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GENDER IN EAST AFRICA: *Teaching Against the Odds*

Gender Report 5

Sarah Vohya, Sue Kiragu and Molly Warrington
with Jane Rarieya and Angela Githitho-Murithi

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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 during the year 2010. The project, entitled 'Girls Against the Odds', 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 1*). The intention of including primary school teachers in this study was to obtain a more holistic picture of the schooling experience of girls. Without considering the insights and opinions of those who teach the girls, the findings would be one-sided and hence incomplete. In addition, since the schools participating in the research were all located in 'hardship areas', a second objective was to examine what difficulties teachers encountered in their work; in other words, to assess the extent to which schools were 'teaching against the odds'.

Following a brief explanation of the methodology used, this report will first seek to divulge why the participants chose a career in education and then whether their original aspirations and expectations have been met. Hence, a discussion of the various challenges faced by primary school teachers will ensue, some of which are unique to certain schools or particular counties and others which are universally experienced across the different case study schools. It will then explore why they are still teaching at their respective schools despite all the hardships and struggles of their work. Finally, the teachers' suggestions for improving primary schooling are given, which tackle the difficulties they deal with, as well as seeking to solve the causes of poor attendance, performance and retention of girls in school.

2. Methodology

A focus group with teachers was conducted in each of the 16 schools participating in the 'Girls Against the Odds' project in Kenya. On average, four teachers participated in each focus group, although in some schools the number fluctuated during the period of discussion, due to other commitments they had to attend to. The criteria for teacher selection was to involve teachers who had been in the school the longest, since they would

be better placed to understand the dynamics of the school culture. However, in some schools these teachers were not available, if, for example, they were in the classroom or on leave, in which case any who were available and willing, took part in the focus group. Nevertheless, it was aimed to have an equal split between female and male teachers in order to acquire a balanced gender perspective, although this was not always possible as male teachers were in the minority in most of the schools. However, in schools 4, 13, and 14 that were in remote areas, female teachers were the minority, with school 13 having only one female teacher. The focus groups were conducted by either a British or Kenyan researcher, with the preferred language being English. Rather than imposing a rigid agenda, the structure was flexible, in order to engender an open discussion between the participants and allow them to air the issues they perceived to be most pertinent. This approach yielded rich data from the teachers, such as their candid views of the local community and personal testimonies of teaching in a hardship area.

The teachers' 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 (Teachers 1-5) and School 2 (Teachers 6-9).

Murang'a County – School 3 (Teachers 10-14) and School 4 (Teachers 15-18).

Nairobi Province:

Nairobi County – School 5 (Teachers 19-23), School 6 (Teachers 24-28), School 7 (Teachers 29-32) and School 8 (Teachers 33-36).

Nyanza Province:

Homa Bay County – School 9 (Teachers 37-40), School 10 (Teachers 41-44), School 11 (Teachers 45-48) and School 12 (Teachers 49-52).

Rift Valley Province:

Kajiado County – School 13 (Teachers 53-55), School 14 (Teachers 56-60), School 15 (Teachers 61-63) and School 16 (Teachers 64-66).

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

3. Key Findings

3.1 Why did the participants choose the teaching profession?

In general, the teachers involved in this research chose a career in primary school education for very practical reasons. Although a few had altruistic intentions of ‘serving the needy in society’ (T53) or felt compelled by God to pursue that particular ‘calling’ (T11), these were not the overriding objectives motivating them. Rather, they admitted that they simply saw it as the easiest profession to enter into at that time, since teacher-training was a relatively short and cheap course and there were plenty of teaching posts to get employment once qualified.¹ It was also considered to be a relatively reliable occupation, as teaching was ‘permanent and pensionable’ (T24). Hence financial security was at the forefront of most participants’ minds when entering the teaching profession, possibly linked to the dearth of white-collar jobs across East African countries (Al-Samarrai and Bennell, 2007).

