitlement, which must

be secured for boys and girls at all costs. Not only their prospects in life, but the future of the nation of Kenya depended, they felt, on quality education for all being a reality.

4. Conclusions

The boys' focus groups, conducted as part of the wider 'Girls Against the Odds' project in Kenya, brought to light several important insights into the challenges that children in hardship areas face in regards to schooling. Despite the cultural and environmental variations between the different case study areas, poverty was a universal characteristic and its impact on the attendance, performance and retention of both boys and girls in primary school was significant. Stemming from the parents' low level of education and corresponding informal labour, financial insecurity and scarcity of basic needs presented many difficulties for boys in school. Some were sent home due to failure to pay tuition fees, exam fees or lunch money; many lacked text books and writing materials; and most of them suffered hunger throughout the day. Thus over a decade later, the findings from this study echo those of Ackers et al (2001: 362), when they spoke of the poor being trapped in a never ending cycle of poverty, with lack of education meaning lack of access to money and lack of money meaning lack of access to education.

However, the most serious impediment to boys regularly attending and remaining in school was forced or voluntary casual labour. In the more rural areas, parents engaged their sons in farm labour out of desperation to survive from one day to the next. Similarly, in more urban communities, deprivation compelled boys to find ways of earning a little cash for themselves so that they could at least buy food to eat. Once out of the relatively safe confines of the home and school environments, these boys could be easily influenced into drinking, taking drugs, petty theft and even gang crime. Dropping out of school was thus in some respects almost inevitable, revealing that there are as many pressures pulling boys out of school as for girls, especially in Central Province where retention rates are actually lower for boys.

Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that the participants generally did not perceive girls to have problems over and above their own. Although many of them acknowledged the existence of gender discrimination in society, the boys felt that they were just as disadvantaged as girls. They too were only still in school out of their determination to

complete their education, gain formal employment and have a better quality of life. These aspirations can partly be attributed to the positive impact that teachers, family members, local celebrities and authority figures have had on their perspective of life. With the right support in place, these boys were hopeful that they would break out of poverty and have a prosperous future.

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