Context Matters
— RESEARCH GRANTS —
2018-2019

A Gender Community Outreach for Girls Living in Vulnerable Contexts: Experiences from School Literacy Clubs in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

Prof. Colomba K. Muriungi: Chuka University, Kenya. colomba.kaburi6@gmail.com

Dr. Andima George: Kisii University, Kenya. andimageorge@gmail.com

Published May, 2020

A Gender Community Outreach for Girls Living in Vulnerable Contexts: Experiences from School Literacy Clubs in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya[1]

Prof. Colomba K. Muriungi: Chuka University, Kenya. *colomba.kaburi6@gmail.com*

Dr. Andima George: Kisii University, Kenya. *andimageorge@gmail.com*

Published May, 2020

Abstract

The Kenya Constitution (2010) has deliberately attempted to remedy the traditional exclusion of women and has promoted their full involvement in every aspect of growth and development. It is indeed true that when women have the freedom to reach their full potential, families and by extension communities experience exponential growth. Despite such efforts by the Kenyan government, young girls in rural Kenya continue to suffer and endure, gender exploitation and child labour due to poverty and lack of alternative means of livelihoods. Girls in some parts of Tharaka Nithi County suffer from poor access to education and health services caused by high poverty levels. Such levels of poverty and the patriarchal systems are responsible for the marginalization of girls on matters health and education in favour of the boy child. This paper presents the efforts made to empower girls in this context to voice their story through literacy clubs. Specifically, the paper discusses the girls' use of literacy clubs to voice the challenges they face in their educational pursuit, the use of literacy clubs to voice the nature of discrimination they face and to empower and build their resilience. Data was collected from a sample of form one and two girls from five Sub-county schools in Tharaka Nithi County. The data collected was analysed qualitatively and the key themes in relation to the plight of girls in this context identified. The paper presents the research process, discusses the findings and key implications of the findings on the emancipation of the girl child at the local as well as the global scene.

Key Words: Gender, Literacy clubs, Access to education and health, Tharaka North, Kenya.

---

[1]An earlier version of this paper with the title, **"Amplifying the Plight of Girls in Vulnerable Contexts: Experiences from School Literacy Clubs"** was presented in the 11th PALFA conference in Kampala, Uganda in August 2019 and later submitted for publication. The current paper has been revised following the completion of the project.

1.0 Introduction

    1.1 Study Context and the State of the Girl Child in Tharaka

Gender equality and girls' education were a key priority in the multilateral Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) frameworks (Hall, 2014: 14). This still remains a key focus area in the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) agenda. In their review the Ministry of Planning, Development and Management in Brazil (2017) agrees with a report on the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of women (2015), that the end of poverty can only be achieved with the end of gender-based discrimination. This is because all over the world, gender inequality makes and keeps women poor, depriving them of basic rights and opportunities for well-being. The SDG 4 argues for inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all, with target 4.1 stating that "all girls and boys should complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030" (UNESCO, 2016: 20). Globally, 62 million girls are not in school, millions more are fighting to stay there and an estimated 100 million will drop out before completing primary school (USAID, 2017: 1). Girls in developing countries face complex and often dangerous barriers when trying to get an education. Even if they are able to attend school, girls often lack the resources and the support they need to learn.

The UN report (2015) on Gender Equality and Empowerment reiterates that girls living in economically poor contexts are as twice likely to marry in childhood as compared to those who live in economically rich contexts. Such girls face potentially life threatening risks; the inability to exploit their full potentials due to lost opportunities for an education and a better income, among others. In patriarchal societies women face challenges in an attempt to look for opportunities to access equal avenues to end poverty and other individual problems. It should be understood that investing in women and girls can boost an entire country's Gross Domestic Productivity (World Bank Report, 2015). In addition, educated girls help to create a healthier population, which in the end becomes more productive because such girls are less likely to contract HIV; they are aware of prevention measures and are also more likely to vaccinate their children as required, and have lower maternal and infant mortality rates. Available evidence however shows that young girls in

rural Kenya do not have equal opportunities to access education compared to boys (Chege and Sifuna 2006: 50).

The Kenya Constitution seeks to remedy the traditional exclusion of women and promote their full involvement in every aspect of growth and development. Generally, children in rural settlements in Kenya are exposed to vulnerability, marginalization, victimization, and abuses of all forms. Young girls for instance suffer and endure abusive relationship, gender exploitation, and child labour due to poverty and lack of alternative means of livelihoods. According to USAID report (2019: 1) on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Kenya, girls and women hold untapped potential and their increased contributions would help Kenya reach its development goals. However, women remain underrepresented in decision-making processes at many levels. Even the attempt by the Kenyan government to have the position of parliamentary Women Representative from every County does not help because it is impossible for a single woman to understand; leave alone represent the needs of all women in the County. The idea of a parliamentary Woman Representative in Kenya was born with the Kenyan Constitution of 2010, whereby each of the 47 counties in Kenya elect one woman to represent the county in parliament. This is done every five years and it is meant to help realize the two-thirds gender rule in parliament. According to Omondi (2013) the Kenyan parliament had limited number of women which meant that women's issues were rarely supported in Parliament where decisions and allocation of funds is based on simple majority voting. The woman representative was therefore seen as this missing voice. However, the presence of these women in parliament has not so much promoted girls' welfare because the challenges facing women and girls still persist in many areas in the country. That is why in our research we discovered girls in Tharaka North Sub-county were still suffering despite having such a woman representative in the county. Women and girls living in rural areas spend long hours collecting water and firewood. These and other household chores limit school attendance and work options. They also have less access to land tenure, education, and employment opportunities.

