

# Parental involvement in rural Kenya

## The why, how, who, when and where of parental decision-making on children's education in rural Kenya

 **Fibian K. Lukalo**

The 2003 commitment by the Kenyan government to prioritise primary education was not the first time that Universal Primary Education (UPE) was touted as 'free' or as a basic human right for all children. Neither was this initiative the first time that schools and teachers experienced an influx of pupils seeking primary schooling. Earlier, in 1974, there was the removal of fees for the first four years of primary schooling. Five years later, in 1979, there was the introduction of the free milk programme and transfer of all schooling charges from parents to their communities. More broadly, in 1974, over a million children enrolled in primary schools but by the time this cohort of students had reached Standard 7 the numbers had dropped to 350,000 or 37 per cent (Palmer et al., 2007). Similarly, with the 1979 *maziwa ya bure* [a Kiswahili term for free milk] programme, the influx of a million pupils in Standard 1 declined over the seven years by 37 per cent.

With a new government in place, 2003 saw the policy for the provision of Free Primary Education (FPE) launched which had no age limit, and once more the country witnessed an astronomical rise in pupil numbers. By 2004 there were 7.4 million pupils in primary school; and by 2007 the number had risen to 8.2 million. The reasons for these pupils' enrolments declining and increasing in 1974, 1979 and 2003 vary but the linkages and implications are clear. Firstly, educational initiatives at the national, local and family levels are often met with obstacles layered with social, political, economic and gender ideologies. Secondly, the statistics and language of primary school educational reforms seem to consistently paint a picture of what is going on in schools concerning the teachers, learners, resources and the curriculum but not beyond this. If further problems are identified then reforms can fix them, the latest example being the FPE programme.

However, most of the aforementioned initiatives exacerbate problems of inequality and access because of the skewed implementation of policies, distribution of resources, tragic levels of poverty, gender imbalances and multifaceted levels of regional exclusion. With a highly centralised governance and educational system, the patterns of schooling benefits seem to favour economically and culturally dominant groups (Serpell, 1993). In this way, many rural areas and families continue to be marginalised in educational initiatives like the FPE.

While there is a good deal of research on what happens inside schools, little attention is paid to what happens within homes and families to guarantee success or interrupt educational initiatives. The hidden labour behind schooling, especially the involvement of mothers in decision-making on their children's education, needs to

be examined. Critical literature or research on parental involvement, decision-making and schooling (not just in Kenya but in Africa as a whole) is conspicuously absent (this position contrast with the abundance of studies on parental involvement in developed countries such as the UK). Therefore parental involvement and educational decisions at the family level in terms of the *gender, why, how, who, when and where* of schooling of their children can no longer be ignored in research. This is the basis of my doctoral research, the hidden gendered labour behind primary schooling in rural areas: *mothers' involvement and the making and shaping of schooling decisions*.

The research actually begins by exploring the hard work that mothers living in a marginalised part of rural Bungoma District do (in conditions of varying poverty levels, informal food traders, professional and varying educational levels). Then the process focuses on the ways in which mothers are *involved in defining, shaping, (re)constructing, (re)making, working and maintaining* schooling decisions for their daughters and sons. Finally I connect the decision-making differences from the various groups of mothers back to the outcomes of FPE. Planning for this research did not go unchallenged. Firstly, accusations were levelled against it focusing on a rural community at a time when 'vogue' research focused on urbanisation. Consequently I was advised not to 'study down' poverty but rather to 'study up' poverty in an urban slum like Nairobi's Kibera slum or the Eldoret's Kingongo slum.

Secondly, objections were raised about the concept of decision-making and whether impoverished rural parents and families, especially mothers (the main participants) living in dominant patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal (p<sup>3</sup>) structures, make any decisions concerning schooling. This latter suggestion ignores the different avenues through which mothers constantly make and negotiate decisions for themselves and their children. It also ignores the deeply held values and norms that parents, especially mothers, still wield in rural African communities. Mothers' symbolic power may be changing; however, it is now acknowledged that most rural areas are populated by women. Thus many rural farmers in Kenya are women. This means that women are responsible for feeding the nation. If this position is held to be true, then why not critically reflect on their involvement in making schooling decisions for their children?

