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Challenges To Kenyan Gender Equality inHigher Education

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Abstract
This paper examines the multifaceted challenges impeding gender equality in Kenya's tertiary education system, focusing on entrenched sociocultural norms, systemic enrollment disparities, and socioeconomic inequities. In Maasai and Pokot communities, practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages—rooted in patriarchal traditions—severely restrict girls' educational trajectories, with transition rates to tertiary education as low as 2.4% in some regions. Policy prohibitions notwithstanding are weak enforcement of these activities continued by geographic isolation and ignorance of anti-FGM policies. Cultural conservatism further devalues girls' education, prioritizing boys' schooling and relegating women to domestic roles, a trend exacerbated in pastoralist communities where modern education is often deemed irrelevant for girls. University enrollment disparities reveal systemic gaps: despite Kenya's expansion to 68 universities, only 9.2% of qualified candidates secure admission annually, with public institutionsovercrowded and private universities financially inaccessible to marginalized groups.
Although private universities slightly increase gender representation, women continue to be concentrated in fields traditionally dominated by women, which reflects ongoing society prejudices. Socioeconomic barriers, including poverty and unstable family structures, disproportionately affect girls, shaping divergent coping strategies—boys pursue education for employment, while girls often resort to early marriage for economic relief. Public institutions' persistent underfunding compromises their quality of instruction and forces reliance on tuition payments excluding low-income students. Broken homes and single-parent households also impede academic drive and success, therefore marginalizing young people who are already susceptible. These intersecting challenges—cultural practices, enrollment inequities, poverty, and systemic underfunding—collectively sustain gender disparities in Kenyan higher education, limiting access and perpetuating cycles of exclusion for women and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

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I. Background On Gender Disparities inEducation

Gender disparities in education in Kenya are rooted in historical, sociocultural, and institutional inequities that have evolved alongside the country's colonial and post-independence trajectories. During the colonial era, education was designed to serve colonial administrative needs, prioritizing male access to formal schooling while relegating women to domestic roles—a legacy that entrenched patriarchal norms in Kenya's education system (Eshiwani, 1993; Sifuna, 1990). Post-independence reforms, such as the 1963 *OmindeReport*, aimed to democratize education, yet persistentcultural attitudes continued to favor boys' education, particularly in ruraland pastoralist communities where traditional gender roles conflated girls'value with marriageability over academic achievement (Abdinoor, 2012;Kinyanjui, 2014).

When programs for structural adjustment (SAPs)emerged in the 1980s, these differences were more pronounced as public-schoolfinancing was cut and expenditures were transferred to families, unjustlyexcluding girls from low-income families (Bogonko, 1992; UNESCO, 2020). By the 2000s, Kenya's Free Primary Education(FPE) policy (2003) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) initiative (2008)improved overall enrollment, yet gendered gaps persisted. For example, only 42% of girls moved tosecondary education as opposed to 48% of boys while enrollment in primaryschools reached almost parity; dropout rates for girls surge during teenageyears due to early marriages, teen pregnancy, and gender-specific labor demands(KNBS, 2019; Malala Fund, 2016).

Regional differences are hitting. Just overfifteen percent of girls complete secondary education in arid and semi-aridregions (ASALs), like West Pokot and Narok counties, as opposed to 65% inmetropolitan areas like Nairobi (Andiema, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). Cultural practices like female genital mutilation(FGM)—prevalent in communities such as the Pokot (74%) and Maasai (78%)—remainsignificant barriers, often marking the end of a girl's education as familiesprioritize marriage over schooling (Rotich et al., 2014;

UNICEF, 2021). These practices intersect with economic precarity:families in marginalized regions often perceive investing in girls' educationas a financial risk, given dowry systems that incentivize early marriage (Chege& Arnot, 2012; World Bank, 2018).At the higher education level, structuraldisparities continue.With inadequate representation in STEM sectors (22%),leadership roles (15%), and just 35% ofuniversity enrollments, women accountfor just Onsongo, 2007; Statista, 2024. Unjust institutional norms includingprejudices in hiring and promotion help to further isolate women academics,hence extending a cycle of marginalization (Kinyanjui, 2014; Morleyet al., 2019). Despite progressive policies like Kenya's *Constitution(2010),* which guarantees gender equality (Article 27), andthe *NationalGender Policy (2011),* implementation remains fragmented. For instance, insufficient funding foruniversity gender workstations and loose implementation of anti-FGM regulationsimpede development (Muigua, 2020; Andiema,2021).