Kenya is grouped among the third world countries and is inhabited by people with different levels of income and living in varied environmental contexts across the country. In many cases, Kenyans

living within a single County have completely different lifestyles and unique levels of access to social and health amenities. The Tharaka people live in the rural semi-arid areas of Tharaka Nithi County in the Eastern part of Kenya. According to Joshua's Project (1994: 1), the Tharaka people occupy the low plains between the slopes of Mount Kenya in the west and the upper Tana River in the east. This community is classified to be among the eastern Bantus in Kenya and their history of immigration dates back to the spread of the Bantu people from Southern Africa. According to Tharaka oral history, for a long period of time, the Tharaka people lived in villages because village life was considered to preserve their tradition and culture. This secluded kind of life in the villages made them wary of strangers and intruders and it often excluded them from pursuing modern national benefits.

In terms of economic activities, the Tharaka people are peasant farmers and livestock keepers. They keep cows, goats and sheep, and grow crops like sorghum, millet, peas, cow peas, sunflower and cotton. Generally, products from these farms are not very promising and most of the Tharaka people remain poor, often living below the poverty line.

In a research done by Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and Society for International Development (SID) on "Striking Features on Intra-County Inequality in Kenya" Tharaka Nithi was identified as one of the five rural Counties with low levels of education. The others being, Baringo, Siaya, Pokot and Narok (2013: 6). In the case of Tharaka people who live in Tharaka Nithi County, as mentioned above, poor access to education is caused by high levels of poverty where many households cannot afford to pay school fees for their children. Despite the government subsidizing free secondary education, parents and guardians are still responsible for meeting other mandatory costs for their children's education (Muhindi 2012:52). These are the costs many parents cannot afford because of poverty. Such levels of poverty create a dire lack of basic amenities in most households and it further causes more suffering and marginalization of the girl child in matters of health and education because, first, priority is often given to the boy child, as patriarchy dictates, and second, girls' demands like the need for sanitary pads during their menstrual flow make some even fail to go to school during such days. A few projects on sanitary pads by well-wishers have been rolled out in Tharaka to help keep girls in school, although these

projects are often temporary. For example, an article by Martin Fundi in the online *Star Newspaper* published on April, 23rd, 2018 featured nominated Member of County assembly (MCA) for Mukothima ward, in Tharaka North Sub-county distributing free sanitary pads to needy girls in the area. Such gestures demonstrate that there is a problem not just about poverty, but also a dismal need and even suffering of the Tharaka girl in the context of health matters.

The above situation called for fact finding research to identify the specific problems that girls in Tharaka region experience, which often border on discrimination, and subsequently find remedy for the same. This research singled out Tharaka North Sub-county in Tharaka Nithi County as the area of focus in the attempt to utilize literacy clubs as avenues for sensitization, voicing the situation at hand and empowerment. Literacy clubs refer to a forum where girls come together to use literacy activities like 1st person narrations, writing and talking about their experiences, to bring out challenges they face in their pursuit for education. The literacy meetings were embedded into the school programme where clubs meet weekly. Through the literacy clubs, girls in secondary schools were allowed to tell their stories through writing their life narratives. The choice of the school environment was crucial because literacy was seen as one of the avenues for women empowerment, and thus school girls were viewed as better positioned to tell about the impediments to girls' education and how women empowerment can be enhanced in this society.

The aim of the study therefore was: first, to use literacy clubs to identify the challenges adolescent girls experience; second, to create a forum for the girls to vent their experiences while identifying with peers having similar challenges; and third, to attempt to create support systems for the adolescent girls and identify support models (school literacy club patrons) to mentor girls.

1.2 A Brief Overview at Women's Experiences in Africa

Women in many societies worldwide face discrimination, with the most pronounced subordination being visible amongst women in rural areas especially in Asia and Africa. Many of these women find themselves in an arduous position of fending for their families in the farms while at the same time having to live up to the demands of patriarchy in the society. Due to entrenched patriarchal systems especially in Africa, women are discriminated against in many life avenues from when

they are young. For instance, while examining the constraints facing women in a rural Yoruba Community, Aderinto (2017) asserts that despite the increasing awareness of women's education, there was still preference for the education of the male-child and decisions in this society were mainly made by the male, therefore escalating discrimination against women (1). Aderinto isolates specific areas that perpetuate subordination of women in the Yoruba community which include: limited participation in economic activities, female circumcision and health matters. In South Africa, Mudau & Obadire (2017) demonstrate that patriarchy prevents women from advancing educationally and that women are controlled even in the reproductive process due to patriarchy. Further, Madiba & Ngwenya's (2017) research on condom use by women in rural communities in Mpumalanga province of South Africa reveal that women are at high risk of HIV infection because of their inability to negotiate condom use, or to reject forced sex and non-consensual sex (Abstract: 56). This inability to negotiate was attributed to patriarchal trends in the society whereby women's inferior social position in marital relationships was enhanced by cultural practices such as bride price. If a woman's bride price is paid to her father, she becomes the property of the husband's family with limited authority in almost all life matters. Culture therefore seems to play a big role in the subordination of women in all societies, whether in Africa or elsewhere, which demonstrates the need to assist women to get out of the patriarchal quagmire they find themselves in as they grow up from little girls to mature women. Stromquist (1991) posits that literacy statistics constitute a basic yardstick of human progress and that "countries with high female illiteracy rates are characterized by rural poverty; they are also societies bound by cultural and religious beliefs dictating the separation of the sexes in key arenas of public life" (113).