3.2 What challenges do the teachers face?

3.2.1 Bureaucratic challenges

The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) is part of the state’s educational arm, responsible for recruiting and paying teachers employed in government schools. It posts teachers in schools across the country and while applicants can request a particular location, they are not guaranteed to get their choice. So, they ‘just have to be prepared to work anywhere’ (T53). The TSC also transfers teachers between schools, moving them to a new post every five years. However, this rarely happens in hardship areas, as the TSC knows that it will be a struggle to find other people who will work in such challenging environments. A few participants at a school in Korogocho slum in Nairobi disclosed that they applied for a transfer after having not been relocated for a long period of time, but were denied one, ‘so that is why we have ended up staying here for so long; for over 20 years’ (T28). Staff at other schools in Nairobi confessed that, despite the adverse conditions they worked in, they were ‘scared’ of asking for a transfer in case they are sent to an even worse school (T19). These accounts reveal the way in which the government controls state-paid teachers, using

¹ This is no longer the case, however, due to the government’s cap on state-paid positions in primary schools.

bureaucratic means to trap some in the least desirable schools. The only option would be to leave the public schooling system, but the participants recognised that, given the scarcity of jobs in the current labour market, such a move would be too risky. Thus, many of the teachers simply struggled on, discontented and frustrated in their place of work, with little more than fear of unemployment and poverty keeping them there.

Another complaint the participants had of the government was its refusal to employ more teachers, despite the evident demand for them (Akech and Simatwa, 2010). An article in 'The Nation' newspaper, September 2010 reported that a survey by the Kenyan National Union of teachers found a shortage of around 66,000 teachers in primary schools, but the Ministry of Education said it would only employ 12,000 more. Its justification was that the state's education budget was already overstretched, but for the teachers toiling to manage classes of over 60 children, that was an unacceptable excuse. Shortage of teachers was particularly acute in more challenging areas, such as the Nairobi slums, where one class in School 7 had a teacher-pupil ratio of 1 to 133: 'the teachers are few, the kids are many' (T30). They felt heavily burdened with so many books to mark and were frustrated that they could not give pupils 'individual attention' and hence the quality of education they deserved (T29). To the teachers, the government appeared to be oblivious to the situation, as they were under orders 'not to stop any child [from joining the school] ... whether they are overflowing ... whether they sit on the floor' (T31). Ironically, all the case study schools in Nairobi County had a physical structure that could accommodate many more children, but the classrooms were lying empty, due to lack of teachers. A similar scenario was found in the rural areas of Kajiado and Homa Bay Counties, as 'schools in the interior are somehow marginalised when it comes to staffing' (T45). Consequently, the teachers felt they were under a lot of pressure, making their job stressful and tiring, while the high pupil-teacher ratios impeded them from delivering the standard of tuition they are capable of, which 'discourages us so much' (T46). This interesting paradox highlights the complex symbiosis of teachers, staffing and spaces of learning.

3.2.2 Economic challenges

The reward for this demanding labour was certainly not in the pay, as they did not feel they were given sufficient remuneration comparative to the amount of work they did. They declared that 'the money they give us is so little that it can't sustain us'. This is the exact

opposite of the perception they had of teaching before becoming qualified. Teachers were said to be the least paid out of all public sector workers and far from giving them financial security, some thought that teaching yielded lower returns than running an informal business (T32). To make matters worse, the participants said that the government were trying to introduce a system called 'contract performance', whereby teachers are paid according to the exam results of the children, rather than receiving a standard salary. This would be extremely unfair for schools in hardship areas, as there are so many economic, socio-cultural and environmental factors militating against good performance. For example, in School 10, Homa Bay County, over half of the pupils were absent from school during the harvest seasons, due to demands on them to work on the farm, resonating with Githitho-Murithi's (2010) study on the challenges to schools caused by child labour. Such absences made the school 'not achieve that excellence' it should be able to attain. Another unique example was School 8, which had a refugee population of 75%. The Somali children joined the school at any time of the year, they could not speak English or Kiswahili and many had not even been to school before. It was therefore not surprising that they failed their exams. Hence participants were extremely worried by the idea of 'contract performance', as it would exacerbate their existing struggle to meet their daily needs.