Globally, Kenya's struggles mirror broaderchallenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, where patriarchal norms, economicconstraints, and colonial legacies sustain educational inequities. However,Kenya's unique context—marked by ethnic diversity, rapid urbanization, and aburgeoning youth population—offers critical insights into the interplay oftradition and modernity in shaping gender equity (UNESCO, 2020; Eshiwani, 1993).Not only is it a constitutional need, but alsoa socioeconomic one since women's education links with lower poverty, betterhealth results, and handed down empowerment. (World Bank, 2018; MalalaFund, 2016).

II. Research Objectives

1. **To synthesize existing literature** on sociocultural barriers (e.g., patriarchal norms, female genital mutilation, early marriages) that impede women's access to and retention in Kenyan higher education, with a focus on marginalized communities such as the Maasai and Pokot.
2. **To review systemic inequalities** documented in tertiary education institutions, including enrollment disparities, gendered field-of-study segregation (e.g., underrepresentation of women in STEM), and institutional biases in leadership and academic progression.
3. **To analyze economic challenges** reported in prior studies, such as poverty, tuition costs, caregiving responsibilities, and unequal resource allocation, that perpetuate gender-based inequities in higher education access.
4. **To evaluate scholarly critiques** of existing policy frameworks (e.g., Kenya's National Gender Policy, Vision 2030) and identify gaps in implementation, enforcement, and intersectional approaches to addressing gender disparities.
5. **To propose evidence-based recommendations** for stakeholders by synthesizing findings from existing research, emphasizing holistic strategies to dismantle structural barriers in Kenya's higher education system.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it synthesizesexisting research to critically analyze the intersectionalbarriers—sociocultural, economic, systemic, and policy-driven—that perpetuategender disparities in Kenyan higher education, offering a comprehensive frameworkto address gaps in literature and practice. By highlighting the persistence ofharmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages inmarginalized communities (Andiema, 2021; Rotich et al., 2014), systemicenrollment inequities (Onsongo, 2007; Statista, 2024), and the gendered impactsof poverty and underfunding (Chege & Arnot, 2012; Mutiso et al., 2015), itprovides policymakers with evidence to strengthen enforcement ofgender-responsive policies, such as Kenya's Vision 2030 and National GenderPolicy (Muigua, 2020). The findings advocate for inclusive reforms aligned withthe United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5 (UNESCO, 2020;Government of Kenya, 2010), emphasizing education's role in empowering women,breaking cycles of poverty, and fostering equitable development. Globally,it contributes to strategies for addressing gender disparities in Sub-SaharanAfrica, where similar structural inequalities persist (Malala Fund, 2016),while advancing decolonial, intersectional approaches to equity in postcolonialeducation systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs **intersectionalitytheory** (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000) and **feministeducational theory** (Arnot & Weiler, 1993; hooks, 1994) tointerrogate the systemic and sociocultural barriers to gender equality inKenyan higher education. Theseframeworks provide acritical lens for analyzing how overlapping identities,power structures, and institutional practicesperpetuate disparities in access,retention, and representation.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Crenshaw (1989) andexpanded by Collins (2000), posits that systems of oppression such aspatriarchy, racism, and classism interact to produce unique experiences ofmarginalization. In Kenya,this framework elucidates how gender disparities in higher education arecompounded by intersecting identities, including ethnicity, socioeconomicstatus, and geographic location. Forinstance, girls from pastoralist communities like the Maasai and Pokot facecompounded exclusion due to cultural practices such as female genitalmutilation (FGM), early marriages, and rural marginalization (Andiema, 2021; Rotich etal., 2014). These practices, rooted in patriarchal norms,intersect with economic precarity to limit educational opportunities: familiesin marginalized regions often prioritize boys' education, perceiving girls asfinancial burdens due to dowry systems that incentivize early marriage (Chege& Arnot, 2012; World Bank, 2018). Intersectionalitychallenges homogenized analyses of gender inequality, emphasizing how coloniallegacies, neoliberal policies (e.g., structural adjustment programs), andinstitutional biases sustain exclusion (Eshiwani, 1993; Morley et al., 2019). Bycentering these overlapping oppressions, the theory underscores the need forpolicies that address the multidimensionality of disadvantage, rather thantreating gender as an isolated category.