In Africa, girls experience discrimination from when they are young because many societies have deep-rooted patriarchal systems which have become almost like a way of life since time immemorial. Even with high levels of literacy, gender discrimination continues to occur in the contemporary world, to the extent that girls' access to education as compared to boys is imbalanced in many regions. For instance, in a comparative research on women's access to education in Kenya and South Africa, Akala (2019) argues that that although both countries have progressive policies that support gender equality and equity, higher education still excludes many women, in particular those from marginalized communities. Furthermore, in a report by Patel and Jesse (2019) on the

varying progress toward gender equality in education in Africa, the two note that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of primary school age children who are out of school and many of these are girls. Our research, therefore, used literacy clubs as platform for uncovering areas of discrimination against girls in Tharaka North Sub-county in Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya, in order to not only understand the situation but also to propose remedies that can uplift the girl child in the area.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Location of the study

The study was conducted in Tharaka North Sub-county of Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The Sub-county has two wards; Mukothima and Gatunga as shown in the map of Tharaka constituency in Figure 1.
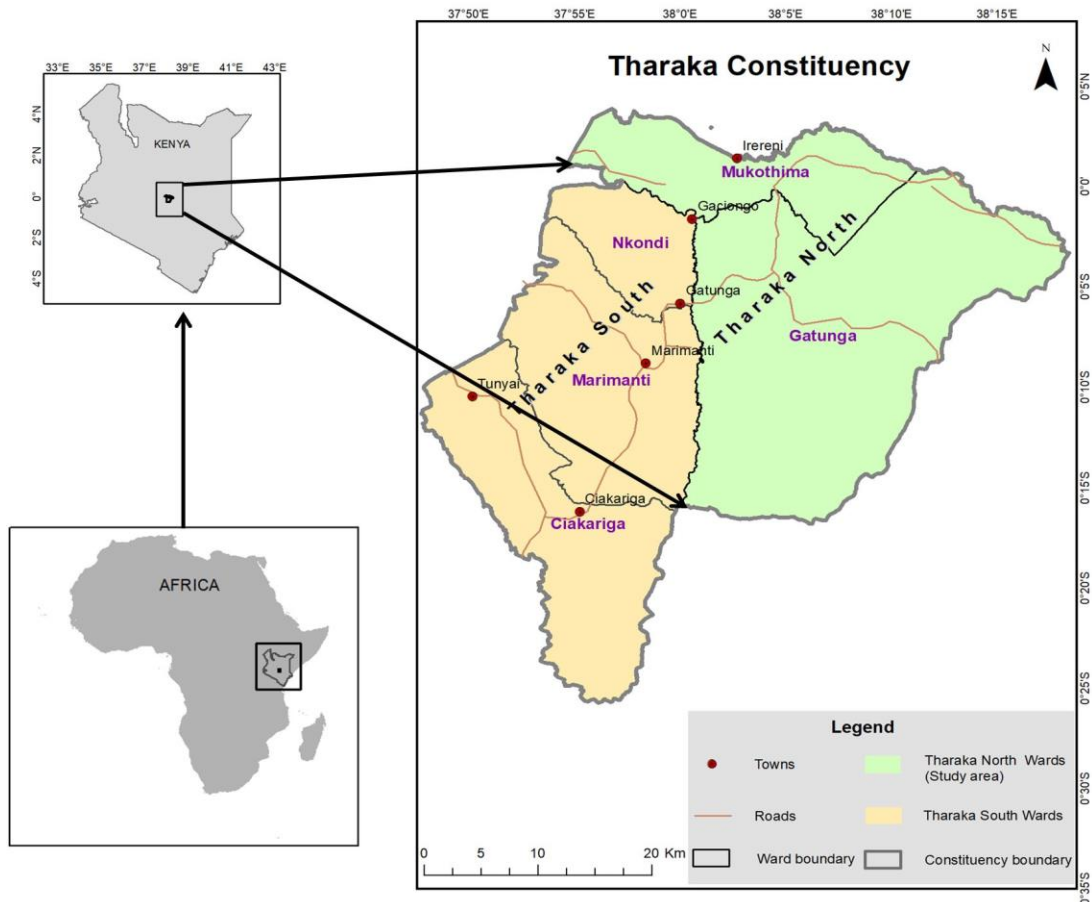
Figure 1: Tharaka Constituency Map Showing Tharaka North Sub-county
(**Source: Map Designed by Purity Rima Mbaabu, CABI-Woodyweeds Project**)

2.2 Scope and Target Group

This project targeted students in Forms one and two from (5) five secondary schools in Tharaka North Sub-county. Day schools were preferred because these are the schools that are often attended by students from poor families and they are the most common schools in the region. A total of 190 girls between the ages of 14 to 19 years were involved in the research.