One way to illuminate how initiatives like FPE work in practice, and continue to exacerbate inequalities of access and gender, is to focus on the intersections of mothers' economic ability, schooling levels and decision-making. Understanding these intersections

requires tracing back the schooling ‘footprints’ of a child or children to a specific family and community context. In many marginalised rural areas in Kenya these ‘footprints’ may end up at the door of the extended family which often lives in close proximity. These ‘footprints’ may also end up in the diversities of polygamy, single mothers, widows, widowers, grandparents and parents. In this regard a holistic understanding of how aspects of culture and community shape the involvement and decision-making of mothers needs to be known.

Advancing this theme, *The State of the World’s Children Report 2007* (UNICEF, 2006) identifies age at marriage and level of education as central factors in determining women’s decisional influences. The report, however, notes that differences occur based on families, households, cultures and countries. As Table 1 shows, depending on the area of influence, decision-making involves a form of control. However, these figures cannot explain or account for how, why, when and where mothers, fathers or both go about making these decisions or what decision-making involves. Neither do they explain whether a father or mother living in a rural or urban context and who has some form of education acts differently when making and exercising decisions.

From Table 1, one can deduce that men and women have different roles or impose upon themselves roles that affect decision-making processes, resource allocation and gender power relations within the household. The implication is that mothers may be positioned to act in specific and important ways that may enable or limit who goes to school, why, when and for how long.

Studies conducted in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mali indicate that mothers with ‘some form of education’ positively influence family decisions to send their daughters to school. Colclough et al. (2003, p.156) found that in Guinea, fathers customarily exercised control and responsibility over their sons while mothers did the same for their daughters. This differential treatment meant that each parent was powerless to amend any decision their partners took which they felt was wrong for their son or daughter respectively. However, the subtle ways in which parents treat their children differently by gender can be difficult to detect and thus interpreting a son or daughter’s access to schooling as indicative of parental preference of gender may not be wholly justified. Ultimately, mothers who keep their girl-children from schooling contribute to the high numbers of girls who are out of school. If we explain the link between mothers and their children’s schooling in families living in educationally disadvantaged rural areas of Kenya, other forms of hierarchies like economic ability, ethnicity, age, status, marriage and religion emerge. In many ways my research has been a path of discovery.

Wolf and Odonkor’s observation offers a valuable point of departure that on the whole women with some education used funds better for their children’s education and demonstrated a better understanding of the schooling process. They specifically note that:

*What education gives women is greater confidence and the necessary skills to act on their own or negotiate decision-making power in the domains where women do have traditional power, such as fertility, care of children, and to some degree, education of children.*

(Wolf and Odonkor, 1997, p.66)

Therefore, one might reasonably infer that the high incidence of the chronic poor on less than ‘a dollar a day’ livelihoods restrict vulnerable mothers from participating in the education of their daughters. To gather mothers’ voices as participants in their children’s schooling it was necessary to adopt ethnography as a method of inquiry. A preliminary finding indicates that despite being constrained in various ways, the schooling of children in rural Bungoma is primarily the labour of mothers. Therefore, mothers make schooling decisions but the educational information they draw upon shapes and limits the possibilities for better decisions.

**References**

Colclough, C., Al-Samarai, S., Rose, P. and Tembon, M. (2003). *Achieving Schooling for All in Africa*. England: Ashgate.  
 Palmer, R., Wedgwood, R., Hayman, R., King, K. and Thin, N. (2007). *Educating Out of Poverty? A Synthesis Report on Ghana, India, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and South Africa*. CAS, Edinburgh: DFID.  
 Serpell, R. (1993). *The Significance of Schooling: Life Journeys in an African Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 UNICEF (2006). *The State of the World’s Children 2007*. New York: UNICEF.  
 Wolf, J. and Odonkor, M. (1997). *How Educating a Girl Changes the Woman She Becomes: An Intergenerational Study in Northern Ghana*. Ghana: USAID, ABEL Technical Paper 8.

**FIBIAN KAVULANI LUKALO** is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. In addition to her research on parental involvement in education in Kenya, her areas of interest include ethnographic work on youth and culture.

**Table 1 Selected countries showing husbands’ decision-making**

Husbands decision (%)	Nigeria	Cameroon	Kenya	Uganda	Ghana	Nepal	Bangladesh
Wife’s health	73.4	57.6	42.9	37.6	34.9	51	48.1
Daily household expenditure	64.5	39	37.3	52.5	31.8	30.3	34.2
Visits to friends/relatives	59.7	43.8	39.4	41.7	33.7	33.7	35.9

Source: UNICEF, World Development Report, 2007, pp.8–20, from Figures 2:1, 2:2, 2:3.