Feminist Educational Theory

Feminist educational theory critiques the patriarchalunderpinnings of education systems and advocates for transformative pedagogiesthat empower marginalized groups (Arnot & Weiler, 1993; hooks, 1994). In Kenya,this lens reveals how higher education institutions replicate genderedhierarchies through biased admission practices, underrepresentation of women in

STEM fields, and exclusion from leadership roles (Onsongo, 2007; Kinyanjui,2014). Forexample, women constitute only 35% of university enrollments and 15% ofacademic leadership positions, reflecting institutional cultures that privilegemale advancement (Statista, 2024; Morley et al., 2019). Feministtheorists like hooks (1994) argue that education should serve as a liberatorypractice, challenging oppressive norms and fostering critical consciousness. Thisperspective aligns with grassroots efforts in Kenya to combat harmful practiceslike FGM through community sensitization programs and to promote economicempowerment initiatives for girls (Malala Fund, 2016). However, feminist educational theory also critiquesthe gap between policy rhetoric—such as Kenya's *NationalGender Policy (2011)*—and implementation failures, such as underfundedgender desks in universities and weak enforcement of anti-discrimination laws(Muigua, 2020). By advocating for curricula and policies that center women'sagency, this theory calls for systemicreforms to dismantle patriarchalstructures and create equitable learning environments.

III. Barriers To Gender Equality inTertiary Education

Social Cultural Beliefs/Factors

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriages represent formidable barriers to higher education for girls in both Maasai and Pokot communities. These cultural practices significantly influence girls' academic performance, hinder their progression to higher education levels, and limit their overall participation in educational pursuits.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a deeply ingrained cultural practice in both Maasai and Pokot communities, serving as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and signifying a girl's readiness for marriage. In contrast, Rotich et al. (2014), FGM not only violates human rights, but also compromises girls' education, leading to high dropout rates due to fear, trauma, and health complications at all educational levels. Despite a presidential decree banning FGM in the Pokot community in 1991, it continues to persist, often with the involvement of local leaders, due to the lack of awareness about the government's anti-FGM policy and its enforcement in remote areas (Andiema, 2021; Rotich et al., 2014).

Former President Uhuru Kenyatta took steps to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) by convening a meeting with elders from communities that practice FGM at the State House following the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM in 2019. During the ICPD25 conference in 2019, President Kenyatta reaffirmed his personal commitment and that of the Government of Kenya to provide the necessary leadership to ensure the eradication of FGM in this generation (ASILI-NEWS KENYA, 2019). The prevalence of FGM in West Pokot remains high at 74%, indicating widespread practice despite national decline (Andiema, 2021).

Rotich et al. (2014) suggests that marrying at a young age exacerbates the educational challenges faced by girls in these communities. Upon marriage, girls are typically expected to perform household chores and care for children, which leaves them with limited opportunities to further their education compared to boys, whose education is not hindered. Early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) have a significant impact on young women's educational opportunities. These cultural factors contributed to the low number of girls transitioning to university in the Maasai community, where the rate is dismayingly low. According to a study by Rotich et al. (2014), for every 15 girls enrolled in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) in

Transmara West, only one proceeds to secondary school. Additionally, the study reveals that girls' transition rate to university is a mere 2.4% in Transmara West and 1.0% in Narok North. These findings underscore the need to address the cultural factors that hinder the educational advancement of young women to promote gender equality and social development. (Andiema, 2021; Rotich et al., 2014).