Day schools were introduced in Kenya in 2008 to help students who could not afford high-cost boarding schools. Before the establishment of the day schools, there was a shortage of secondary schools in Tharaka North Sub-county. Therefore, those who wanted to pursue secondary level education had to travel to other counties, which made secondary education even more expensive. Only the well to do parents could take their children to the far away schools, which made access to education in Tharaka north Sub-county wanting, and girls were the more affected group. Today, it requires not less than Kshs. 212,000/- (2,120 USD) for tuition only at a boarding school to complete four years of secondary education in Kenya, which is Kshs. 53,000 (530 USD) per year; compared to a day school that costs as low as Kshs. 12,870/- (128.7 USD) per year. Therefore, with Kshs. 51,480 /- (514.80 USD), a student is able to complete the four-year secondary course in a day school

When this research was carried out, there were ten (10) day secondary schools in Tharaka North Sub-county and one (1) girls' boarding school. The day secondary schools were: Ntoroni, Mukothima, Iriani, Kirundi, Gaciongo and Kamacabi in Mukothima ward; and Gatue, Kathangachini, Kamwathu and Karii ka Mburi in Gatunga ward. Kabuabua, a girls boarding secondary school, is in Mukothima ward. All ten of the day schools are relatively new, apart from Gaciongo which was slightly older than the rest and admitted both day scholars and boarders. Out of these schools, we sampled two day schools from each ward: Gatue and Kathangachini in Gatunga ward; and Gaciongo and Kamacabi in Mukothima ward. Although the study targeted day secondary schools, Kabuabua girls' boarding was also included to provide a comparison to the experiences of girls in day schools with those in a boarding school.

From these five schools involved in the research, we aimed to recruit fifty (50) girls into the literacy club in each school (25 in Form one and 25 in Form two), who were aged approximately between

14 and 19 years. Girls in form one and two are expected to be aged between 14 to 16 years, but many of the girls were over age because of the challenges in the area, which sometimes forced them to join school late.

On getting to the schools, we discovered that some schools had fewer number of girls in the targeted classes. For example, in Gatue and Kamacabi we had to include girls in form three and form four because of the fewer number of girls in form one and two. We therefore ended up working with 25 girls from Gatue, 40 girls from Kathangachini, 40 girls from Gaciongo, 35 girls from Kamacabi and 50 girls from Kabuabua. This means that a total of 190 girls were involved in the research. The issue of fewer girls in day schools is attributed to the fact that day schools are preferred by parents who cannot always afford the cost of education for all their children, and may prefer to send boys to school because they are seen as the heir apparent, as was discovered from the research.

2.3 Research Process and Data Collection Procedures

The initial process of this study was a baseline survey. Data was collected from primary school head teachers, high school principals and education officers in order to establish specific areas/themes for purposes of guiding the study on what to pay attention to when overseeing girls' story writing sessions in the literacy clubs. After the baseline survey was done, teacher patrons were trained. The teacher patrons were the main link between the researchers and the students. They were responsible for coordinating the writing process in the literacy clubs and also guide the girls on how to go about sharing their experiences. Subsequently, literacy clubs were formed in the five selected schools in the Sub-county. Before the commencement of writing of narratives by the girls, the principal investigator and the investigator launched the literacy clubs in the five schools as shown in figures; 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Figure 2: Kathangachini Day Mixed Secondary school

Figure 3: Gatue Day Mixed Secondary School

Figure 4: Kamacabi Day Mixed Secondary School

Figure 5: Kabuabua Girls' Boarding

Figure 6: Gaciongo Mixed Secondary School

Data was collected through the clubs whereby, students shared their daily experiences, wrote stories based on these experiences and subsequently submitted them for analysis. This data was validated during the open forum where representatives from each school shared a summary of girls' experiences from their schools. Collectively, the girls proposed ways in which they thought the challenges could be overcome. Data was therefore gathered from three sets of narratives written by girls during the school literacy club meetings under the mentorship of the literacy club patrons and sharing of experiences by representatives from each of the five schools during the open forum, which was done at the end of the project.

Figure 7: Representatives from the Five Schools during the Open Forum

The general idea in writing the narratives was to get the girls to tell their story; to share their recent experiences that is one week, month or two months ago. They were expected to keep a daily journal from when the clubs were formed which would be incorporated into their prior experiences when writing the narratives. The guidelines for writing used are consolidated in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Guidelines Given for Writing the Narratives

THEME	DESCRIPTION BY THE RESEARCHERS
Social Cultural Factors	*This week we are compiling the first round of stories based on the first theme.* *We encourage you to write truthful stories (not fiction). Those who wish to write their names can write but it is not compulsory. Write in prose using this guideline:* 1. Give an introduction in terms of how many family members there are in your family and your position (Mum, dad, sisters and brothers) 2. Write in 1st person (e.g. I am... my name is.... I have two brothers, etc.) 3. Explain the roles the male siblings in your family perform on a day to day basis. 4. Explain the roles you are involved in while at home. 5. How does what you do affect your school work?
	As you write your experience here think about these questions: **a. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

