THE STATE OF GENDER AND EDUCATION NEEDS IN KENYA
THE MISSING STEP TOWARDS GENDER EQUITY

Key Takeaways

• Despite making strides toward near-universal access to primary school nationally, enrollment lags in certain counties, with low access below 40% in Turkana, Mandera, Garissa and Wajir.

• Despite national gains in primary completion rates between 2014-2022, some counties saw worrying declines for boys, including Siaya, Busia and Machakos, while girls in these counties saw increased rates. Conversely, counties like Taita Taveta and Nairobi experienced slight declines in primary completion for girls, even as rates rose for boys in the same counties. Both trends signal uneven rates of progress across genders despite broader national improvements.

• Gender disparities in literacy rates also remains a challenge. Between 2014 and 2022, 11 counties saw literacy rates increase for girls alone, while 14 saw literacy rates increase for only boys. Only five counties saw increases for both boys and girls.

• Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy also remain major challenges, with counties including Tana River, Marsabit, and Samburu reporting 37% to 43% of women aged 20-24 (at the time of data collection) were married before the age of 18.

• While 35 counties made progress in decreasing violence rates against women aged 15-24 between 2014 and 2022, alarming trends remain. Specifically, Elgeyo-Marakwet county saw a concerning 22 percentage point spike in violence rates towards women within this age group over the eight-year period.

Recommendations

• General education policies should address school retention and transition challenges for both genders with special focus on women who are lagging behind at higher education level.

• Strengthen the implementation and enforcement of existing policies that relate to barriers to education.

Background & Introduction

Kenya has made great progress in enhancing access, equity, and quality of education over the past decade. However, challenges persist, particularly in counties where regional and gender disparities in education outcomes remain. Education studies identify poverty, limited access to schooling, and increased exposure to violence as some of the main barriers to achieving gender parity in education (Charo, 2022). The repercussions of these inequalities extend beyond the classroom, hindering access to essential skills and limiting opportunities in the labor market.

As part of a 4-brief series exploring the Kenyan gender and education landscape, this brief aims to provide an overview of the current state of gender and education in Kenya, focusing on identified gender-related barriers to schooling.
**Methodology**

To understand the current gender and education landscape, we analyzed data from national datasets, including the 2014 and 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Surveys (KDHS), the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, and the 2018 Monitoring Learner Achievement report. Throughout the brief, we reference data for age groups beyond average school-going years (i.e. 20-24). Looking at data from older age cohorts provides a comprehensive view of the educational trajectory of Kenyan youth, including primary and secondary school completion and trends in school leaving. Sampling younger age groups may underestimate school leaving and other outcomes due to their ongoing educational pursuits. Additionally, some estimates in the brief are marked with an asterisk, indicating they were derived from a small sample size and should be interpreted cautiously.

Our analysis was guided by four key policy areas: Access to schooling, Quality of learning, Gender equity barriers to education, and Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

**Overview of the Research and findings**

**Access - Enrollment & Attainment**

While near-universal access has been achieved in primary school, gender disparities still exist in some counties, especially at the secondary school level. Based on data from the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, an analysis of the percentage of males and females aged 6-22 who have ever enrolled in primary school and continue to attend school reveals:

- While most counties have achieved near-universal access to primary school, access remains below 90% in 10 counties.
- Primary school access is low (below 40%) in four specific counties: Turkana, Madera, Garissa, and Wajir.

In terms of attendance in all Kenyan counties, the primary net attendance ratio (NAR) is 86.2%, with no major difference in NAR for girls (87%) and boys (85.5%) of primary school age. In contrast, the secondary NAR stands at 48.8%, with girls showing a higher representation at 52.7%, compared to boys at 45.4% (KDHS, 2022). The Gross Attendance Ratio (GAR) for total attendance in primary is over 100% (104.8% for girls and 108.7% for boys), indicating that the system has both underage and overage learners at the primary level. For secondary school, the GAR is 82.3%, with a gender gap favoring girls (84.3%) over boys (80.5%) (KDHS, 2022). For context, NAR shows the level of participation in education of students in the official age group, while GAR reflects general participation in education among students of all ages, thus indicating that not all children are in school. Both ratios decreased substantially for males and females between 2014 and 2022, indicating a significant reduction in access to education over the eight-year period (KDHS, 2022).