Lack of money was not only a personal challenge for the teachers, but it also placed a strain on their professional work. As Omwani and Omwani (2010) point out, although enrolment in primary schools in Kenya has increased, government allocations of per capita grants to schools have actually declined. Thus all the case study schools were under-resourced, lacking the facilities and teaching materials needed to effectively convey the content of the curriculum. The teachers divulged that even basic items like text books, exercise books and pencils were wanting, because the disbursement of funds from the government was usually delayed and even when the money arrived, it was not sufficient to sustain the school through the year (T15). To compensate, the parents were asked to contribute, but most were unable or unwilling to, as 'they say that the government should be providing those things' (T15). Some teachers felt that a poverty mindset had produced an attitude in many of them that they could never give, since 'even when they can chip in and do something, they don't because they believe they are poor' (T16). As a result, 'the children are coming to school with empty bags' (T17) and some just 'stare at you while you teach, since they don't have anything to write in' (T37). Also, 'the pupils have to share one

text book between three' and take it in turns to take the book home for doing their homework (T20). This evidently frustrated the intellectual progress of the children, which the teachers found disheartening and stressful, due to 'time pressure' to complete the syllabus on time (T56).

As well as not being able to cover the requisite quantity of subject matter, the participants also felt impeded from delivering quality tuition, as modern technological equipment and even basic teaching aids were not available. For example, T63 in Kajiado County recounted her struggle to teach class 4 about light without even having a candle to demonstrate, let alone a torch or electric light. As a consequence they were restricted to using 'the theory method to teach them instead of practicals', which consumed 'a lot of time that we don't have', since it took so much longer for the pupils to understand (T52). It was not necessarily a case of schools just needing pedagogical equipment, as even basic daily facilities were in short supply. For example, almost none of the case study schools had electricity, piped water or modern sanitation facilities. Therefore, many beneficial learning activities, such as painting or using computers were rendered unfeasible and on an overcast day the children could barely even see to write in their exercise books.

Such examples were symptomatic of the impoverished communities these schools were situated in, where an overwhelming majority of the pupils were orphaned or vulnerable, suffering neglect and deprivation. While to an extent, school was a refuge for them (T66), the children could not completely separate themselves from their problems at home. Thus, they brought their burdens into the classroom, which the teachers then had to take on the responsibility of carrying. For example, several of the participants from Homa Bay County shared that many of the orphaned children (about 50% of the pupils) were not properly taken care of by their relatives, so they felt obliged to help them with basic items like soap and sanitary towels and take them to hospital when they were sick. Those working in Kiambu and Murang'a Counties also assisted the students out of their own personal resources, particularly with food, seeing as they 'complain of being hungry all the time' and 'cannot concentrate in class' (T2). The situation in one school in Kajiado County was even more distressing as the school was apparently known as a 'rescue centre', so people from the surrounding communities, including the local authorities, simply left their children at the school and abdicated responsibility for looking after them. As one teacher explained, 'Nobody wants to know what they'll eat, what they'll wear or where they'll sleep' (T65).

Thus, the teachers were burdened with taking girls to their own homes to look after during the holidays.

3.2.3 Socio-cultural challenges

In addition to economic hardships, the teachers were confronted with various socio-cultural challenges emanating from the surrounding community. In Kiambu, Murang'a and Nairobi Counties, the prevailing attitude of indifference to education resulted in absenteeism being a major challenge at all the case study schools. For instance, up to 20% of the pupils were absent on an average day at School 8. Hence, as T35 aptly said, what 'they are good at [is] being absentees'. This made tutoring difficult for the teachers, as they had to balance going over past lessons for those who missed class, against trying to cover new topics in the syllabus.

Often, it was the parents who actively hindered their children from going to school, because they did not value education. This was problematic not only for the teachers, but for the long-term future of communities, because, as Gisemba Bagaka (2010, p.587) points out, the lack of opportunity to develop human capital will be passed on from generation to generation'. Since many of the parents were occupied in farm work or casual labour that did not require literacy, they did not 'see the importance of education' (T50). They then passed the same attitude of 'negativity towards education' (T4) on to their children by talking badly about the teachers at home, until they regarded school 'as their enemy number one' (T51). Paradoxically, the root cause of some parents' dislike of school was not so much that they did not recognise the benefits of being educated, but rather that they were ashamed at themselves for not being able to afford to send their children to secondary school. Hence they made their children detest school, so that they would not want to continue with education after class 8 (T9). Instead of encouraging them to work at school, they told them to prioritise 'being able to get to earn something for themselves' (T10). In an example of the trade-offs made by poor households (Colclough et al., 2000), short-term survival therefore took precedence and the pupils were kept from attending school to engage in income-earning activities. This often led to girls and boys dropping out of school all together, which in School 6 in Nairobi was almost half the student population. Hence, the teachers sometimes 'wonder whether to punish the parent or the pupil' (T11).