Cultural Practices/Social Support Systems:	1. Are there girls in your village who have undergone FGM? 2. What are some of the reasons why FGM is still carried out in your community and has this affected girls' access to education? Do you think these girls had an option of not going through this? **b. Early Marriages** 1. What is the earliest age when girls from your village get married? 2. Do you know anyone who has been forced into early marriage? 3. Share any experiences you have from those who were subjected to early marriages. **c. Menstrual hygiene** 1. Did you know anything about menstruation until you were confronted with your first menstruation? 2. Who did you share this with and how were you helped to understand what it was? 3. Did this affect your active participation in school activities? 4. What do you think needs to be done in order to help other young girls?
Sexual Harassment and Unsafe Educational Environment.	*Patrons please guide the girls to reflect whether they have faced or face any of the signs identified here, paying attention to these questions.* 1. Did they consider it offensive? If yes, why? If no, why? 2. Did they share this with anybody? If no, why? If yes, what did the person do? 3. What do they think needs to be done? **a. VERBAL** • Whistling at someone/cat calls. • Making sexual comments about a person's body. • Telling sexual jokes or stories. • Asking about sexual fantasies, preferences, or history. • Asking personal questions about social or sexual life. • Making kissing sounds, howling, and smacking lips. • Making sexual comments about a person's clothing, anatomy, or looks. • Repeatedly asking for a date (outing) from you. • Telling lies or spreading rumors about a person's personal sex life. **b. NON-VERBAL** • Looking a person up and down (elevator eyes) or staring at someone, making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses. • Blocking a person's path or following the person. • Giving personal gifts. • Displaying sexually suggestive visuals or asking sexual gestures with hands or through body movements.

	c. PHYSICAL • Giving a massage around the neck or shoulders or touching the person's clothing, hair, or body. • Kissing, patting, or stroking or brushing up against another person

Discussions, writing and sharing of stories was employed to allow maximum participation by the respondents. This participatory approach was used to provide opportunities for the girls to express, document and analyse their situation and propose ways to improve their lives. Generally, the girls' experiences were based on three thematic areas: daily experiences and chores undertaken at home especially after school; experiences on cultural practices; and knowledge of menstrual hygiene and other health issues. This was explained to the girls at the beginning of the study and further clarifications were made during the writing process. The girls were asked to explain how these experiences affected their access to education. The aim of engaging girls in sharing and documenting their stories served three key functions: to provide a space to share; to learn from others' experiences; and to empower them to identify challenges they faced and the coping mechanisms that were appropriate in their context. This was done, not just through discussions during the club meetings, but also through the daily journals mentioned above. Girls were provided with writing materials to use for their daily journal entries, which could be about any subject. They wrote a rough draft of the narratives and later compiled in a fair copy for submission to the researchers.

3.0 Findings
The findings from all the three data collection avenues, that is the questionnaires, the narratives and the open forum discussion show that generally girls face challenges in their attempt to access education because of high levels of poverty and strong cultural beliefs emanating from patriarchal biases in the community. In addition, it was noted that schools in Tharaka North Sub-county are scattered and students who are enrolled in day secondary schools still need to walk long distances to and from school. The girls also face the challenges of coping with menstruation due to inadequate knowledge and lack of support systems to help them deal with changes in their life and health experiences. The preference of the boy child over the girl child was cited frequently as a factor that put girls at the most disadvantage in their attempt to access education. In the focus group

discussion for example, the girls explained that this low regard meant they were given less money than the boys for both school fees and other needs, leading to even more problems. In fact, some girls shared that they knew of friends who were forced to have sex with some rich men in order to get money for things like sanitary pads; while other girls they knew were forced, either by their fathers or their brothers, to get married. This illustrates how gender discrimination is the root cause of many problems in this community. The key findings were further analyzed under three thematic areas: Social Cultural Factors, Social Support Systems and Educational Environment.

Social Cultural Factors: From our study it was noted that whereas the girls continue to carry out specific roles in contemporary society, the boys' roles are not clearly defined. The girls indicated in the narratives that there was unequal and unfair distribution of chores at home. Even when they attend the same schools (day schools) with their male siblings, girls were expected to carry out much of the domestic chores after school. This included fetching firewood, water, cooking and serving the rest of the family members, and sometimes washing clothes for the entire family before settling down to do their school assignments. This meant that girls had less study time because of these multiple home chores and were often fatigued to effectively handle their school assignments. This is exemplified by the following excerpts from Karimi and Karea's narratives (not their real names).

Karimi

"I wake up at 5a.m. and start preparing myself for school. I walk five kilometres from home to school…. Then at 5p.m. I walk back home from school, on the way I always collect firewood. At home I take off my uniform and take the donkey and go to fetch water. I take almost one hour to fetch water because of the many people at the well. Then I go back home to cook."

Karea

"After my brothers come back in the evening, they usually go out to play while I am busy preparing supper and cleaning utensils and I also take food to them in their hut. As a girl I am expected to do all these while they go on with their studies. My mother too does not

help me with the work. She says that she is training me to be a good wife. I should therefore cook and focus on my homework later."

From Karea's sentiments it is clear that girls' education is secondary to being prepared to be homemakers. Her sentiments represent views given by most of the girls in their narratives in the study. Komora (2014) identifies almost similar predicaments for the girl child in Galole Constituency of Tana River County where she posits that "…home chores such as cattle herding, cultivating in the crop fields, selling of farm produce in the markets, migrating with animals to better grazing lands, among other home based chores constitute the biggest impediments to girls attending school" (72). Similarly, in his study on girls' education among communities in Marsabit County, Muyaka (2018) argues that established community routines worked to marginalize girls because they are exposed to more work at home compared to boys, thus limiting girls' time to attend to their homework. This means that the socialization process in Tharaka, Galole and Marsabit communities in Kenya contribute negatively to the girls' confidence and pursuit of their aspirations in life.