**Access – Completion**

In 2022, 80% of Kenyan counties reported primary completion rates of 70% or higher for girls aged 20-24 at the time of the KDHS survey. However, 8 counties fell below this benchmark, namely Garissa, West Pokot, Samburu, Tana River, Wajir, Madera, Marsabit, and Turkana. Notably, primary school completion rates for girls aged 20-24 were less than 40% in Madera, Marsabit, and Turkana (KDHS, 2022).

Analyzing trends over the last 8 years, most Kenyan counties saw primary school completion rates increase between 2014 and 2022 for boys and girls aged 20-24 at the time of the survey. For example, Isiolo county stands out with the most substantial increase in girls’ primary completion, marking a rise of 43.8 percentage points (pp). However, the increase for boys in Isiolo, while also significant at 19.5 percentage points, ranks 10th among all counties. Conversely, Turkana witnessed the greatest surge in boys’ primary completion, experiencing a 39.7** percentage point increase, while girls in Turkana saw only a marginal increase of 11.7 percentage points, ranking 26th among all counties.

- Not all counties saw these increases. Some counties saw slight decreases in girls’ completion rates (average -2 pp). These include: Nakuru (-2.9 pp), Taita Taveta (-2.4 pp) and Nairobi (-0.9 pp). Of these, only Nakuru also saw a decrease in boys’ completion (-1.9 pp). The other two saw increases in boys’ rates of 8.6 pp and 2.7 pp, respectively.

- In counties where boys’ primary completion rates did drop, the average decrease was of 3.2 pp. These counties are Samburu (-1.3 pp*), Busia (-3.8 pp*), Siya (-6.4 pp*), Mombasa (-2.9 pp*), Nakuru (-1.9 pp*), Kisumu (-3 pp*), Machakos (-2.8 pp*). Interestingly, girls’ rates increased in all of these counties, with the only exception being...
Nakuru. As already noted in the bullet above, this was the only county in which both boys’ and girls’ primary completion rates dropped between 2014 and 2022.

Furthermore, transitioning to secondary school seems to be a pivotal point in the education journeys of Kenyan youth. The national transition rate from primary to secondary school is 87.1% for all students with boys and girls transitioning to higher learning at nearly equal rates (Basic Education Statistical Booklet, 2020). However, a closer examination of county-level data reveals disparities in the transition rates from primary to secondary education.

Counties like Nyeri, Murang’a, Kirinyaga, Nyandarua, Nyamira, Kiambu, Makueni, Kisii, Embu, Nairobi City, and Vihiga showcase high transition rates for girls, with over 90% transitioning to secondary school. Conversely, Isiolo, Marsabit, Turkana, Kwale, and Narok exhibit a lower proportion of girls transitioning from primary to secondary in 2020, with Marsabit having a transition rate of only 78.9% (Basic Education Statistical Booklet, 2020).

Analyzing gender differences in primary to secondary transition rates, most counties show very similar rates for boys and girls. Notably, the top five counties with the highest transition rates for girls are the same as the top five counties for boys. However, in counties with lower transition rates, disparities become more evident. For instance, in Turkana, there is a 6.3 percentage point difference between boys (85.3%) and girls (79%) (Basic Education Statistical Booklet, 2020).

Finally, secondary education completion rates for girls aged 20-24 are notably low across Kenya, with only five counties—Nyeri, Kiambu, Nairobi, Machakos, and Uasin Gishu—reporting rates above 70% in 2022 (KDHS, 2022).

- Gender disparities in secondary completion rates were evident in 2022, generally favoring boys. In counties where boys had higher completion rates, the average difference was 10.4 percentage points.
- The most significant disparities were observed in Marsabit (15.5% for girls vs. 50.5% for boys), Mandera (27.1% for girls vs. 60.9% for boys), and Samburu (26.7% for girls vs. 54.2% for boys).