Sociocultural factors have a significant impact on academic performance as indicated by the Ministry of Education (2007). Articles 27 and 59 of the Kenyan constitution outlaw's discrimination based on gender, tribe, or region and emphasize social justice and equal opportunities in education. Other policy documents also aim to promote equal opportunities regardless of sociocultural, religious, regional, and gender barriers. However, disparities between genders and regions can widen the gap between individuals in life and create an irreparable vacuum in socioeconomic status between communities, according to Abdinoor (2012). From a sociocultural perspective, factors such as cultural and religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, as well as social norms that hinder individuals from participating in learning, such as early marriages and circumcisions, contribute to these disparities. Performance on national examinations is one area where these disparities are evident. For instance, in the 2009 KCSE examination report, boys performed better than girls in key subject areas, and no girls were featured in the top ten positions. However, Keeves (1992) attributes this gap to social beliefs rather than to biological or hereditary factors.

The early 2000s Ministry of Education's report on policy identified cultural conservatism as a contributing factor to disparities in education among pastoralist communities. Abdinoor (2012) posits that in these communities, modern education is not perceived as relevant, especially for girls. As a result, some parents prefer to marry their daughters at an early age instead of keeping them in school. Aluko correctly highlights the role of cultural beliefs and practices in perpetuating gender inequality in Kenya's education sector. Traditional values prioritize boys' education over girls' education, and parents often prefer to invest in male education, as they are considered the family's breadwinners. Additionally, early marriages and other cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, prevalent in most communities and recently among marginalized communities, contribute to high dropout rates among girls at any level of education, reducing their chances of accessing secondary education. (Aluko & Mse, 2016; Kinyanjui, 2014; Malala Fund, 2016; Abdinoor, 2012)

According to a study conducted by the World Bank on Education in Sub-Saharan Africa, Abdinoor (2012), there appears to be a lack of motivation among parents to invest in their daughters' education. This lack of motivation extends to unmarried individuals, who understand that they will not be able to complete their education. Furthermore, the social benefits of female education are not perceived as a significant factor in a family's private investment decision-making process ((Abdinoor, 2012). In my opinion, this has significantly contributed to the low enrollment rates currently being faced by Africa, which stands at 9%, and specifically Kenya, where the enrollment rate is 19.9%, as evidenced by World Bank data.

