

Gender Issues Affecting the Girl Child in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of Kenyan children with a special emphasis to the girl child. The paper brings out some major gender concern that affect the girl child in Kenya. The main question of this paper is how can the girl child in Kenya escape the effect of the gender issues that tend to affect the girl Child's present and later stage of adulthood. The paper found out that Kenya girl Child is adversely affected by gender issues ranging from female genital mutilation, early marriage, girl child drops out of school since most parents prefer educating the boy child rather the girl child when faced with financial constraints, sexual abuse and gender based labor division which affect the girl child school performance since the girls fail to competitively do their school given home work.

Key words: Child, Female Genital Mutilation, Sexual Abuse, Child labour, Early Marriage

1. Introduction

This is case study paper that examines the gender issues that affect the girl child in Kenya. The main objective is to bring to the centre of analysis the experiences of Kenyan girl child through autobiographic and ethnographic research methods. The paper remained focused on answering the question of what are the current and future effects of the gender issues that affect the girl child in Kenya. The paper focuses on Kajiado district of Kenya where the reality of gender issues associated with multiple social cultural concern is highly felt.

1.1 Placing the study within the literature

Kenyan children and especially the girl child continue to experience numerous problems associated with gender factors, Kenyan girl child suffer violation of human right as a result of these gender related abuses. Gender refers to socially constructed roles for male and female (as opposed to sex which denotes the biological distinction between males and females. (De Safg'e 200: xix). Children in this case are those under 18 years of age.

The same definition is provided by the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, the African charter on the rights of the child and the Kenyan children's act 2001 of the laws of Kenya (ANPPCAN 2004:18). Some key gender issues that affect children in Kenya are female genital mutilation, gender bias usually in favor of boys against girls, moranism, a practice in which boys stay in isolated places (bush or forest) for a certain period as requirement to attain manhood.(ANPPCAN 2004: 22). The later practice affects boy child by denying the opportunity to acquire education the communities that embrace this practice have a huge number of illiterate men. A good example can be seen among the Maasai and Samburu among others whose youngsters serve as watchmen in the city for lack of education. Issues such as education of girls are also major gender issue. The following already mentioned gender issues will be discussed.

1.1.2. Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation is often referred to as female circumcision. Population council (2007:73) estimates that in the year 2003, thirty two percent of Kenyan women had been genitally cut compared to forty percent in 1998. Save the children Kenya (207:21) also adds value in this subject by pointing out that female genital mutilation is the most harmful cultural practice that contributes to easy marriage.

Female genital mutilation as a gender issue in Kenya impacts negatively upon girl child. Girls in areas where FGM is practiced suffer common problems associated with it, such as early marriage, dropping out of school and other numerous physical and psychological type of sufferings. Gachiri (2001:147) reveals that female genital mutilation is practiced in more than that fifty percent of Kenyans district with tribes such as Samburu , Kenya Somalis, and Gabra circumcising 101 percent of the women

The following statement stresses the seriousness of FGM as child abuse to girls.

“The impact of all types of FGM on girls and women is wide ranging and the practice compromises the enjoyment of human rights including the right to life, the right to physical integrity the right to the highest attainable standard of health including with maturity, reproductive and sexual health as well as the right to freedom from physical or mental violence injury or abuse. The practice is also a violation of the rights of the child to development, protection and participation” (UNICEF 2005: 15)

UNICEF (as quoted by Mwit 2006: 57) suggest following key essentials that can help in the abandoning of this practice.

- Increasing empowerment of Human rights and empowering of girls and women.
- Creating an environment that enables and supports the change required.

Female Genital Mutilation remains a major gender issue affecting girl child in Kenya. More measures need to taken to arrest the situation.