The experience of the participants in Homa Bay County was of a slightly different nature, as the major socio-cultural resistance they suffered was gender discrimination. The Luo tribe, who are predominant in that geographical area, are a patriarchal society that do not believe women should be in positions of authority and responsibility in the public sphere. In their view, 'only a male teacher is a real teacher' (T38), so a school with many female teachers is not a 'real' school (T48). Schools 9, 11 and 12 were shunned by the surrounding communities, who did not recognise the good work the schools were doing in empowering their pupils. Parents resented the fact that they had to take their children there (as there were no other schools in close proximity to their homes) and so were hostile to the staff, making life very difficult for them. The female teachers felt particularly belittled, which lowered their self-esteem, causing them to become easily discouraged.

Having grown up in this kind of cultural atmosphere, the boys in school had subconsciously internalised the perception that women are inferior to men. They therefore did not respect the female teachers or listen to their instruction: 'when madam talks it's like no-one has talked' (T39). Such gendered mind-sets were also prevalent amongst the boys in Kajiado County, where in traditional Maasai culture women are subjugated to the status of children; 'they are called girls' and 'have to be seen, not heard' (T39). In school, this 'breeds the attitude' that boys 'have the rights to do everything' (T63), making them very unruly and difficult to manage. Ironically, the girls in Kajiado County were also badly behaved and rude towards the female teachers. The root of this is that, according to Maasai philosophy, once a girl has been circumcised she is a woman and so is equal to older women or even superior to them if they have not been circumcised (T55). Thus, the teachers posted to Kajiado County from other tribal communities (that did not circumcise women) found that misbehaving students did not heed their warnings or repent after being reprimanded (T40).

Similarly, in the two predominately Somali schools in Nairobi, the participants divulged that discipline was a major problem. The refugees from Somalia grew up in a country where violence and lawlessness were rife, and so teachers described the boys as hot-tempered and aggressive on arrival at the school. Stopping them from vandalising the property, fighting with one another and even attacking the staff were viewed as huge challenges. In fact, the teachers claimed that they spent more time trying to instil discipline in the class than actually teaching them academic subjects. They did not get any support from the parents

either, as teachers felt the parents did not see a need for disciplining their children. On the contrary, they would even defend their children and lie on their behalf to get them out of trouble. Hence, the teachers had a two-fold task of punishing belligerent pupils in class and dealing with angry parents out of class.

Interestingly, many of the participants from across the four counties complained about the government's policy of banning caning in schools (introduced in 2001), arguing that it had made disciplining students more difficult. They claimed that 'rebellious and defiant' pupils only responded to corporal punishment (T49), as they were too 'hardcore' (T3) to be affected by a verbal rebuke – 'if you don't cane, the child continues to misbehave' (T49). Hence, the government's strategy of 'guidance and counselling' was often seen as unsuccessful; nor was it perceived as practical considering the high pupil-teacher ratio, since it was not possible to 'do the practical classroom teaching and at the same time guide those who misbehave' (T52). In light of this, it is evident that appropriate and effective disciplinary action in schools is an issue that needs to be addressed, in order to help the teachers form an atmosphere that is conducive for learning. It is important to note however, that despite the ban and the teachers' claim that they did not beat the children, we witnessed them caning the children with sticks. It was common too, to see the teacher on duty walking around with a stick.

