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Stereotyping of the girl learner within the context of gender equality in education: A cultural perspective

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Abstract

Culture is instrumental in any given society for its own good. However, culture can also be detrimental to gender equality especially as regards education of the girl-child today through stereotyping of the girl-child. Over the years, education policy has focused on access and equality; but the enrollment gap between girls and boys are not being closed. The purpose of this study was to give an understanding of how cultural stereo-typing among pastoral communities has been an impediment in the realization of equity in Basic Education in Kenya. The study using the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Qualitative approach established that cultural stereotyping of the girl child contributes to gender inequality in education among the Turkana community. The study recommends a cultural change in communities and households in respond to social and economic changes and development experienced in education in the country in the last two decades.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Cultural Change; Basic Education; Stereotyping; Child Early Pregnancy; Child Early Marriage

1. Introduction

Stereotyping of the girl learner remains a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in education, particularly within communities where deeply rooted cultural practices and social norms perpetuate inequality. This study explores the stereotyping of the girl learner from a cultural perspective, focusing on its impact on educational opportunities in the Turkana community. In many traditional settings, gender roles and responsibilities assigned to girls often hinder their access to and participation in education, reinforcing societal perceptions that prioritize domestic and reproductive roles over academic and professional aspirations.

Among the Turkana community, practices such as child early marriage further exacerbate these challenges, limiting educational attainment and perpetuating cycles of poverty and gender inequality. These cultural norms and practices not only shape perceptions about the value of educating girls but also contribute to systemic barriers that undermine their potential.

This study seeks to shed light on the intersection of cultural practices and gender-based stereotypes, specifically focusing on how social norms and child early marriage contribute to the stereotyping of girl learners. By examining these factors, the research aims to highlight the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions that promote gender equality in education.

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1.1. Statement Problem

In Kenyan, 23% of young girls are married before their eighteenth birthday celebration and 4% are married before the age of 15. As per UNICEF report, Kenya has the twentieth most noteworthy outright number of adolescent girls getting married [1]. Cultural norms and beliefs about gender roles can shape educational opportunities for girls as in some cultures, girls can be expected to prioritize household duties over education based on traditional gender roles and child early marriage. Has the creation of stereotyping of the girl-child resulted in gender disparities in educational attainment between boys and girls? This study aimed at filling the gap that exists in gender disparity in education by examining the social norms and practices of the Turkana community in Kenya.

1.1.1. Objectives of the study

- To identify social norms and practices that contribute to gender roles and responsibilities that create girl-child stereotyping among the Turkana community
- To explain the role of child early marriage in creating gender inequality in education arising from girl-child stereotyping among the Turkana community

1.2. Theoretical Basis

The social identity theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970's. The theory explains how individuals define themselves based on groups they belong. The Social Identity theory explores how group membership and social categorization impact an individual's behavior. Within the context, individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group membership, such as gender or cultural identity. This theory is applicable in carrying out an examination on how cultural stereotyping affects girl's education opportunities, self-esteem and gender inequality in education.

Cultural norms and beliefs about gender roles can shape educational opportunities for girls. In some cultures, girls can be expected to prioritize household duties over education based on traditional gender roles. This can lead to disparities in educational attainment between boys and girls. Moreover, stereotypes and prejudices related to gender can impact girl's access to educational resources and opportunities. If society views girls as less capable, they may not be encouraged to pursue education. Additionally, social comparisons plays a role in social identity theory as girls may compare themselves to others in their cultural group and internalize perceived limitations on educational achievement. The social identity theory can help policy makers and educators address cultural barriers to girl's educational opportunities. By challenging stereotypes, promoting gender equality, and providing resources to support girl's education, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

2. Literature Review

Stereotypes are defined as a universal generalization about a social group [2]. The concept of "gender stereotype" had existed and developed for a long time. And the definition of this concept had been discussed by many scholars. Scholars had formed different understandings based on their research. For instance, Marsden agrees that gender stereotypes are beliefs or assumptions about gender that have been rigid, simplified, and generalized. That gender stereotypes ignore the differences between people of the same gender role [3]. While Wei and Chen argue that gender stereotypes are relatively fixed views and concepts of male and female gender that people widely accepted [4]. A recent article published by the United Nations Human Rights defines gender stereotype as a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men [5]. It can be concluded from all the definitions above that there is a universal and consistent understanding of gender stereotypes. The concept of gender stereotype refers to a generalized and fixed view of the gender between boys and girls or men and women.