While the girls at Kabuabua boarding secondary school had ample time to study and do their assignments in school, they did indicate that when at home they experienced a skewed division of chores, that is they did more chores than their male siblings. This skewed division was observed to be more pronounced among girls who were day scholars in Gatue, Kamacabi, Katangachini and Gaciongo mixed day secondary schools. Elimination of these negative cultural beliefs requires coordinated efforts towards community sensitization on the benefits of giving girls equal educational opportunities for the realization of their full potential.

Another social cultural factor captured in most of the narratives was the commodification of girls as sources of family income. Whereas boys in many families were taken to boarding schools where they got superior educational opportunities, the majority of the girls were either enrolled in day schools or were forced into early marriages. This can best be exemplified by a parents' question on the value of educating girls; "*Why should one educate a girl who will eventually get married and enrich another family?*" (Quoted from one of the stories). It can be deduced that in poverty

stricken communities in Africa like the Tharaka, girls are viewed as a source of income through traditional marriages that involve exchange of wealth. These findings from the Tharaka community resonate with the findings of Muyaka (2018) mentioned above, where early pregnancies and marriages within the Marsabit communities are among the factors that impede girls' access to education.

Additionally, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), otherwise referred to as female circumcision was the other social cultural factor that affected girls' access to education. In the Tharaka community, traditionally both boys and girls underwent the cut and it was viewed as a bridge to adulthood and thus a ticket to marriage for girls. FGM therefore not only exposed girls to the dangers related to health but also to early marriage and early pregnancies. In fact, some of the girls who were involved in writing the stories were circumcised, either out of their own volition or were forced by their mothers who insisted that "*they were not going to keep a non-circumcised girl in their compound*", as quoted from Mwari's write up. She points out that:

> "*Sometimes women in our community are the ones who make girls to get circumcised. Some may call girls **mithera** (uncircumcised girls). Some are forced by their mothers who say they cannot stay with girls who are not circumcised in their home. They go on saying those who are not circumcised are the ones who easily get pregnant and do not know how to handle their husbands when they get married.*"

From this excerpt it is clear that women who should ordinarily be leading in fighting the practice of FGM are themselves agents who employ scare tactics to bully the girls into getting the cut. During the open forum, it was reported that in some families, after a girl gets circumcised the father or elder brother can order her to either get married or be chased out of the homestead, as noted earlier. This brings out the need for enhanced sensitization initiatives to help the community understand that girls too have rights that should be respected. Equally, the sensitization will bring out the negative effects of FGM in the community.

Social Support Systems: Social support systems can play a critical role in assisting girls to develop a positive self-image as they go through life's challenges. The social support system in this case consists of friends, peers and family. It was however noted that some parents were unsupportive in matters of provision of basic needs either due to poverty or due to the strong patriarchal systems and preference of the boy child in the community. In the narratives, some girls pointed out that their parents were drunk and violent, making the home environment unfriendly for studies, while other parents forced their daughters to undergo FGM and get married as noted above. In terms of menstrual issues, many girls indicated a constant lack of support during the onset of menstruation and after. From the narratives and discussions, it was noted that mothers and elder female siblings in this area did not open up to the adolescent girls, meaning that such girls had to either learn from their teachers or the hard way through their peers. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from Mukami's story:

"My elder sisters were so secretive with menstrual issues. They used to hide pads in locked boxes and I never understood what they were for" (Mukami [not real name]).

Both the teachers and the girls expressed that often, girls failed to attend school, either because of menstrual pains or because they lacked sanitary pads. They therefore preferred to stay away from their peers in case they got their skirts soiled and were embarrassed. According to Komora (2014), low income levels in many of the families in Galole constituency in Kenya make it difficult for such families to provide sanitary pads for teenage girls. This leads to them skipping classes for at least four days in a month during their menses. It is important to note that the accumulative loss of school days in a year affects not only the girls' understanding of the school syllabus but also their performance in crucial exams and also their morale (Komora 2014). This by extension means that girls experiencing these challenges not only fail to succeed in their studies but also fail to develop a positive self-image. This eventually entrenches the vicious cycle of gender disparity.

Unsafe Educational Environment: Unsafe educational environments affect students' ability to pursue their educational goals. Safety was a major concern mainly for girls in day schools because students walk for long distances to and from school. Girls reported assault, cat calls and sexual

harassment from men on the way to school. These experiences lured a number of girls into unwanted pregnancies and/or made them give up on schooling altogether. The distance from school also caused students fatigue, sometimes making it difficult to concentrate in class. This failure of concentration was attributed to a combination of factors. For instance, in a discussion in one of the sessions during the literacy club's meeting at Kabuabua secondary, one student was reported to having left home hungry because there was no food and she had to walk for seven kilometres to get to school. At some point however, she was unable to proceed because she was weak. The student was later rescued by villagers and escorted to school. Such a case demonstrates that poverty and distance from school work hand in hand to make school attendance impossible. In addition, while girls in the girls' boarding school indicated that they felt safe at school, many girls in the day mixed secondary schools explained that there were intimidating sexual advances from boys even in the school environment. This means that safety measures need to be put in place to ensure that girls feel secure both at home and at school, especially by having more schools to avoid walking long distances to school which was cited as the most scaring experience for the girls. Girls feared to be waylaid by bullies on their way to school as they were expected to arrive in school by 6.30 am in the morning. Bullying from school was referenced to but not to a great extent probably because there was security in reporting the bullies to the teachers.

