

Young People’s Access to Higher Education in Kilifi, Kenya

Heidi Eggleton

University of Sussex
International Development
Global Studies

“If you get a good grade you don’t have any challenges, as long as your parent has enough money to help you”

Introduction

This study explores young people’s (YP) challenges to access higher education (HE) in Kilifi, Kenya. All YP recognised grades and finances as the leading barriers to HE. This research investigates contributing factors to these barriers. Through two themes, gender and socio-economic background it focuses on the lives and identities of YP in Kilifi. This includes family background, secondary-school experience, post-secondary choices, cultural expectations, religion and career options post-education. I seek to explore the challenges to HE that stem from factors beyond the lives of individual YP.

My field of study is Kilifi-North, a sub-county of Kilifi, a rural and semi-urban region along the coast. Inequality is most evident on the coast where access to health care and basic living standards are limited. 47% of Kilifi’s population is in the age range 0-14 years (KNBS, 2013) and less than 40% of secondary education youth are in work. Though segregated, Christian and Muslim populations are equal in number. Teenage pregnancy, early marriage and drug addiction are of major concerns to NGOs and have had a retrogressive impact on the communities. The youthful population and high levels of unemployment raised the initial question; what barriers do YP face with accessing HE?

Methodology

This research is an explorative study using mixed-methods of quantitative, but predominantly qualitative fieldwork with the aim of hearing the voices of YP in Kilifi. It is partly stratified; participants are all aged 18-30, have finished SE and are living in Kilifi North. The purposive sampling enables the collection of data from specific numbers of participants based on their gender, religion and education and snowball sampling was a suitable method for the time available for fieldwork. Thirty-six people were interviewed individually, and thirty-five people participated in focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants fitted into one of twelve groups depending on their gender, religion and level of education. All participants have completed SE and either; a) finished secondary but not transitioned into HE (SE), b) a student/ graduate from, vocational training (VE), c) a university student/ graduate at degree level (HE). By using the three education categories allowed deeper analysis of all data. Local organisations who sourced the participants for the FGDs ensured equal representation of YP in Kilifi; they are listed under ‘collaborations’.

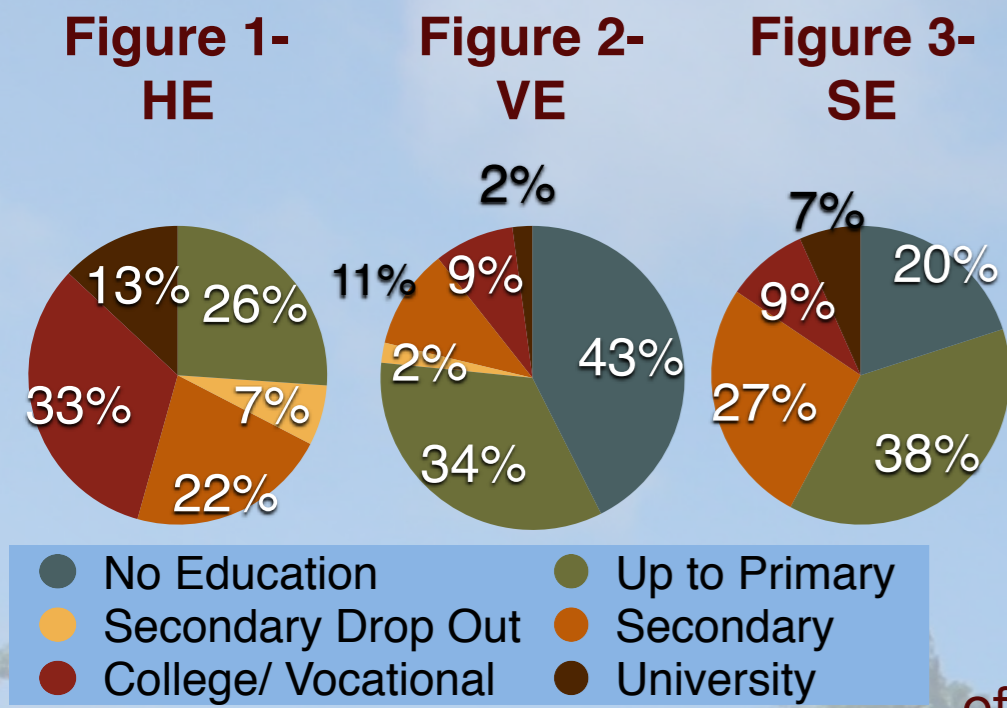
“I am the breadwinner of the family..things change when in the house. A man, when he is in the house, he will require a lot of service from his wife. He wants his wife to cook for him,..then his wife gets sick, thats when the man becomes active.”