According to [6] the word gender was first used by Anne Oakley and associates in the 1970s to describe those characteristic behaviour and roles that we acquire through socialization. Gender is dynamic and culturally determined. Equity is the provision of equal opportunities to citizens irrespective of gender, religion, social class and ethnic affiliation. Researchers claim that experiences, feedbacks, and models presented by environment where one grow up are effective in gender differentiation among children [7].

Gender stereotypes are defined attitudes and behaviors that society expects from women and men or boys and girls [8] and stereotypes pressures people to adhere to these expectations. The belief that boys and girls should behave differently entails expectations for children to assume different roles [9]. Therefore, social expectations limiting the activities men and women do can have an important role in the formation of sex role identification of an individual. The

acquisition of gender roles starts at early ages [9]. Family is the primary structure determinant in gender-specific behaviors and in the development of gender roles. Parents make an effort for their children to adopt traditional gender roles. These approaches cause children to learn this distinction earlier and parents convey these beliefs and anticipations by modeling, pressure, or teaching in socialization process [10, 11]. Some traditional stereotypical judgments may cause inequalities in the formation of social gender perception. For this reason, it is important for parents to be role models for their children from birth and to raise individuals sensitive to gender equality. Researchers suggest that adults should act consciously and be cautious when modeling against gender roles, beliefs and behaviors of children [11]. Moreover, most of these differences are completely social and cultural, rather than biological.

Another social structure effective in the reshaping of gender is the education environment [12]. Early childhood is said to be the period when the stereotypes are structured quickly. Being specific to this period, children are observed to frequently exaggerate certain behaviors related to gender and make a serious effort to implement the gender roles [13]. Children's beliefs based on the stereotypes are strengthened in this period, and children tend to be firmly attached to these beliefs [14]. It is therefore expected from pre-school teachers to encourage children to develop their thoughts on gender differences and establish gender identity.

Children try to shape their social behaviors with cultural structure, by being affected by what they are told or by reflecting what they observe because they are not mature enough to conceptualize them on their own, while acquiring or shaping sex-specific behaviors [13]. During this period in which the gender schema develops, children improve their cognitive capacities by creating rules that determine what is the most appropriate for women and men [15]. At an early stage as two or three years of age, as soon as one realizes what his or her gender is, children are given stereotypical behaviors by their own cultural experiences. During this process, they realize their identity by attributing a meaning to themselves and others [10; 14].

Throughout history, gender stereotype has been universal and potentially threatening. For instance, Simon Baron Cohen, a Cambridge University psychologist, stated that "males are good at leadership, decision-making and achievement, while females are suited for making friends, mothering, gossiping and 'reading your partner" [16]. This claim was based on a study conducted in 2000 [17]. However, this study has never been replicated, nor has it appeared in a peer- reviewed journal.

Gender stereotypes refer to the general views, expectations, and requirements about male and female's behavior on personality, characteristics and other aspects. Gender stereotypes may cause people to oversimplify their understanding of gender groups with wrong views. Gender stereotypes exaggerate the differences between males and females, lead to a kind of discrimination against a certain group, or cause people to lose their individuality. It is vital to eliminate gender stereotypes for individual and societal development [18].

Gender stereotypes had unconsciously seeped into every aspect of our lives, even education. Education is one of the most important factors for the development of individuals and society. However, gender stereotypes are constraining different gender groups from getting an equal education quality. The most threatening consequence is that gender stereotypes are easy to be accepted and imitated by learners, and then the next generation forms stereotyped gender concepts. Once stereotypes are formed, it has a significant and negative effect on children's development.

