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Could Boys be Lagging Behind?

“I don’t know how I can put it, but for boys there is a lot to be done. I don’t know if it is from my area, or it is the whole country, but for boys, there is a lot to be done for the boys.”

Primary school teacher, Kwale County, Kenya



Male students in elementary school listen to their teachers in Kenya (© 2007 Aude Guerrucci)

While working on a research project in Kenya, we had the opportunity to collect qualitative data from primary school teachers. Working on randomized evaluations and in primary data

collection more broadly, we often come across new and emerging trends: some directly pertinent to our studies while others tangentially related. One day, we were assessing the impact of an educational text messaging service and we were interested in learning more about different users' experiences. When we planned these qualitative interviews, I had anticipated that teachers might be concerned for girls' welfare. Girls face unique threats and challenges. Research on previous negative shocks such as the Ebola epidemic highlighted how vulnerable girls can be. School closures in particular put girls at risk. Sure enough, many teachers in our interviews noted that when schools reopened, they observed an increase in early marriage and pregnancy, and that many of these girls did not return to school. What I hadn't anticipated was how often teachers would bring up boys' education—a topic that kept coming up.

Our interview took place around the return to school, following the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures and an additional school holiday. We asked teachers about children's academic performance. Half of the teachers we interviewed reported that girls were doing better than boys. One teacher responded, "We were surprised that the mean score of girls was better than the mean score of boys" and later, in relation to girls' comparatively higher performance on Kenya's standardized exam, "It is as if it is a school for girls. The girls led, and the boys tailed."

This same teacher had previously answered the question "Do you think that gender played a role in how children experienced the school closures?" by saying "I saw a big challenge especially on girls" and "The girls were the ones who were hard hit." Another teacher interpreted her school experience as an aberration, answering the question, "How did children perform in the last term?" with, "Boys performed better than girls. However, in our school, girls topped." The following exchange from one of our interviews illustrates a typical exchange:

Respondent: *Boys are lagging behind, yeah*

Interviewer: *And why is that?*

Respondent: *Eeh*

Interviewer: *Why is that, why are they lagging behind?*

Respondent: *(Laughing) I don't know. I don't know. Those who are performing well now are girls*

It seemed that teachers were grappling with the complexity of different gender narratives and dynamics, as well as their observations. I was reminded of a project I worked on more than ten years ago, where I found that in our sample of Ugandan primary schools, more boys were dropping out of school than girls. At that time, I wasn't able to find much other research or discussion about such a trend. This time, as I looked into the issue related to our study in Kenya, it seemed that in an increasing number of low- or middle-income country contexts,

gender gaps that favor girls were being recognized. In fact, at this point, in all regions and almost all countries around the world, rates of learning poverty or being unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten, are now higher for boys than for girls.

I reached out to my colleague, Victoria Kiasyo Isika from our policy team to learn from her experience and research expertise on gender. Together, we worked to analyze the qualitative data from this study in Kenya and we wrote up our findings in a working paper. We discuss a range of different issues and how they relate to our data, such as girls' potential relationships with older partners and children's chores and responsibilities. We also describe a few key takeaways.

First, girls still face many specific challenges that significantly affect their education. Even if there is a population of girls who are scoring relatively well on learning assessments, other girls might still be struggling, and averages can also conceal important variations. Research across East Africa has found that though girls on average have higher learning levels than boys, there is important subnational variation, including in Kenya.

Additionally, even if girls' comparative performance on academic outcomes is improving, there is still the need to address interrelated but broader societal concerns such as violence against women and girls, and even when an educational advantage for girls has been documented for years, as in contexts like South Africa, this has not translated into later labor market success.

Second, we need more research, data, and investigation into boys' lives and education. In our interviews, teachers brought up several issues in their discussion of boys, from drugs and alcohol to disco *matangas* (funeral parties to celebrate the departed), to *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) and other income-generating opportunities, but often teachers appeared to be speculating. Multiple teachers admitted that they did not know what might explain the trends and dynamics they had observed.

Increasing attention to boys' education should not detract from continuing efforts to support girls, and should not be framed in opposition to girls' education. It is critically important that work to understand and address the challenges that boys face does not feed into backlash to girls' perceived advancement, a dynamic that we identified in our interviews. One teacher in our sample, for example, described the need to support boys by saying, "When we talk about the male gender (...) I think a lot has to be done to bring them back to the society the way it used to be. Focus is given to the female gender giving the male gender to be sidelined. So this has led to the discouraging of this gender." This kind of framing could undermine the important advances that have been made in girls' education, and also inaccurately presents the work to address gender gaps in education as a zero-sum tradeoff.

There is an inspiring body of evidence that shows that educational intervention can improve learning among both boys and girls. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that patriarchal systems and certain social norms can negatively impact both boys and girls. Understanding these dynamics will require investigation and research on multiple levels: in-depth, contextualized, and local research, as well as analysis of higher-level regional and

global trends. Comparing these different perspectives will help illuminate the complexity and nuance of these issues.

In a recent [webinar](#), we started a conversation on the topic of emerging trends in gender gaps and highlighted local, regional, and global perspectives. Victoria and I presented our qualitative research from Kenya, Rebecca Thornton of Baylor University presented [Boys Lagging Behind: Unpacking Gender Differences in Academic Achievement across East Africa](#), and Laura Gregory presented [Educational Underachievement Among Boys and Men](#). We also learned insights and policy perspectives from Kenya and Zambia. A key takeaway from our discussion was the importance of recognizing the complexity and nuance of these issues and the need for more data and research. We look forward to continuing this conversation!