4.0 Key Implications from the Findings

From the findings in this study, a few deductions were arrived at. First, patriarchy was seen to be strong in Tharaka North Sub-county, making the girls feel less important and disadvantaged. Second, poverty is rampant in the area, which results in some parents feeling desperate and not prioritizing educating their children, especially girls, who are already disadvantaged by patriarchy. Third, cultural systems/practices like FGM and early marriages are still strong in Tharaka North Sub-county and hinder the girls' attempts to pursue education. Fourth, due to a lack of information on health matters, some girls are less exposed to knowledge on menstruation and sexual matters, and as a result, some end up getting pregnant, while others treat menstrual cycle like a disadvantage in their lives. Fifth, girls in day schools experience gender-based violence, name calling and

whistling as they travel the long distances needed to access the secondary schools that are scattered in Tharaka North Sub-county.

5.0 Recommendations

From the findings of this study, we realized that a series of follow up activities are needed for this study to benefit the girls in Tharaka North Sub-county and the community at large. In this case, if more funds are available, the researchers shall carry out the following activities:

First, facilitate brainstorming sessions with education officials in the county, Board of Management (BOMS) of the schools and the Parent Associations (PAs) for purposes of working together to develop the most effective modalities of carrying out the dissemination of the girls' feedback from the research.

Second, engage school BOMs and parents in conversations on the importance of offering both boys and girls equal educational opportunities to enable them realize their full potentials. This shall be done by holding meetings in the schools. This means that it is essential to create sensitization forums for parents and guardians in schools, on the importance of girls' education as a future solution to the situation.

Third, the researchers shall initiate mentorship and support systems in schools in Tharaka North Sub-county to help boost girls' self-esteem. This shall be done as a follow up activity from the research, through getting successful female role models to hold sensitization seminars for the secondary school girls. Such support systems will also be enhanced by provision of sanitary pads for girls and sensitization of parents and elder siblings to educate girls on health matters. In addition, during these follow up activities, we will recommend to parents to consider taking girls to boarding schools to help reduce sexual harassment to and from school. This means that the team will also need to consult with the education officers in the Sub-county to sell the idea of urging the Ministry of Education to support education for girls in Tharaka North Sub-county by increasing the number of boarding schools for girls in the area.

Fourth, the researchers will write a policy brief to propose to the County and National government to look into ways of promoting economic empowerment for parents in Tharaka North Sub-county, perhaps through cash transfer programmes in the area in order to reduce poverty levels. Economic empowerment will boost the parents' ability to educate their children and there will be lesser cases of early marriages or equating girls to property. More so, economic empowerment has the possibility of boosting these parents' self-esteem and will result to them being more responsible in their households.

Fifth, during the follow up meetings the research team shall hold workshops to train religious leaders and community volunteers who will in turn be expected to hold community sensitization meetings to address and help eliminate negative cultural beliefs like FGM and marrying off girls at an early age. When such campaigns are supported by local leaders, it will help reduce or eliminate stereotypes of attaching too much importance on acquisition of dowry at the expense of the girls' education.

Sixth, the school heads in the area need much more support by including more in-service training and opportunities to share experiences to help the girl child access education with the same ease as the boy child.

Seventh, depending on availability of funds we plan to document the stories from the girls and publish them in a book so that these stories can be heard all over the world.

6.0 Conclusions

To achieve universal gender equity, communities should be sensitized on the need to give both boys and girls equal opportunities to realize their full potential, in line with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 (SDGs 4 & 5). Girls in Tharaka North Sub-county also require a forum to voice their problems. From our study the girls learnt that at least there is somebody who they can open up to and tell their stories. The use of literacy clubs was important in this study because sharing of experiences empowers the girls as they get to know they are sharing a common cause and in the process, building their resilience.

7.0 Authors

Colomba Muriungi is a Professor of African Literature in the Department of Humanities, and also the Director, Quality Assurance at Chuka University, Kenya. Colomba has previously worked as a lecturer at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, and she specializes in Gender Studies, Cultural Studies and Children's Literature. She has a vast experience in research and has published thirty-one (31) Journal articles, two (2) book chapters, attended learned conferences and presented papers. Her co-edited book with the title *Cultural Archives of Atrocity: Essays on the Protest Tradition in Kenyan Literature, Culture and Society* was published by Routledge in 2019. Additionally, Colomba has won grants through proposal writing, whereby some grants were utilized in research work, while others went into facilitating needy students to complete their studies. Colomba has also supervised many students at Masters and PhD Level to graduation, reviewed papers for publication and also participated in a number of community empowerment programmes. She holds a doctorate in African Children's literature (2006) and Master of Arts in Literature (2003), both from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and a Bachelor of Education (Arts) from Kenyatta University (1998), Nairobi.

George Andima is a lecturer in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the Kisii University in Kenya. Prior to taking up his current position he was a postdoctoral fellow at the institute for Human Development Aga Khan University, Kenya. At Kisii University, Andima has participated in designing, implementing and evaluating program efficacy in his department and he is a supervisor and mentor in the education student-teacher program. Andima has worked extensively in early grade literacy interventions among the most disadvantaged communities in Kenya. His expertise in the aforementioned include; designing of training manuals, training, oversight and mentorship on the use of child friendly instructional strategies for literacy development. Andima has a PhD in language education from Kenyatta University, a Masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction and an undergraduate degree in Education from Egerton University. Andima has facilitated instructional training programmes for university lecturers who do not have an educational background in Kisii University and for Kenya school of law (2009 to date).