Adolescent is a critical period for the development of self-cognition. Erikson identified adolescence as a period of identity vs. identity confusion [19]. He believed that during this stage, individuals will evaluate their previous experience, social expectations and aspirations in establishing values and "finding themselves" [19]. According to Erikson, getting contradictory information about an adolescent's gender role may lead to role confusion for a lifetime. Otherwise, if they get misleading characteristics about their identity, it may lead to a negative self-cognition for their entire life. Therefore, it is important to find gender stereotypes that will negatively influence adolescent girls and minimize their impact.

In an educational setting, the gender bias has far reaching effect. The biases regarding gender are in fact the result of gender stereotype that exist in the society [20]. Education is one of the most crucial factors in personal growth and social progress. The period of adolescence is crucial for the development of self-cognition 21]. Gender stereotypes are the result of family culture and influences of the social culture. Gender stereotypes can affect children's self-confidence, academic achievement and future career choice.

Family is the first place of education for children. Parents as the children's first teachers, have an influential impact on children's gender concepts. Parents, consciously or unconsciously, pass on their own gender stereotypes to children. Parents often treat girls and boys differently. Girls are mostly dressed in pink by parents and are more likely to be

encouraged to choose toys such as dolls and kitchenware. In contrast, boys are dressed in blue clothing and most of their toys are cars and robots, and are criticized for playing with girls' toys [22]. Girls receive more gender-stereotyped toys as a result of the way in which children are treated, and as a result, these kids develop differently. Sarkar found that parents with gender stereotypes have a positive and supportive attitude toward the education of boys, while their attitude toward the education of girls has dramatically deteriorated [23].

In most Chinese families, parents follow the traditional role division of "male master outside, female master inside". Specifically, the father in a traditional family is responsible for working, while the mother spends more time doing housework [24]. Roles that parents play will lead to the gender stereotype of teenagers. Especially for girls, as they believe that they are going to undertake the main responsibility of looking after the family like their mothers in the future, they think that women's education is not as important as men's, so they are not willing to work hard in school.

3. Results and Discussion

This qualitative study was based on two research objectives; to identify social norms and practices that contribute to gender roles and responsibilities that create girl-child stereotyping; and to explain the role of child early marriage in creating gender inequality in education among the Turkana community.

From several interviews among the study respondents, the girl-child among the Turkana people play a significant role in defining the wealth of the family and the community. The community do have several social norms and cultural practices that ensure the girl child is prepared for future marriage. Such practices as beading emerges immediately after birth and several beadings are done on the girl-child by the parents. The beading is a traditional practice where the girl child is beaded around the neck and the beaded skin hind (*eleu*) and the front beaded skin attire (*ekude*). 30-50 bundles of beads are worn by the girl-child around her neck and is said to be equivalent to about five camels.

Also several beautification and decorations are carried out among the Turkana people to make the girl more attractive to suitors and earn more for the family in marriage negotiations. These include; *Aremae* which is a beaded hanging from the neck beads towards the waist; *Ngitim* is a head gear; *Apene* a decoration on the hind wear; *eboli* is a beaded decoration and *Ngigel* which encompasses the traditional bangles. Further, *Eleu Loruat* is a wide beaded skin worn at the front and *Ngamuk* which are shoes made from animal hide. All these social practices associated with the traditional regalia of the girl child make one very expensive and their parents need a payback in terms of dowry equated to livestock. Different kinds of livestock are given by the bridegroom during the wedding.

The girl child is prepared from birth by the parents and moral values associated with the community taught. The moral uprightness of the girl will ensure that rich suitors will be ready to come for marriage negotiations. This shows that moral uprightness ensures one is courted for marriage. The girls belong to the community and they ensure that they grow up in a morally upright manner and responsible future women or wife. Girls are given due attention in the family when they enter into adolescent age. Several actions are undertaken by the family during this period that include; their brothers become their guides, they are slaughtered fat sheep to ensure they don't sleep hungry and sleep with their mothers in enclosed area.