3.2.4 Environmental challenges

The external environment was another important factor challenging teachers. For example, the four schools in Nairobi County and School 1 in Kiambu County were situated in dangerous neighbourhoods with little security apart from a perimeter fence. School 1 was in a 'crime infested area' (T5) and the teachers revealed that they were often targets for petty criminals, who monitored their movements and waited for an opportunity to steal their phones or even break into their houses. One teacher was even burgled by a former pupil, but when she reported the case to the police she got a letter warning her that if she testified she would be killed (T3). Likewise, Korogocho and Kiamaiiko slums, where Schools 6 and 7 were respectively located, were rife with gang crime and violence, reflecting the high levels of violent crime within the city of Nairobi (Stavrou, 2002). Some pupils were members of the gangs and carried guns in school, so the teachers were constantly afraid. They declared, 'we even risk our lives just coming to school' (T24).

These two informal settlements also had appalling environmental conditions, with open sewers weaving through the overcrowded housing, refuse littering the pathways and human waste lying out in the open (see Candiracci and Syrjänen, 2007). Working in such squalor, the teachers found themselves 'getting sick all the time' (T30). To add to the unpleasantness, School 6 was situated directly opposite the main dumping site for the whole of Nairobi City, so there was an overwhelmingly bad stench in the air. Bearing in mind that circumstances like that are detrimental to emotional and physical wellbeing, it is not surprising that the teachers at these schools objected to having to work there.

Although the participants posted to rural areas did not have to suffer the pollution of the urban settlements, they had an equally challenging environment to cope with. The interior parts of Kajiado and Murang'a Counties were very dry, having experienced prolonged periods of drought over the previous few years. The geographical area around School 4 was so arid and inhospitable that the TSC apparently avoided sending female teachers there, since women were deemed to be more vulnerable than men (T16). School 13 was in an even harsher environment, and two hours drive from the main road on very rocky, dry, dusty terrain. It only had one female teacher. Teachers commented that women found it tough, describing it as 'a hardy area... [where] there is no water during times of drought' (T54). Furthermore, both these schools were so remote that the participants had to walk 1-4 hours to and from their homes each day. With the intense heat and dry air, they found this incredibly exhausting and unpleasant, but had to persevere, as replacement 'teachers don't want to come' to such a place (T53).

3.3 Why are they still teaching against the odds?

It is clear from the above discussion that there were multiple challenges facing the teachers in the CASE STUDY schools, whether of a governmental, economic, socio-economic or environmental nature. Without probing any further, one would conclude that these teachers were miserable, but remained in their respective schools simply due to state-imposed bureaucratic constraints. On the contrary, further data from the FOCUS GROUPS explored below reveals that there were a myriad of positive reasons why the participants were still 'teaching against the odds'.

3.3.1 Spiritual and moral reasons

First and foremost, the teachers at all the case study schools cited spiritual beliefs or moral convictions as the principal forces compelling them to continue in their challenging places of work. The majority identified with Christianity and believed that they were called by God to teach. The persuasion that they were 'doing something for God' (T10) gave them a 'strong commitment to just keep coming', despite the daily sacrifice involved (T1). Some even felt they were on a God-given assignment to impact on a specific ethnic group, such as T33 from School 8, who declared, 'I see it is like a plan God has put me here just to help this community' and empower the Somali refugees. In School 15, teachers' faith also gave them the strength to maintain a positive attitude, being thankful for the little they had and for being given the opportunity to serve God: 'we may not be having a car, we might not be owning a good house, but having good health God is giving you that good health every day so that you can come and attend to this child. You see that is just a gracious blessing' (T61).

Besides having a sense of duty towards God, several of the participants felt obliged as citizens of Kenya to serve their country: 'we are doing it for our nation' (T25). In recognition that they were amongst the privileged minority of the population who were educated, they believed they had a responsibility to give others in society the opportunity of realising their potential. As one teacher put it, 'we, the enlightened people are the ones to show the others the way' (T61) and warn them of 'the fate of those who do not come to school' (T29). In Kajiado County, they considered this to include being a role model to the girls and positively influencing the surrounding community to change its negative cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation (T55).

3.3.2 Emotional reasons

Hence, the participants also revealed that they were compelled by compassion for the pupils, desiring to 'give them hope' in the midst of their deprived circumstances (T59). Rather than condemning the children, they 'pity them' (T9) and made personal objectives to 'bring this child out of poverty and to be an educated person in Kenya' (T26). Thus, they wanted to 'do more than we are employed to do for them' (T1). For some this entailed becoming like 'a mother figure' to the girls and boys, replacing the mother who was not there for them at home. So, they would go out of their way to sit with the students during

lunch break and 'really share things' with them, especially the girls (T16). The fact that children confided in them bears testimony to the fact that the teachers were viewed as 'the only helper'; a role which made them feel appreciated and valued (T3).

