

Kenya

Kenya is an east African country that faces the Indian Ocean in the east and borders the countries of Sudan and Ethiopia in the north, Tanzania in the south, and Uganda, Lake Victoria, and the Great Rift Valley in the west. In 2008, it had a population of approximately 39 million people, composed of more than 40 ethnic groups (primarily of the Bantu, Cushitic, and Kilotic linguistic families) as well as people of European and Asian backgrounds.¹

After gaining independence from the British in 1963, Kenya encouraged educational development with appeals for *Harambee* (an African tradition of community self-reliance, mutual assistance, and local responsibility) to build and maintain schools. Today, elementary education is widely available, and while secondary education is less available, it has also experienced growth. In 1963, for example, there were only 65 secondary schools in Kenya, but by 1987 the number had grown to more than 2,600. By the 1990s, Kenya had a growing system of primary, secondary, and tertiary (postsecondary and higher) schools, including both public and private options.²

Gender and the Kenyan economy

Kenya has a burdensome national debt that results in inadequate funding, overcrowded schools, and poorly paid teachers. Educational opportunity has been affected not only by gender but also by ethnic group status, socioeconomic class, and proximity to urban centers where schools are more numerous and better financed than in rural areas. Continuing economic and political problems make educational change difficult to achieve, but modest progress was made in expanding educational opportunities related to gender. For example, in 1971 girls composed 31 percent of secondary school enrollments, but by 1990 their percentage had increased to 43 percent.³

Kenya's national debt contributes to educational inequities because requirements of the International Monetary Fund for debtor nations to repay their debts often means cuts in public service budgets, which usually take resources away from education. Women and children are among the most vulnerable parts of the Kenyan population, and they usually suffer most in such circumstances. At the same time, women are also important economic producers responsible for approximately 75 percent of the food production and most of the "informal" economy (e.g., domestic labor, child rearing, informal health care, etc.). Underfunded education forces schools to raise funds in other ways to meet actual costs, such as fees and other assessments that families must pay. Because Kenyan tradition values the education of boys over girls, poor families faced with extra

costs are more likely to keep their daughters at home to reduce expenses. The better education of females provides a number of societal benefits that need to be recognized, however, for not only do educated females increase economic production, but mortality rates are reduced for both mothers and children when mothers are educated and can more readily access information to help provide their children and themselves with better pre- and postnatal care and nutrition. Better-educated females would benefit not only women and children but all of Kenyan society.⁴

Gender and educational opportunity in Kenya

Research indicates that inadequate attention has been given to gender issues in Kenyan education. While education plays a central role in its national development plans, Kenya has a long history of patriarchy that resists efforts to provide greater equality for females. Although women were important to the economy and community historically speaking, when Christian missionaries introduced formal schooling to Kenya during the colonial era, authorities restricted it to African boys and virtually excluded the girls. After independence, however, Kenya's primary school enrollments grew markedly, with females making up almost half of those attending. Still, fewer girls actually completed primary school than boys, mainly because of patriarchal traditions that led many poor families to pull their daughters from school prematurely.⁵

Today, the migration of males from rural areas to urban job markets has increased the number of de facto female-headed households. When distantly employed fathers are absent for long periods of time, mothers not only must provide unpaid domestic labor but also supplement meager family incomes. This has spurred the growth of women's self-help organizations for training in economic skills to alleviate poverty and gender discrimination, but poor and uneducated females are still mostly limited to the lowest-paying jobs, and poor families that truly want to educate their daughters may be unable to bear the costs. Despite government efforts to abolish school fees, the lower classes of Kenya continue to face barriers to equal educational opportunity, including persistent gender discrimination.⁶

Despite difficulties, Kenya has made important educational gains. Before independence in 1963, schools were racially segregated. Only an estimated 35 percent of the African school-age population enrolled in primary schools and a mere 1.3 percent in secondary schools (as compared to a 98 percent enrollment rate for resident white students). In contrast, by 2002 approximately 5,590,143 Kenyan children were enrolled in primary schools (of which 48.31 percent were female) and 1,389,000 in secondary schools (of which 47.88 percent were female).