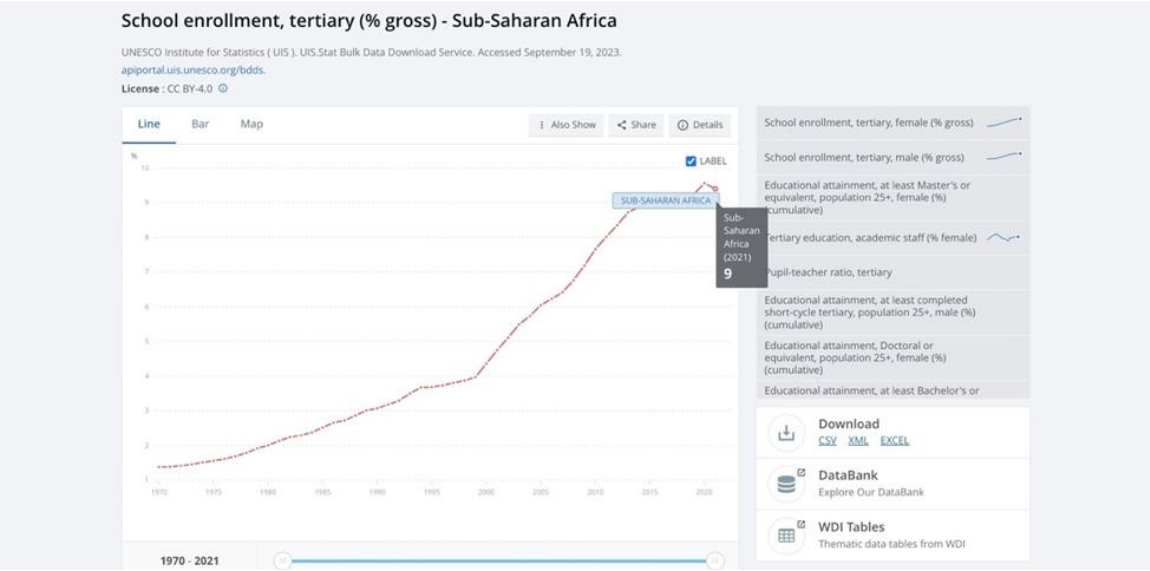

Fig. 1. World Bank Data.

Although Maasai and Pokot communities confront comparable obstacles related to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and early marriage, the degree and consequences of these customs are subject to variations stemming from geographical, socioeconomic, and educational disparities within these marginalized communities. Regions in West Pokot that exhibit greater levels of social and economic development have demonstrated a decline in detrimental sociocultural practices when contrasted with more remote and

marginalized segments of the community. In the past, these remote areas engaged in the primitive practice of cattle rustling, which has led to the loss of many lives, including those of students and teachers. Consequently, schools in these areas have become hiding places for families under the guidance of the security apparatus. This observation suggests that socioeconomic advancement coupled with educational initiatives can contribute to a reduction in practices that impede girls' educational progress.

IV. University Enrollment Disparities

Godfrey Mulongo (2013) highlights the history of higher education in Kenya which dates to 1956, with the establishment of the Royal Technical College in Nairobi. This college later became Nairobi University in 1970 following the Act of Parliament. More universities have been established over the years, including Moi University in 1984, Kenyatta University in 1985, Egerton University in 1987, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in 1993(Mulongo 2013). Today, there are approximately 68 universities in Kenya, of which 35 are public and 33 privates, with an enrollment of 500,000 students. However, despite the increase in the number of universities, only 81,000 of 500,000 candidates can secure admission, with private universities absorbing only 3% of these candidates (Mulongo, 2013; Statista, 2024). Despite the anticipation that university expansion would reduce the waste of students who attain university entry grades, this has not been the case. Public universities in Kenya include the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Moi University, Egerton University, Maseno University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology. These universities enrolled a total of 16,000 students in 2009 and 24,000 qualified for admission. However, only 41,000 students were able to secure a place in either a public or a private university in 2012, despite the availability of 118,000 qualified candidates (Mulongo, 2013). The growth has been exponential from to 2016-2023 in both public and private universities, but the gap is glairing compared to secondary school graduation.