8.0 Works Cited

Aderinto, Adeyinka, A. "Patriarchy and Culture: The Position of Women in a Rural Yoruba Community, Nigeria". *The Anthropologist*, Vol 3, Issue 4, 17th Oct. 2017, pp. 225-230. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09720073.2001.11890719, Accessed on 19th Nov, 2019.

Akala, Beatrice. **"**Gender inequality in education is still an issue in Kenya and South Africa". *The Conversation,* November 2019. https://theconversation.com/gender-inequality-in-education-is-still-an-issue-in-kenya-and-south-africa-125747. Accessed on 28th April, 2020.

Chege, Fatuma. N. and Daniel, Sifuna, N. *Girls' and Women's Education in Kenya: Gender Perspectives and Trends.* UNESCO, 2006.

Fundi, Martin. "Gender PS pledges 140 million sanitary towels for schoolgirls by August". Online *Star Newspaper*. 2018. www.the-star.co.ke/news/2018/04/23/gender-ps-pledges-140-million-sanitary-towels-for-schoolgirls-by_c1748221. Accessed on 13th May, 2018.

Hall, Samuel. "Increasing the Access and Quality of Basic Education for Marginalized Girls in Faryab". *An Educational Baseline Survey for ACTED*". May, 2014. www.samuelhall.org/, Accessed on 3rd March, 2019.

Icheria, Beatrice, K. "A Social Narrative on Tharaka People in Kenya, Africa". IJHSSE. Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 49-55. www.arcjournals.org, Accessed on 4th March, 2020.

Joshua Project People and Language Detail Report: The Tharaka of Kenya, 1994. joshuaproject.net/assets/media/profiles/text/t15463_ke.pdf, Date of access 20th April, 2018.

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) and Society for International Development (SID), 2013. docplayer.net/amp/67099792-2013-kenya-national-bureau-of-statistics-knbs-and-society-for-international-development-sid.html

Komora, Mwanahamisi. G. Challenges Facing the Education of the Girl Child in Kenya: A Case Study on Experiences and Views of Girls in Galole Constituency of Tana River County, Kenya. MA Thesis, University of Nairobi, 2014.

Madiba, Sphiwe&NomsaNgwenya. "Cultural practices, gender inequality and inconsistent condom use increase vulnerability to HIV infection: narratives from married and cohabiting women in rural communities in Mpumalanga province, South Africa", *Global Health Action*, 10:sup2, 2017. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28678650, Accessed on 19th November, 2019.

Mudau T.J. &Obadire O.S. "The Role of Patriarchy in Family Settings and its Implications to Girls and Women in South Africa". *Journal of Human Ecology*, 58:1-2, 2017, pp. 67-72. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09709274.2017.1305614, Accessed on 19th November, 2019.

Muhindi, Dedan Muriithi. Challenges facing the implementation of free secondary education: A case study of Nyeri South District, Nyeri County. 2012. Unpublished M.Ed Thesis of Kenyatta University Kenya.

Muyaka. Jafred. "Community Environment and Education of Girls: The Case of Communities in Marsabit County, Kenya". *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 6(3), 2018, pp, 430-439. www.hrpub.org, Accessed on 22nd November, 2019.

Omondi, Fleming L. Representation of Women in Kenyan Parliament: What is the Role of Women Representatives?Online publication, 2013. https://www.academia.edu/11935621/Representation_of_Women_in_Kenyan_Parliament_What_is_the_Role_of_Women_Representatives. Accessed on 28th April, 2020.

Nagra, Baljit. "Cultural Explanations of Patriarchy, Race, and Everyday Lives: Marginalizing and "Othering" Muslim Women in Canada'. „*Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 38:2, 2018, pp. 263-279. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13602004.2018.1466488?journalCode=cjmm20, Accessed on 19th November, 2019

Nelly, Stromquist Educating Women: the political economy of patriarchal states, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 1:1-2, 1991, pp. 111-128. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0962021910010107, Accessed on 19th November, 2019.

Patel Nirav and Genevieve Jesse. African States' Varying Progress toward Gender Equality in Education. *African in Focus*, 13th June 2019. Accessed on 28th April 2020.

UN Report, Brazil. *Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals,* 2017. sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/brazil, Accessed on 21st November, 2019.

UN Report *Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women* (UNWOMEN), 2015. www.refworld.org/publisher/UNWOMEN.html, Accessed on 21st November, 2019.

UNESCO. *Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4.* Unesco, 2016. www.uis.unesco.org, Accessed on 4th Mar. 20.

USAID Report. *Promoting Gender Equality and Access to Education*, 2017. www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment/addressing-gender-programming/promoting-gender, Accessed on 22nd November, 2019.

USAID Report, Kenya *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment,* 2019. www.usaid.gov/kenya/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-kenya, Accessed on 21st November, 2019.

World Bank Report. *Investing in Women is Vital to Ending Poverty, Boosting Needed Growth*, 2015. www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/07/14/investing-women-vital-ending-poverty-boosting-needed-growth, Accessed on 22nd November, 2019.