

Whose Gender?: Exploring Representations in Kenyan Social Studies Textbooks

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Abstract

One of the United Nations' (UN) eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aims ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. Highlighting the need to educate girls, the UN asserts that meeting the Education Goal will speed progress toward every other Millennium Goal, asserting that educating children helps reduce poverty and promote gender equality. "It is inextricably linked to Goal 3 – gender parity – as universal primary education by definition requires gender parity."¹ Considering the Kenyan education system and its relatively recent introduction of free primary education (2003) and subsequent massive expansion of children's enrollment in the classroom, gender parity has been achieved with gross primary enrollment (ratio of female rate to male rate) is 0.96 and the ratio for net primary enrollment for females to males is 1.01.² The reality of the women of Kenya is that they remain underrepresented in virtually all areas of leadership and employment. Thus, if gender parity has been achieved in primary schools, what other possible factors are contributing to the discrepancies between UN rhetoric and the Kenyan reality? A UN assumption that physical presence in a classroom as the best way to alleviate poverty ignores the relevance of what the students are learning, which is codified in textbooks. This paper is a brief preliminary analysis of Kenyan Social Studies textbooks and will be the foundation for a larger project to follow, which will include conversations with Kenyan primary school students in three schools in Kitale, Western Kenya. Through content and situational analysis, this study will investigate Kenyan textbooks' ability to address issues of gender and whether they successfully break through or reinforce gender stereotypes. In an effort to reverse the process of female gender marginalization, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. According to the UN, the CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.³ The Office of UN High Commissioner on Human Rights notes that Kenya ratified CEDAW on March 9, 1984.⁴ To address these issues, in 2005, the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology created a point-based system focusing on the promotion of emerging issues, which included gender responsiveness. In order to get the Ministry's approval, every textbook must stress those emerging issues through both text and illustrations

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