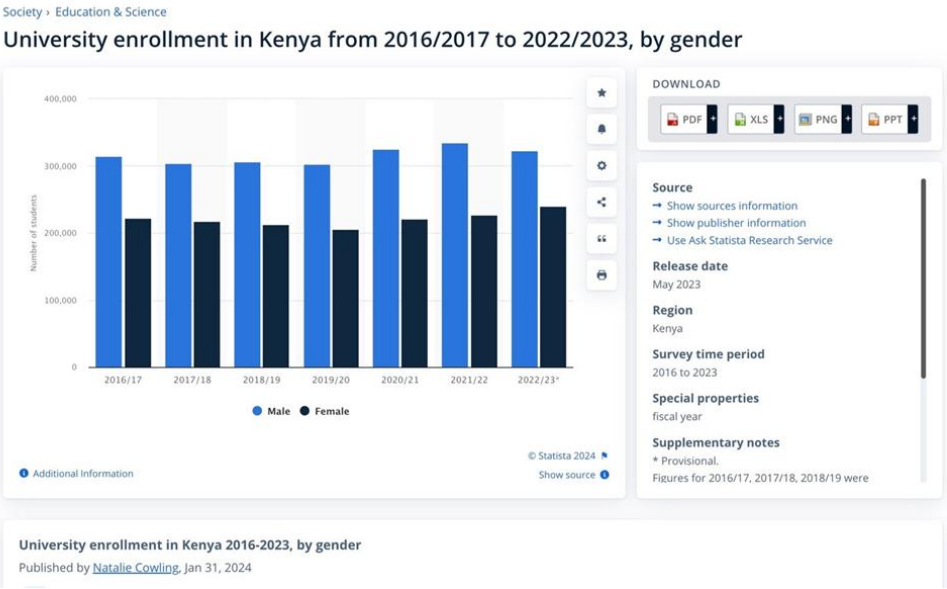

Fig. 2 Statista 2024

Statista 2024 indicates that 500,000 students enrolled in universities out of 881,416, and 94,000 are enrolled in private universities.

Jane Onsongo's study (2007) underscores the vital role those private institutions of higher learning play in fostering gender equality in Kenya's higher education sector. Onsongo (2007) emphasizes that these institutions have significantly expanded opportunities for women in both student and academic/administrative spheres. This progress is primarily due to the more inclusive admission and recruitment criteria employed by private universities, which caters to a diverse range of candidates. Furthermore, Onsongo (2007) highlights that private universities have cultivated a supportive work environment that encourages the advancement of women to senior management positions, a practice that is less prevalent in public universities (Onsongo, 2007).

Onsongo (2007) acknowledges the progress made in private universities, particularly in the increase in female enrollment. However, she emphasized that merely having a higher number of women does not guarantee gender equality. Women are still disproportionately represented in traditionally female-dominated fields of study, and the high cost of education may prevent individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from

accessing it. Furthermore, while there are more female students and staff members, this may not be a result of deliberate policies promoting gender equality but rather the inclusive practices of these institutions. This highlights the significant gap between the number of students who qualify for higher education and the number of students enrolled. The Vision 2030 initiative recognizes this issue and is working towards addressing it. (Mulongo, 2013; Onsongo, 2007).

Socio-Economic Factors

Poverty

The relationship between poverty, gender, and education among Kenyan youth was identified by Fatuma. Chege and Madeleine Arnot (2012) are complicated and significantly impact educational opportunities and prospects. Although education can provide Kenyan youth with a means of escaping poverty, gendered perspectives and economic constraints shape their experiences differently. While young men see education to achieve employability and independence, young women often view marriage as a means of escaping poverty, revealing different coping strategies for dealing with socioeconomic constraints. The authors also uncovered shifting gender roles, as both sexes engage in non-traditional jobs as survival tactics, but societal norms and expectations continue to influence the acceptance of these roles. Parents' narratives highlight a shared desire for their children's education to improve their lives, reflecting a communal aspiration to break the poverty cycle through education (Chege & Arnot, 2012).

The research conducted by Mensch and Lloyd (1998) shed light on the significant and wide-ranging effects of poverty on education, particularly in Kenya, where it exacerbates gender disparities and hinders the educational progress of girls. The researchers emphasize that impoverished environments result in a scarcity of educational resources, lower educational quality, and diminished expectations for students, with girls encountering additional challenges, such as biased teacher attitudes, inadequate learning materials, and gender-stereotyped school environments. The findings of this study highlight the need to address poverty and its relationship to gender in educational policies and practices to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic or gender status (Mensch & Lloyd, 1998).

Azmat's (2010) argument can be applied to the Kenyan educational context, highlighting the universal challenges that poverty poses to education in developing countries. Like Nigeria, poverty in Kenya significantly undermines access to quality education, with economic hardship limiting families' ability to afford school costs. Azmat (2010) underscores a critical reality: 'Poverty strikes hard and determines people's fate in Nigeria and dictates the kind of life people should live' (Amzat, 2010). This observation is equally relevant in Kenya, where economic constraints lead to high dropout rates at all levels of education, under-resourced schools, and a cycle of poverty that education could otherwise mitigate.