Marriage ceremony is a community affair and several colorful rites are undertaken. Upon marriage negotiation being agreed, the ox is driven into the animal shed where it is speared by the suitor's father (*kicuma ta apakenge-ekile*). Several rites accompany the marriage ceremony and the girl is considered married when the bride wealth is transferred and rites such as spearing of the *ekumwa* marriage ox and the *Akinyonyo* garments exchange are concluded.

Girls who have gone to school are considered outcasts and not morally upright for their behavior have been corrupted and spoilt and many other derogative terms used to describe them. The parents of girls who have gone to school are not respected and not allowed to mix and share the same tree shade with men who have married off their daughters for wealth. Girls are associated with wealth and parents know that they have wealth in waiting when a girl is born in a family.

Girls who marry young drop out of school as indicated by low enrollment rates for all levels of education in rural compared to urban regions which is associated with cultural practices. Majority of girls are married off creating gender inequality in the community. The girls have been disadvantaged than the boys who are preferred by parents to continue with education. Boy/son preference in the community has stood as a social norm that create the situation of gender biases that significantly contribute to gender inequality in accessing education.

Gender social norms profoundly shape attitudes and social relationships in the community which has a contributory factor to girls accessing education. The place of the girl child in the community is that of a future wife whose role is to raise a family. The gender norms develops attitudes towards education specifically that relating to the girl child in the family. Parents prefer having their sons/boys attend school and resources are preferred to be allocated to boys than girls if a decision is to be made on who should attend school between the girl and boy. The differences between males and females in the community emerge and is embedded in the social norms that have created stereotyping in the community. The situation has led to a kind of discrimination of the girl child and contributes to them not being given the opportunity to go to school. Gender stereotypes has affected the girl's self-confidence and acceptance of their status resulting in low morale in their demand for education.

Parents have consciously or unconsciously passed on their own social norm gender stereotypes to children by treating girls and boys differently in the family. This makes children know what their parents' intentions are and girls due to the societal existing social norms grow up knowing the expectations. They grow knowing their destiny of being future wife and mother. The essence of motivation is killed by the family with the aftermath being failure of not going to school. Girls believe that they are going to assume the responsibility of taking care of the family like their mothers in the future. It disadvantages the girl child as it reduces the motivation of wanting to go to school even if they are of school age. More boys than girls attend school consequently creating gender inequality in the community.

Due to acceptable social norms in the community, child early marriage prevalence is high. Girls of very young age are married during early-adolescents age (13-15 years). Parents are ready to negotiate for dowry moments a suitor has shown interest in the daughter. It is an accepted practice that girls can be married off during their early adolescence and suitors are ready to pay the demanded dowry in order to have the girl as a wife.

4. Conclusion

Gender stereotyping have a positive and supportive attitude toward the education of boys, while the attitude towards the education of girls considerably deteriorates in the community. Girls are more sensitive to gender stereotype emanating from the social norms of their respective community and family. The social norms and cultural practices among the community, creates stereotyping of the girl-child with the resultant effect of them not accessing education compared to boys. The social norms and cultural practices encourage child early marriage in the community denying the girl-child the free education opportunity offered by the government.

Understanding the social norms and practices among the communities is an enabler to development of policy interventions and strategies to ensure that the girl-child is not denied education. Interventions are developed from situational analysis of communities so has to succeed in the implementation process. Culture can be used as a turn-around approach in the development and implementation of strategies in education. Understanding of the culture of a people is key in unlocking some of the challenges faced by governments in their efforts to create gender equity in education. From the study, homegrown interventions are key in addressing gender inequality in education in Kenya based on understanding the culture of the pastoral communities like the Turkana.

Social norms and practices is a contributor factor to child early marriage. The law cannot unlock this situation, but introduction of culture change is critical in this aspect. Ways and means of culture change based on adoption of the social norms and practices as an identity of a people should be encouraged. Not all social norms and practices are detrimental, but can be used to introduce change to the benefit of the community. The value of the girl-child by the community as the source of wealth can be utilized to change the mindset of families towards the girl-child as an investment with high returns in the future if they get education. Successful role-models is key to this endeavor of culture change in the community.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was sought from the respondents prior to collection of data.

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