1.1.2 Early Marriage

Early marriage means marriage or cohabitation with a child or any arrangement made for such marriage or cohabitation (NCCS, 2007:15). This practice affect girl child in numerous ways. UNICEF & GOK, 1998:53) points out that child bride are common in Kenya. The child bride is denied the love and care of her family. The girl child in this situation is exposed to trauma causing sexual experiences and also after the break up with the child brides ends up destitute in the streets or as barmaids and possibly sex workers GOK & UNICEF (1998:53) Mwit (2006:88) laments that statistics indicate that girls in rural areas are more likely to be married by the time they turn 18 years, than their peers who live in urban areas. She correctly maintains that this practice is fully supported by some communities because of their tradition and cultural orientation. Mwit(2007:88) reveals that this cultural practice of early marriage is common in Kilifi, Busia, Kisumu and most part of North Eastern Kenya.

The National Council for children’s services (NCCS 2007) reveals some of the following as reasons for early marriage.

- To preserve and ensure virginity before marriage
- To control promiscuity
- For economic reasons such as acquiring dowry or bride price
- Development of social status –especially for the father and the ‘old man’ marrying young girls.

As earlier stated this gender related violation of the rights of the girl child is a major concern in Kenya. Measures should be taken by the government to sensitize communities through print and electronic media. The law enforcement agencies such as the police and the provincial administration should be trained to investigate and enforce the law where early marriage has taken place. NGO’s, CBO’s and local administration should play a role of educating the conservative communities of the dangers of marrying off children.

1.1.3 Education

Education of girl child is a major issue in Kenya. Despite the many gains realized in education the education sector, such as free education, boys are still much ahead of girls in enrolment especially at secondary schools and colleges. A study conducted by GOK & UNICEF (1998:75) revealed that in the 8 provinces of Kenya more boys received secondary education compared to girls.

The study is a clean demonstration of the gender bias, where by most parents will prefer to educate sons rather than a girl child. Also a data from Kwale district education office showing primary school gross enrollment ratio, show more girls’ dropout of primary schools with the increasing age. Researchers pointed out to the problem of early marriage and teenage pregnancy as the ones accounting for some of this high drop- out (UNICEF/GOK 2006: 30).

The drop-out was (10.6%) boys and 12.3% for girls. Pupil drop out in Kwale peaks during the later years of primary school, as stated reflecting the withdrawal of children from school due to early marriage or pregnancy. The education of girl child is not taken very seriously by some parents, schools and even some policy makers. There should be effort made to ensure no girl child is denied education by the parents. Culprits responsible for impregnating school girls should be given severe penalties.

Also schools should be girl child friendly. This should be ensured through provision of counselors for them. Harassment to girls by male teachers should be dealt with seriously. Provision of well furnished wash rooms with relevant toiletries and flowing water should be provided. Also Proper mechanism to monitor the enrollment and dropout rate of girls should be put in place.

1.1.4 Sexual Abuse

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual abuse as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, unable to give informed consent to or for which the child is not developmentally prepared for or else that violets the law or social taboos of society (Save the children Kenya, 2007: 19)

Sexual abuse occurs when adults or older children exploit their power, authority or position and use female children to gratify their own sexual needs (NCCS 2007; 45). Sexual abuse is a major gender issue affecting girl child in Kenya. According to Child Right Advisory Documentation and Legal Centre (CRADLE), (quoted by Mwiti 2006: 144) between march 2004 and September 31st 2004, the Nairobi women hospital a gender recovery centre had attended to a thousand and ninety seven survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence, of these forty percent were cases of child sexual abuse. Mwiti (2006: 145) reveals that other statistics indicate that incest accounts for 74.9% of girls sexually abused .

There are many forms of sexual abuse prevalent among Kenyan Children. This are abuses such as child prostitution. Save the children Kenya (2007: 19) reports that child prostitution has been in the rise in the past. The report reveals that UNICEF estimates that some ten thousand to thirty thousand children are being exploited in the sex industry. Studies revealed that there are many children involvement in the child prostitution in the country but hardly is the number known due to secrecy involvement in the activity (save the children Kenya, 2007: 190.) Mwiti (2006: 147) reveals that a survey done by child welfare society of Kenya in Mombasa, Malindi, Kilifi, Kiambuu and Busia disclosed that Mombasa ranks highest in child prostitution with 600 cases. Sexual abuse which range from pornography, rape to child prostitution is a major gender concern which should be advised by all actors in the community. The state bears the major role in eliminating sexual abuse of girl child.