Teachers also derived a sense of achievement from witnessing pupils being able to manage their problems and mature as individuals after receiving counsel and encouragement, including instilling manners in them; 'they didn't know...what is "sorry"...what is "please", but now I have taught them. To me I see I am achieving and I am proud' (T33). Similarly, the teachers were satisfied 'when you see the fruits of your efforts' on an academic front, such as a child improving in a certain subject or passing their exams (T39), as then they knew that their efforts had 'not been in vain' (T66). Some of the participants invested so much of their efforts in the students that they felt like there was 'a bond between you and the children' (T17) and so when they passed Kenya Certificate of Primary Education and gained a place in secondary school, they were as delighted as if they were their own children - 'like you gave birth to them' (T24).

In several cases this close connection between teachers and pupils continued after the children had left primary school, as some pupils would go back to thank the teachers and acknowledge the good that they did for them (T33). Others they would just meet by chance in town years later, but the former students would still recognise them and proudly introduce them to their friends or partner, saying "this was my teacher", and that made them 'feel good' (T16). One from School 8 in Nairobi said that the fact that 'they respect me and show appreciation really makes me happy' (T34). Even parents who were previously hostile often went back to apologise once they saw the transformation in their child's life. Such occasions gave the teachers great encouragement that they had attained something noteworthy. Thus, acknowledgement from just a few students or parents made all their toils seem worthwhile.

Nevertheless, a common trend across the case study schools was a strong internal support network amongst the staff, which protected them from being too affected by the positive or negative comments and interactions with the local community. For instance, the participants at School 1 in Kiambu enjoyed close fellowship, which enabled them to build up and encourage one another. Even when situations were tough, they would share jokes and so declared, 'surprisingly enough we are very happy here' (T3). Similarly, the teachers at School 14 liked 'motivating each other' (T55) by sharing their experiences and reading 'the

Word of God together' (T55). As a result, the staff at most schools had 'strong teamwork' (T7), such as School 2, where the teachers described themselves as 'a very cohesive team' (T8). This lessened their workload and strengthened them to tackle challenges, hence making their job easier and more enjoyable (T8).

3.3.3 Financial reasons

In addition to internal support, external aid also proved to be a source of encouragement, as it showed the teachers that some people somewhere valued what they were doing. For example, School 16 had several donors, and that assistance gave them 'strength to continue' (T65). The participants explained that when outsiders helped provide for the pupils' basic needs, they felt inspired to play their part too. Other schools also received aid from NGOs or partner schools overseas, like School 12 in Homa Bay County, which benefited from a link with a primary school in the UK. Teaching resources, toys and computers were sent to them regularly and the British school even helped to improve their curriculum. The pupils in Kenya consequently became more enthusiastic about school and eager to learn, which served to 'motivate us as teachers' (T49).

Besides their schools getting funding and the other aforementioned reasons for the participants continuing to teach 'against the odds', personal financial concerns still played a significant part. As T5 frankly declared, the basic reality is that state education is 'where you are getting your daily bread'. As much as it was arduous, they recognised that they were 'being paid to do the work' (T37) and that should not be taken for granted, as they 'need the money' to provide for their families (T13); 'if you want your own children to be able to go to school, then you cannot quit your job' (T14). Thus, the longing to obtain financial security (which was the key factor motivating them to enter the teaching profession in the first place) remained an important priority for them.

3.4 How can their job be made easier and more effective?

Although the teachers had developed certain attitudes and communal coping mechanisms for dealing with the challenges that confronted them in their work, they were still full of ideas for how the schooling experience could be improved for both staff and pupils. Since their job was inextricably linked to the welfare of the children, many of their suggestions focused on ways to empower the pupils, which indirectly accrued benefits to them as well.

