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Introduction

Main Focus

This book is about women's perceptions of the uses of education in Kenya. It focuses on rural women's experiences of formal education in Kilome division, Makueni District, Kenya. The purpose of the study, which this book is based on, was to clarify the cultural, historical, social, economic, and political factors that have shaped and continue to shape women's educational and employment opportunities. Specifically, the study sought to highlight Kilome women's agency¹ in their struggle to offer their children—particularly their daughters—educational and economic opportunities.

My interest in a study of women's experiences of education and in Kilome division in particular, arose largely from my own experience growing up in this area. Mothers, most of whom were de facto heads of households, played a key role in the welfare and education of their children. They provided the material labor required to maintain their children in school, especially at the primary level (grades 1–7 or 8). In my case, I do not remember any one time when my father was able to attend the weekly parents' work sessions at school. (Parents fetched water and made bricks for building classrooms.) It was my mother who came to school to work and bought me the stationery I needed. She was the one who made sure I was in school when I was supposed to be. Women were overrepresented in the Wednesday parents' school work sessions. Nevertheless, these women's struggles to afford their children educational opportunities have not been acknowledged. Their struggles are shaped by the social, economic, and political contexts within which they operate.

To understand the women's contexts, it became important to understand their own educational journeys. The women narrated their stories in relation to education highlighting their experiences of formal education and the constraints they have faced, and continue to face, in Kenya today. Their narratives expose and draw attention to the gender and power issues that limit their participation in education and in the formal employment sector, issues that in general, exacerbate gender inequalities and the subordination of women individually and collectively. These are issues that policymakers, politicians, development agents, and educators do not adequately address or challenge. The women speak about their experiences from their standpoints.² Their material locations are shaped by ethnicity, gender, marital status, age, and region.

The women articulate their experiences relating to education in the past (their own) and in the present (their daughters), highlighting fears and hopes, and possibilities and constraints that structure their daily lives. They also articulate their experiences concerning labor, both paid and unpaid. This makes visible the increasing demand for women's labor as they intervene for their families' welfare within a harsh social, economic, and political climate (George, 1994; Mbilinyi, 1998; Mikell, 1997). The discussion of family and sexuality demonstrates women's perceptions of themselves, of their daughters, and of their roles in the family. The women do not define their agency simply around motherhood in the private sphere. As Stamp (1995) argues, women in rural African communities have multiple subjectivity as mothers, daughters, sisters, traders, and farmers, which is the bedrock of their agency in the Kenyan state today. Women's participation in self-help groups further highlights their collective agency. I construe the women's narratives as their private discourse on education, one that operates in the family and in the community.

I contrast the private discourse with the public discourse on education articulated in policy documents, highlighting the contradictions and similarities between the different narrative standpoints. The public discourse regarding the purpose of education of men and women in Kenya is set out by male politicians, policy makers, and international development agencies such as the World Bank. I analyzed educational and development related policy documents³ produced over the last thirty-year period to document the public discourse. Analysis of national development plans is important because education is viewed as an instrument of national development. The analysis of the private and public discourse on education makes visible women's agency and the systemic gender discrimina-

tion that women face in accessing educational and economic opportunities in Kenya.

Background

Education occupies a central position in the national development plans of many countries, including Kenya. Since independence in 1963, the government has set up several commissions and working parties to look into ways and means of structuring and restructuring education to meet the country's development needs and more importantly, to meet international financiers⁴ demands. They have recommended policies that have served to shape education and educational opportunities in Kenya. While women constitute over 50% of the population of Kenya, gender issues that limit their participation in education and in the economy have consistently remained invisible to policy makers. This has maintained the low representation of women in all levels of education and in the labor market, since educational qualifications are used as criteria for hiring for employment in most areas in the modern sector. The commissions that have been set up have emphasized the economic, rather than the social function of education.

Although the public discourse on education has expressed a commitment to providing education to all Kenyans, absent in this policy discourse has been the discussion of how gender has influenced opportunities available to men and women in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. Gender is a social, cultural, economic, and political construction of what it means to be a girl or a boy, or a woman or a man in a given context.⁵ It is a social process that ascribes characteristics and behaviors to women and men according to their sex (Eyre, 1993). Gender constructions of femininity have continued to limit educational opportunities made available to women in postcolonial Kenya.