Despite these challenges, there is a positive trend in secondary completion rates for girls across Kenyan counties, showing improvement between 2014 and 2022. Notably, Marsabit was the only county where completion rates for girls slightly decreased (one percentage point). On the other hand, substantial increases were recorded in Machakos (from 35.5% to 76.1%), Baringo (from 21.9% to 58.5%), and Homa Bay (from 16.6% to 52.9%) during the same period (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

Note: pp= difference in percentage points between 2014 and 2022. Estimates with one asterisk are based on 25-49 cases. Figures with double asterisk are based on fewer than 25 cases. Interpret with caution.

### Quality – Learning

Based on data from the 2022 KDHS, 80% of all Kenyan counties reported female literacy rates of 90% or higher among girls who completed primary school in 2022. However, gender disparities currently persist, favoring boys in 28 out of 47 counties.

- Nakuru, Kirinyaga, Nyamira, and Vihiga stood out with the highest literacy rates among girls aged 15-24 who completed primary school or higher (99.2%-99.6%).
- Conversely, Garissa, Marsabit, Kericho, and Isiolo reported the lowest literacy rates for girls who completed primary school, ranging from 76.4% to 85.7%. Marsabit exhibited the most substantial gender gap, with a literacy rate of 98.2% among boys compared to 77.1% among girls.

When assessing progress made between 2014 and 2022, only five counties witnessed overall improvements in literacy rates among both boys and girls who completed primary school. In contrast, some counties experienced increases in literacy rates for only one gender. Specifically, 11 counties observed a rise in literacy rates exclusively for girls, while 14 counties saw literacy rates increase solely for boys (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

- Kiambu (5.8 pp increase), Nyamira (4.5 pp), and Homa Bay (4.4 pp) showcased the highest literacy rate increases among girls.
- Conversely, Marsabit (13 pp decrease), Elgeyo-Marakwet (13 pp), and Garissa (10.6 pp) experienced the most substantial decreases in literacy rates among girls who completed primary.

In nearly half of all Kenyan counties (23/47), literacy rates among girls with less than primary school completion increased between 2014 and 2022. Significant improvements were noted in Nyamira, Laikipia, and Homa Bay. However, challenges persist, as evidenced by substantial decreases in literacy rates observed in Murang’a, Elgeyo-Marakwet, and Baringo (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).
Moreover, data from the 2017-2018 Monitoring Learner Achievement at Class 7 Level of Primary School Education in Kenya show that the majority of pupils are not acquiring key subject skills and concepts:

- 66% of boys and 60% of girls did not achieve minimum competency in Kiswahili.
- 68% of boys and 73% of girls did not achieve minimum competency in mathematics.
- 53% of boys and 64% of girls did not achieve minimum competency in science.
- 58% of boys and 53% of girls did not achieve minimum competency in English.

**Safety, Security, & Gender-Based Violence**

Gender-based violence in schools, households and communities can often be another barrier to schooling. Based on data from the 2022 KDHS, among young people aged 15-19:

- 20% of young women and 29% of young men have experienced physical violence since age 15.
- 7% of young women and 5% of young men have ever experienced sexual violence.

In an important stride towards addressing gender-based violence, 35 out of Kenya's 47 counties observed a decrease in the proportion of women aged 15-24 who experienced physical and/or sexual violence between 2014 and 2022 (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

However, despite overall improvements, challenges persist in certain regions. Elgeyo-Marakwet experienced an alarming increase of almost 22 percentage points from 5%** to 26.6% in violence rates toward women. Murang’a also experienced a concerning rise from 29.8%* to 47.3%, along with Nyeri, where rates increased from 11.6%* to 24.4% (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

Finally, in 39 out of Kenya's 47 counties, there was either a reduction or stability in the rates of female circumcision between 2014 and 2022 (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

- However, eight counties experienced an increase in female circumcision rates during this period. Notably, Tana River saw the largest increase, rising from 58.6% to 63.5%.
- In 2022, the prevalence of female circumcision was notably high in five counties, surpassing the 70% threshold. These counties were Wajir (97.6%), Mandera (96.3%), Garissa (80.8%), Marsabit (75.8%), and Samburu (70.9%).