That shows considerable progress, but to give it some perspective, 1,867,765 children were not enrolled in primary schools in 2002, and in almost all other measures, males fared better than females.⁷

In an effort to help alleviate such problems, the Kenyan government abolished primary school tuition fees in 2003, which increased school enrollments by approximately 25 percent over the next four years and forced the government to seek outside financial support just to furnish basic materials, books, classrooms, and teachers. The abolition of fees certainly advanced Kenya's goal of free primary education for all children. That same year, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that Kenya was coming close to parity between male and female enrollments at the primary school level but not at the secondary and tertiary levels. In addition, Kenya needed to provide more adequate information and educational help concerning puberty and sexual maturation, particularly for girls.⁸

Continuing political and economic difficulties make progress on gender equality in education difficult for Kenya to achieve. Political instability limits governmental capacities to take effective actions, while poor economic conditions limit the resources needed to make educational improvements. In 2005, a proposed new Kenyan constitution that promised greater equality for women was defeated by a 58 percent majority of voters, and in 2006 a national study on adult literacy found that approximately 7.8 million adult Kenyans were illiterate, with only 29.6 percent at a level of literacy needed for today's knowledge-based economies. The adult reading rate was 61.5 percent, and the numeracy rate at 64.5 percent. In terms of gender, women had a reading rate of 64.2 percent and a numeracy rate of 58.9 percent, as compared to men (with rates of 67.9 percent in reading and 61.4 percent in numeracy).⁹

How Kenya will fare in its efforts to achieve greater gender equality in education remains to be seen. Perhaps the Education for All (EFA) movement, which is supported by world bodies such as UNESCO, offers some fruitful directions. In 2000, the EFA set a goal of massively reducing world illiteracy by the year 2015, and Kenya is one of the participants. Gender parity in educational opportunity is a primary goal of EFA,¹⁰ and while Kenya faces daunting challenges in achieving such goals by 2015, its record of previous successes may provide inspiration and direction to achieve future goals.

Notes

1 "Kenya," CIA-The World Factbook, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/KE.html> (accessed on July 13, 2009).

- 2 Agostino M. Zamberia, "Self-Help Secondary Education in Kenya," in *Education in Comparative Perspective: New Lessons from around the World*, York W. Bradshaw, ed., *International Studies in Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. LXIII, York W. Bradshaw, ed. (New York: E.J. Brill, 1997), 47, 52–55.
- 3 Zamberia, 56–59.
- 4 Claudia Buchmann, "The Debt Crisis, Structural Adjustment, and Women's Education," in *Education in Comparative Perspective: New Lessons from around the World*, 5–11 [5–30].
- 5 Mutindi Mumbua Kiluva-Ndunda, *Women's Agency and Educational Policy: The Experiences of the Women of Kilome, Kenya* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 8–9.
- 6 Kiluva-Ndunda, 18–21, 86–97, and 105–116.
- 7 For data on the 1960s, see Anthony Somerset, *A Preliminary Note on Kenyan Primary School Enrollments over Four Decades*, Create Pathways to Access Research Monograph, No. 9, June 2007 (University of Sussex Centre for International Education), 1, at http://www.create-rpc.org/pdf_documents/PTA9.pdf (accessed on July 10, 2009). For Kenyan education statistics, see NationMaster.com, at <http://www.nationmaster.com/red/country/ke-kenya/edu-education&all=1> (accessed on July 10, 2009).
- 8 Victor Chinyama, "Kenya's Abolition of School Fees Offers Lessons for Rest of Africa," Nairobi, UNICEF, 2006, at http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/kenya_33391.html (accessed on July 13, 2009); and UNESCO, *Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality*, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2003/4 (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), 47, 291, at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132513e.pdf> (accessed on July 13, 2009).
- 9 For perspectives on Kenya's constitutional vote, see "Anti-Discrimination Committee Urges Kenya to Continue Pursuing Gender Equality," Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women, UN General Assembly, July 27, 2007, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2007/wom1644.doc.htm> (accessed on July 13, 2009); and Joyce N. Kebathi, "Measuring Literacy: The Kenya National Adult Literacy Survey," *Adult Education and Development*, No. 71, 2008, at http://www.dvv-international.de/index.php?article_id=802&clang=1 (accessed on July 13, 2009).
- 10 See, for example, *Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality*, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2003/4; and UNESCO, "Ten Things You Need to Know About Education for All," at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efa-international-coordination/the-efa-movement/10-things-to-know-about-efa/> (accessed on July 13, 2009).