Research Findings

Findings show YP in Kilifi-North believe finances and grades to be their two main barriers to HE. However, it was evident that deeply cultured norms particularly those of religion, gender, family background were also significant barriers. These findings discuss in more detail the socio economic, cultural and religious barriers to HE.

KCSE Grades

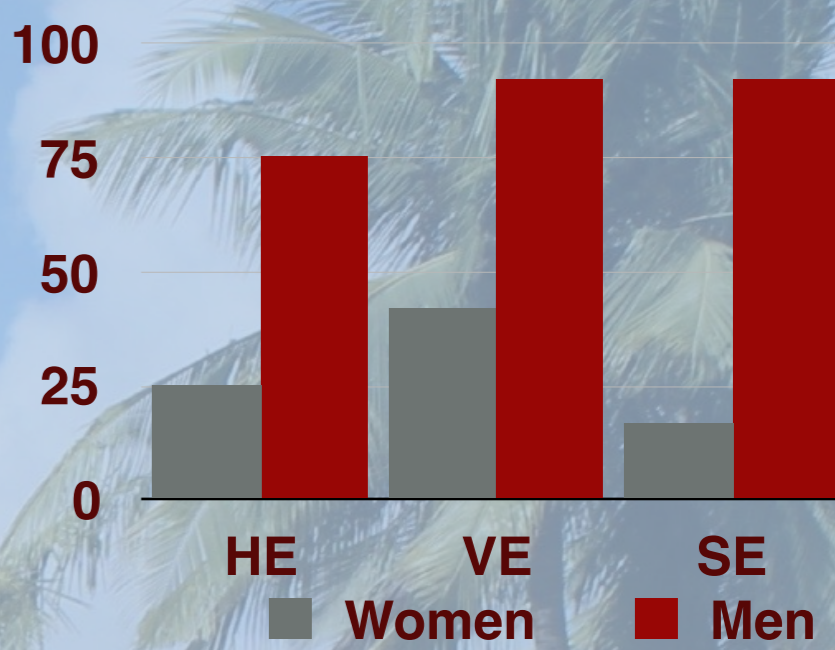
The grades YP received in the KCSE reflect the level of post-secondary education they can access. YP in HE scored between A to C+ in the KSCE whereas YP reaching only SE or VE generally scored between B- to fail. YP who score higher grades can qualify for government sponsorship whereby the government covers a percentage of their university fees. Therefore, they have much less to finance themselves, and for many participants, their parents or bursaries would fund the rest of their fees. With KSCE grades being a significant determining factor in accessing HE, it led to the exploration of why YP achieve specific grades. A significant factor to this is gendered norms and socio-economic background. Firstly it is essential to recognise the trend in parental education and access to HE.



Parental Education

Findings show that the higher the level of education of parents, the more likely YP are to transition to HE themselves. Figure 1 shows that 46% of parents of HE YP reached college or university level of education. In comparison, only 11% of parents of VE YP (figure 2) and 16% of parents of SE YP (figure 3) reached college or university. Therefore the lower the parental education, the lower the education of YP. Often, a higher level of education can create more significant employment opportunities and a higher income for parents. With more significant capital, this could likely allow parents to invest more in their children’s education, healthcare and home environment, and for individuals in Kilifi, potentially lift their family out of poverty. Consequently, YP would be in a better position to achieve a higher KCSE grade and transition to HE if their parents.