In Kenya, men play a dominant role in all aspects of governance. Kenyan women have had difficulty penetrating the patriarchal decision-making structures and processes of the state and the party. Policy making, planning and development, and implementation of policies and programs in Kenya usually take the male perspective (Kibwana, 1992). The failure to address the impact of seemingly gender-neutral educational policies has reinforced gender inequities in educational opportunities, for instance, the implementation of the cost-sharing strategy, where parents have to pay for schooling, has increased women's work loads and intensified

their daughters' struggles for educational opportunities. The interplay between gendered cultural assumptions about femininity and the increased costs of schooling have a negative impact on women's education.

The formulation of policies from the male perspective also intensifies the public and private dichotomy⁶ on the basis of gender. Policy makers seem to confine the discourse on women's education to their agency in the private sphere. They do not view women as economic and political agents in the public sphere alongside men. This has led to the formulation of policies that have served to reinforce gender inequities in the public sphere. This thesis proceeds on the assumption that gender and power issues must be taken as fundamental categories within which human social relations are organized (Harding, 1986).

The government of Kenya professes to be committed to the provision of equal opportunities to all of its citizens irrespective of sex, race, and religion. The government also claims to be committed to addressing the unequal social, economic, and political status of women in Kenya. However, in reality, the government is resistant to gender issues, for example, women, who have voiced and articulated women's concerns, such as Professor Wangari Mathai, have frequently been met with severe and brutal repression. Mathai, the first female professor of veterinary medicine in Kenya, and founder of the world renowned environmental GreenBelt movement, has been arrested numerous times for challenging men's supremacy in making decisions that are gender biased and environmentally destructive. Women who attempt to exercise their political and economic agency in the public sphere are faced with a multitude of limitations. As Mathai observes, gender, marriage and ethnicity (among others) serve to limit women's agency contrary to the popular publicly promoted rhetoric that "the sky is the limit (quoted in Gruduah, 1991)."

As a female child growing up in a polygamous home in rural Kenya, I am aware of the gender and power issues, nestled in cultural beliefs about women that limit women's/girls' educational opportunities in the society. The clear gender division of roles in my family were those of a mother, wife, care giver, and food producer. These were roles that were limited to the private sphere. Women had performed these roles in the precolonial era before the introduction of formal education and continued to learn them informally. On the other hand, the man was the head of the household, though he often spent most of the time in the city as a migrant worker. He was the "breadwinner," the income earner, and the one

who made all the decisions that shaped each and every household member's life. Formal education was considered necessary for his economic role. The woman's unpaid labor, though crucial to the survival of the family, was not as valued as the paid work performed by the man.

About 50% of the girls who enrolled in the first year of primary level education (Standard 1) with me left school before completing this level to become mothers and/or wives or to work as domestic help. Less than 30% of the girls passed the secondary entry examinations, and even fewer completed that level. Only three of us completed the tertiary level of education. I am, therefore, personally aware of how gender and power factors shape women's educational and economic opportunities within the historical, social, economic, and political context of Kenyan society.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the ways in which gender has structured Kenyan women's participation in education, in the economy, and in the family. It also highlights women's concerted efforts to retain their control of work through individual and group activities—self-help groups. I describe the three research sites in detail in chapter 3. The discussion covers life, schooling, and women's activities in each site. These details enable the reader to see the differences and similarities that exist within the same region and how they shape the lives of the women and their children. The chapter also gives an overview of the participants.

Chapter 4 deals with the methodology of my research. Articulation of the methodology/ies is not only important to the reader but also to researchers because it enables the latter to put into words their seemingly indescribable inner beliefs and assumptions that shape their actions. Finally, I reflect on doing research as both an insider and outsider in Kilome division.

Chapter 5 presents the public discourse on education. This discourse is constructed through the analysis of policy documents to show how policies have implications for the public sphere and to show how they limit women's agency. Chapters 6, 7, 8 present the women's discourses. Chapter 6 presents Kilome women's educational experiences. Chapter 7 deals with cultural-gendered assumptions that limit girls' participation in education. Chapter 8 examines the intensification of women's labor as they struggle to educate their children. This includes an examination of rural women's

economic activities within a gendered economy. Chapter 9 deals with women's agency in self-help groups and the potential as well as the limitations of these groups in addressing women's concerns.

Chapter 10 is the conclusion. In this chapter, I contrast the women's private discourse with the public discourse on education emphasizing the contradictions as well as the similarities between the narratives.