The sexually offences Act 2006 should be enforced by law enforcement agents. There should be adequate training of the police officials and provincial administration on this sexual offences Act for the purpose of ensuring effectiveness among the officers.

The community should be trained through chief's barazas. Women groups and youth groups should also be educated on what entails sexual offence. In their training, there should be adequate information on the physical, social, emotional and psychological effects of sexual abuse on children.

1.1.5 Gender based labour division

Gender based labour discussion occurs when particular roles are assigned to a particular sex. In this case the view of women as the appropriate domestic workers has affected girls. Most girls in Kenya are suffering the effects of child domestic labour. Many girls are relied upon to work in urban households. Domestic child workers are driven to this situation by poverty, some at a very young age. Child labour survey done by save the children Kenya (2007:32) indicates that the child domestic work is a serious child concern in Nairobi. According to the report girls aged nine to ten years are often taken from Nairobi Soweto slums in Kayole to work in the neighboring Umoja, Dandora and Komarock estates. The report further states that these child workers still end up getting exploited as many are not paid anything at all, if they complain they are dismissed or the employer accuses them of stealing. They are also overworked and in some instances sexually abused. When women are denied access to income generating processes children are affected. Sen and Grown (1998:116) argue that if the goals of development includes improved standards of living, removal of poverty, access to dignified employment and reduction in societal inequality, then it is quite natural to start with women.

Sen and Grown further emphasizes that women's work is vital to the survival and ongoing reproduction of human beings in all societies and especially in healthcare and child rearing.

When women are economically and socially disadvantaged, children feel the impact, but when the women are granted their rights to access means of production, the major beneficiaries are children. Koos 2000:60 points out that cultural or religious norms in the society may block the role of women in the society. He argues that in these cases women are left without meaningful political and economic rights. In Kenya the unemployment and lack of stable income among women has contributed to street children phenomenon as well as other abuses of children such as labour, prostitution of the girl child among other problems. Koos 200:60 further points out gender income inequality begins from childhood when a girl child is denied education, making her less competitive in the labour market. He maintains that woman lack of education leaves her with few options in the labour market. Mukhopadhyay (2001:14) states that there is evidence to suggest that economic resources under the control of male heads of household do not necessarily translate into well being for women and children. She argues that independent ownership of such resources by women especially land, can be critical in promoting the wellbeing of the family.

3.0 Conclusions

It is worth noting that Kenya has a lot of gender related violation of children human rights. All the mentioned gender issues affect the girl child. Failing to grant the rights of the girl child in childhood affects the child in the future life.

The girls involved in female genital mutilation suffer the effect of these practice by excessive bleeding some bleeding to death. Those that survive suffer the trauma for long period extending to their marriage life. The state and other stakeholders should put mechanisms in place to stamp out the practice especially among the Somali, Samburu, Maasai among other people groups where it is rampant. Sensitizing the communities involved as well as giving severe penalties to those involved should be prioritized by the state.

Early marriage is form of physical and sexual abuse of the girl child who suffer the physical and emotional pain that goes with the practice. The sensitizing of communities practicing early marriage should be carried out by the government and donor communities. Adequate fund should be set aside to ensure training of the local administrators while the school teachers are also used to monitor and report the incidences to the authorities. Reliable rescue centers should be develop d to house girls rescued from early marriage.

The sexual abuse violations should be addresses by training the Kenyan tourist police to be vigilant and report, arrest and ensure prosecution of those involved in child prostitution especially in tourist hotels. Rehabilitation centers should be set aside by local authorities to ensure the girls are counseled and taken back to schools, this should go hand in hand with program of supporting the poor families who vulnerable enough to late their girls engage in child prostitution to earn living.

The numerous issues affecting the girl child ranging from issues of education, to girl child labour especially at domestic level will require conceited efforts by the govern, community and the Non Governmental organizations to champion the rights of the girl child especially those at the marginalized remote communities of Kenya. Failure to effectively address the key gender issues will main the women and mothers of Kenya remain vulnerable since sound development to quality life in adulthood will not be realized.

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