Figure 4: Percentage of YP with jobs



Gender

- a) **‘Breadwinner’ vs Domestic Responsibilities-** A significant focus for this research is the gendered norms impacting access to HE. As a result of a patriarchal society, more men are enrolled in HE than women in Kenya. One contributing factor stems from the expectation that men are typically the breadwinners and women are responsible for domestic jobs. This study recognises that this is not the scenario in every household, but it is the predominant lifestyle in Kilifi. This can be supported as in Kilifi, data shows that 92% of young men who finished SE but did not transition to V/HE have full or part-time paid jobs, compared to only 17% of young women. Across all levels of education, figure 4 highlights that men are significantly more likely to have a job compared with women. With men providing capital for their wives/ girlfriends/ family ,unequal power dynamics form and over time, the boy child and his education has been prioritised. One woman said, “despite our levels of education, the husband still remains the husband, and the wife still remains the wife, and the roles and responsibilities with them when we go to the house, our degrees are left outside”. This gendered culture is a contributing factor to why more men than women can access HE and progress into professional jobs.
- b) **‘Sugar’ Sponsors, A Sexual Economy-** Some young women support themselves financially by having a sponsor, sometimes known as a ‘sugar daddy’. It is essential to recognise that some young men also have sponsors (‘sugar mummies’), but this is particularly men who did not transition to HE. YP expressed that the main reasons to have a sponsor are “poverty and peer pressure”. Most YP believed that “...sponsors are [not] there to help with school fees...many girls will go out with sponsors to be on the same level with the other girls”. As accessing part time job is a challenge for many young women, many look to sponsors to fund their needs. There is a considerable stigma around having a sponsor, and although many participants had friends with sponsors, no participant admitted to having one themselves. Many participants, particularly Muslim women, felt that having a sponsor clashed with their religious beliefs, and many would choose to hustle over having a sponsor. Consequently, many young women face more significant barriers than men to accessing HE because of financial constraints. However, for young women that do have sponsors, although it may support them through HE it also contributes towards the sexual economy and patriarchal society. Many sponsors are older and married men; firstly, this allows men to believe it is ok to have multiple sexual partners themselves, but often expecting loyalty from their wife/ girlfriend. Secondly, it continues to keep men in power because the man knows that the younger woman is dependant on him. As one participant states: “he will use you, do anything that he feels like because by the end of the day he is going to give you something”. Although the figures in Kilifi are unclear, in Nairobi, 1/5 women at university have a sponsor (Busara, 2018). As the numbers of sponsorship for women are high, it strengthens the gender norm that men have more power over women, sexually and financially, leaving many women facing higher barriers to HE than men.

“When you go to university, poverty and peer pressure lead [you] to find the sugar daddies..he will use you, do anything that he feels like, because..he is going to give you something.”

Conclusion

In Kilifi access to HE is limited and unequal. Despite YP recognising grades and finances as their main barriers to HE, it is evident that this does not justify the complexity of access to HE. Factors such as parental education often impact both the grades and finances of YP; the higher the level of parental education, the higher the level of education for the child. Gendered factors heavily impact access to HE; with expectations for men to be the breadwinner, family priority is placed on the boy child’s education. In HE, as young men can access jobs much easier than women and often when parental support is lacking, many women look for sponsors. This reinforces the unequal gender dynamics and contributes to the patriarchal power cycle. A question remains: how can modern relationships coexist with traditional gender norms? One recommendation is the provision of more HE scholarships for lower income YP and an increased focus on women’s empowerment, education and employment.

References and Collaborations

Busura, (2018), ‘Sugar Dating: An Investigation of ‘Sponsorship’ In Kenya’ Busura- Centre For Behaviour Economics. KNBS, (2013), ‘Exploring Kenya’s Inequality: Pulling Apart or Pooling Together, Kilifi County’, Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and Society for International Development.

With thanks to: Pwani University, Kesho Kenya, Moving The Goalposts, Kilifi Saidia College, Neema Tailoring & Dress Making College, Rotaract Club of Kilifi, University of Sussex and The Nicola Anderson Bursary for supporting this research.