3.4.1 Government measures

As discussed above, the teachers felt exploited by the government, feeling overworked and underpaid. Free Primary Education had resulted in a rapidly increasing student population, while the number of teachers employed by the TSC rose negligibly in comparison. This had adversely affected the quality of tuition in primary schools; hence the participants all stated that more teachers were desperately needed, as it was 'easier to impact on them when they are fewer' (T65). A lower pupil-teacher ratio would not only reduce their workload and the stress of managing so many children in one class, but it would also enable them to give more support and special attention to girls struggling with personal issues (T29).

In addition to employing more teachers, the participants also wanted the government to give them better pay, so that their salaries reflected the amount and demands of the work they undertook. It is not just a question of justice, but also of practical necessity, since insufficient remuneration caused many teachers to become 'very demoralised and some to be absent without reason' (T24). Bearing in mind that the participants had all been posted to hardship areas by the TSC, they suggested that teachers in such locations should be given 'special financial incentives' to compensate for the adverse conditions in which they had to work. For those in remote rural areas, 'housing conditions should be made more comfortable for women, because the environment is so harsh' (T14). Furthermore, if the benefits outweighed the costs, teachers would not give up and leave so quickly and more would be willing to go to such areas, so there would be more staff in schools (T25).

The participants from School 8 in Nairobi had another idea for hardship schools, stemming from the unique circumstances of their high refugee population. They objected to the standardised structure and treatment of public schools, arguing that they have different needs and challenges according to the surrounding socio-cultural and economic environment. Correspondingly, they proposed that their school should be recognised as a 'special school', so that a specific governmental arrangement and pedagogical approach relevant to its cultural context could be implemented. This would enable them to 'get the best results out of children', thereby improving the academic performance of the school and giving them greater job satisfaction (T34). Similarly, the teachers in Kajiado County advocated special schools for young mothers to tackle the increasingly common scenario of

teenage girls returning back to school after having a baby². Although being a progressive step forward for girls' education, it brought about a variety of issues³ that made teaching very challenging. Thus, establishing schools specifically for teenage mothers would help make education more relevant to the girls as well as enabling teachers to be more effective in meeting pupils' diverse needs (T63).

3.4.2 Donor measures

One measure raised in all the focus groups that could diminish the chances of girls getting pregnant in the first place was having boarding facilities in primary schools. According to T62 in Kajiado County, building dormitories is 'one of the steps ahead for improving girls' education', as it would ensure their physical wellbeing as well as safeguarding them from negative cultural pressures at home. Since trying to protect girls from female circumcision and early marriage were some of the main difficulties the teachers in Kajiado had to deal with, this strategy would greatly assist them in their efforts. The participants in Nairobi and Kiambu Counties saw the need for both girls and boys to board, as they were equally vulnerable to 'the influence from the environment' (T26), like prostitution, cohabitation, substance abuse and gang crime. Hence, the teachers regarded boarding facilities as a key strategy to improve pupils' attendance, performance and retention in school.

Even the provision of basic school and personal needs would help keep children in school and enhance their academic performance. T10 said that girls needed 'a sponsor who can help them with some small, small things, like biros and sanitary towels'. In fact, shortage of sanitary towels was 'a really big issue' (T28), because many girls were prevented from coming to school during menstruation. Thus, 'stakeholders of education should ensure girls have sanitary protection, as this will reduce absenteeism' (T53). Likewise, the participants urged the government and aid organisations to ensure every child received adequate food each day. The summary of their pleas was that the school feeding programme should be scaled up to cover every state school in the country (only the schools

2 In recognition that teenage pregnancy was a major hindrance to educational achievement, the government of Kenya introduced the Return to School Policy in 1994 after much lobbying from Civil Society Organisations. The Ministry of Education then formulated a set of guidelines in 1996 to facilitate the re-entry of girls into schools after giving birth.

3 Such as pupils being of different mental, emotional and physical levels of maturity due to age disparities within the class; teenage mothers having a negative influence on younger girls; mothers finding school irrelevant; and cases of indiscipline due to young women's perceived equality with teachers.

in Nairobi and Kajiado Counties were included in the programme) and should be free and independent of parents' support, as failure to pay the food contribution money meant no lunch for the children concerned. In addition to benefiting the students, these measures would also relieve the teachers of the burden of having to buy personal items and food for the pupils, which should in any case not be their responsibility.