**Equity - Child Marriage, Adolescent Childbearing & Gender Norms**

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are often structural drivers of low educational attainment affecting girls. According to the 2022 KDHS, Tana River, Marsabit, and Samburu counties exhibited the highest child marriage rates in Kenya, with 37-43% of women aged 20-24 being married by age 18. Conversely, Makueni, Machakos, and Uasin Gishu had the lowest child marriage rates, with 5% or less of women aged 20-24 being married by age 18.

- From 2014 to 2022, the majority of counties witnessed a decline in child marriage rates, with Turkana, Isiolo, and Narok experiencing the most substantial reductions (>25%).
- However, five counties (Kirinyaga, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Meru, Marsabit, and Taita Taveta) reported increases in child marriage rates, with 2-11% more women aged 20-24 getting married before age 18 during this period (KDHS 2014 & 2022).

Recent data from the 2022 KDHS also show that adolescent pregnancy is present in all counties. In 2022, Homa Bay, Samburu, and Migori counties had the highest rates of adolescent childbearing in Kenya, with 35-39% of women aged 20-24 giving birth by age 18.

- Embu, Nyeri, and Machakos had the lowest adolescent childbearing rates, with 7% or fewer women aged 20-24 giving birth by age 18.
- From 2014 to 2022, the majority of counties experienced decreases in adolescent childbearing rates, with Tana River, Isiolo, and Narok witnessing the most significant reductions (>22 pp).
- However, four counties (Taita Taveta, Wajir, Elgeyo-Marakwet, West Pokot) reported increases in adolescent childbearing rates, with 1-5 pp more women aged 20-24 giving birth by age 18 from 2014 to 2022 (KDHS 2014 & 2022).

**Poverty**

Poverty is another structural driver of low educational attainment. Poverty affects both boys and girls, but poverty and gender intersect to further undermine girls’ education.

Note: Figures with one asterisk are based on 25-49 cases. Figures with double asterisk are based on fewer than 25 cases. Interpret with caution.
Examining primary school completion rates, it becomes evident that children in the poorest households were less likely to have completed primary school. Notably, the lowest attainment was observed among girls in the poorest households in the Northeastern region, where only 33% had completed primary school in 2022. While this reflects an improvement from the 2014 figure of 19%, significant challenges persist (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

- In 2022, the Coast region had the largest wealth disparities in primary completion rates for girls. Nearly 90% of girls in the wealthiest households in this county had completed primary school, compared to only 47% of girls in the poorest households.

Further disparities emerged in literacy rates, with children in the poorest households facing heightened odds of illiteracy. In the Northeastern region in 2022, only 35% of girls in the poorest households could read a whole sentence, marking an improvement from 26% in 2014 (KDHS, 2014 & 2022).

- However, the Northeast region not only had the lowest literacy rates among girls from the poorest households but also exhibited the most significant wealth disparities in literacy. Literacy rates for girls from the wealthiest households were nearly 20 percentage points higher.

- In contrast, the central region presented a more positive scenario, having both the highest literacy rates among poor girls and the smallest disparity based on wealth levels. Here, 94% of girls in the poorest households were literate, compared to 97% of girls in the wealthiest households.

- Adding to the positive developments, literacy rates for girls in the poorest households increased in 35 counties between 2014 and 2022. Notably, significant gains were observed in Nyamira (18.2 percentage points), Laikipia (17 pp), and Bomet (13.6 pp).

### Recommendations

- Develop policies that are responsive to the unique needs of specific counties or households, acknowledging variations in access, retention, and completion rates across different regions.

- Design comprehensive education policies aimed at addressing challenges related to school retention and transition, focusing on both genders.

- Provide targeted resources and support to counties demonstrating lower literacy rates among both girls and boys completing primary school. Further, address gaps in subject knowledge acquisition revealed in national assessments, including interventions focused on strengthening competencies in key topics for both genders.

- Develop and implement county-level action plans to address high child marriage and early pregnancy rates, with customized strategies tailored to local context.

- Prioritize initiatives for sensitization, awareness raising, and the dissemination of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) guidelines.

- Enhance and enforce the implementation of sexual and gender-based violence laws to create a safer learning environment for both male and female students.

- Strengthen guidance and counseling services in schools, emphasizing sexual reproductive health and life skills. Develop targeted programs to support school re-entry for students facing challenges.
References