3.4.3 Civil society measures

Notwithstanding the government's duty to uphold every child's right to education and food, the teachers stated that parents also needed to embrace their responsibility of looking after the wellbeing of their child. They should be informed about the importance of education and hence the need to co-operate with the school and government in supplying their children with all the required learning resources, as well as ensuring their attendance in school. This was identified as a critical requirement, because parents' negative attitudes towards education led to frequent conflicts with the teachers and caused pupils to be disruptive and disinterested in learning. Moreover, since gender discrimination was a pertinent problem in most of the communities, especially in Kajiado and Homa Bay Counties, 'parents should be educated and sensitised to know the importance of education for the girl' (T61). They should be taught through 'forums' with 'role models from the same community or the same religion', so that the adults could identify with them. Then, once enlightened, they 'will change their culture' and 'that is going to change everything' (T32).

Role models were also recognised to be essential for girls in school, particularly 'more lady role models' (T15), who can prove that 'women can also go far' in life (T10). It would inspire the pupils to work hard so they can be like them (T29); hence making the role of the teachers much easier, as many girls did not see a future in education due to gendered beliefs and practices in society. Giving the girls insight into other cultures and the chance to interact with students from different parts of the country would produce a similar result, as they would 'get exposed to life outside' (T55) and see 'that girls are just as equal as boys' (T40). With a better knowledge of more modernised places, the teachers would also have a simpler task getting them to understand unfamiliar things, as 'explaining some terms [to children living in underdeveloped areas] is like Greek to them' (T56). Hence, the participants suggested that links could be made between girls' schools on a national and international level to help broaden their minds. This, including their other suggestions,

would help make the work of teachers easier and more effective, thereby empowering the 'girls against the odds'.

4. Conclusions

Beyond serving to corroborate the accounts of the 'girls against the odds' with regards to the challenges of their schooling experience, the teachers' focus groups revealed valuable insights into the difficulties that schools face in providing quality education. To begin with, the staff worked under poor terms and conditions, with low pay and heavy workloads managing classes of up to 133 pupils in inhospitable environments. Not only did this cause the participants to become tired and demoralised, but it also compromised the quantity and quality of tuition they were able to deliver. The struggle to perform well was further intensified by the widespread lack of teaching resources and basic facilities. Furthermore, instead of supporting the school, the majority of the local communities were uncooperative, stemming from an apparent indifference to education. This resulted in continuous conflicts between the parents and teachers, as the former would actively discourage their children from going to school and working hard through negative talk, engaging them in paid/non-paid labour or forcing them into cultural practices like early marriage.

Although having a reliable salary remained a key consideration for the participants, if it was the only factor motivating them to continue teaching against all these odds, then most would have left their jobs by now. Thus, in addition to their original professed aspiration of attaining financial security, the teachers disclosed a variety of other reasons for their resilience. Most spoke of a sense of duty to serve God, the nation of Kenya and the underprivileged in society. Compassion for the poor and vulnerable compelled them to become a parent figure to the children; comforting, counselling, instructing and developing them, which made the teachers feel needed and valued. If their efforts were acknowledged by the students or parents, that encouraged them greatly, but even without being appreciated many derived a feeling of achievement from seeing their pupils progress socially and academically. Emotional support amongst the staff and external aid also proved to be significant in motivating the participants, as it made them realise that they were not struggling to empower the children alone.

Correspondingly, the teachers gave a number of suggestions that different stakeholders of education should implement in order to lighten their load and assist them in their endeavours to provide quality education. In summary, they believed the government should employ more teachers, increase their pay and offer positive discrimination for those working in hardship areas; donor bodies should provide primary schools with boarding facilities, teaching materials, food and sanitary towels⁴; and civil society should organise forums for educating adults on the value of education and arrange for role models to talk to girls and boys in school. Thus, the causes of, and solutions to, 'teaching against the odds' and 'girls against the odds', are inextricably linked. They therefore need to be tackled holistically in a comprehensive package of policy reform and interventional measures on the ground.

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⁴ As a result of gender responsive budgeting, the Kenyan government has currently budgeted \$4million to provide free sanitary pads to schoolgirls (Gathigah, 2011).

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