The need for increased government investment, addressing corruption, and implementing effective poverty alleviation programs through education is a universally applicable solution relevant to the Kenyan context. As Azmat (2010) highlighted, "a revolution needs to be declared for things to change and for things to be put in order," advocating for systemic changes and emphasizing education to eradicate poverty. Kenya can follow this blueprint to tackle its educational and economic challenges (Amzat, 2010).

Education Funding

The study conducted by Mutiso et al. (2015) offers significant insights into the relationship between funding sources and access to high-quality higher education at public universities in Kenya. The authors highlight the strong connection between funding and educational quality, emphasizing that the diversity and origin of funding sources play a crucial role in determining the quality of education provided. (Mutiso et al., 2015).

According to Mutiso et al. (2015), one of the primary challenges facing Kenya's education system is inconsistent government funding, which directly affects the quality of education. This volatile funding has raised concerns among employers regarding the quality of graduates and their ability to meet industry demands (Mutiso et al., 2015). This inconsistency restricts universities' ability to maintain and improve the quality of education, affecting crucial aspects, such as recruiting and retaining faculty, upgrading, and maintaining facilities and resources.

According to Mutiso et al. (2015), the growing trend in tuition fees as a primary source of funding presents several challenges. Researchers argue that charging tuition fees is a cost-sharing strategy to address the increasing demand for higher education and compensate for declining government investment. However, this dependence on tuition fees creates obstacles in terms of affordability and access, particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Mutiso et al., 2015). As tuition fees increase to compensate for the lack of government funding, higher education becomes less accessible to a significant portion of the population, exacerbating inequality and limiting social mobility.

This research indicates that the amount of funding has a direct effect on the quality of education provided. Although the connection between the two may not be statistically substantial, findings imply that government funding, tuition fees, and other financial resources are essential for delivering quality education (Mutiso et al. 2015). This emphasizes the need for sufficient funding to ensure that educational institutions offer the necessary resources, facilities, and qualified staff to provide high-quality education. Without this, graduates may struggle to meet industrial demands and affect their employability.

Broken Homes

The study "Influence of Broken Home on Students' Academic Achievement Motivation as Perceived by Secondary School Teachers in Ilorin Metropolis" by Adenike (2021) can be used to examine the impact of broken homes and single-parent families on tertiary education in Kenya. This research underscores the importance of a stable family environment for a child's social, psychological, and emotional development, which in turn affects their academic performance and motivation. This finding is essential for Kenyan tertiary education, as students from broken homes or single-parent families encounter challenges like those mentioned in this study, such as poor classroom behavior and repetition of classes. By emphasizing the role of the family in the growth of children, the study recommends that Kenyan higher education institutions consider the specific difficulties faced by this demographic (Adenike et al., 2021).

The findings of Adenike et al. (2021) indicate that the impact of broken homes on academic performance is not influenced by factors such as gender, educational attainment, or years of service. This suggests that the challenges faced by students from broken homes are not limited to specific demographic boundaries, and are universal in nature (Adenike et al., 2021). This insight is particularly relevant for tertiary education in Kenya, where the implementation of effective guidance programmes can assist students from broken homes. These support mechanisms can help mitigate the negative effects of broken homes on academic achievement and promote overall wellbeing. This approach recognizes the significant influence of family structures on academic motivation and highlights the crucial role of educational institutions in providing a supportive learning environment for all students, regardless of their background.

V. Discussion: Interaction And Reinforcement ofBarriers To Gender Equality

The barriers to gender equality in Kenyanhigher education—sociocultural norms, systemic enrollment disparities, andsocioeconomic inequities—do not operate in isolation; rather, they intersectand reinforce one another, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion for women. Forinstance, **socioculturalpractices** such as female genital mutilation (FGM) andearly marriages, prevalent in communities like the Maasai and Pokot, are deeplyintertwined with **economicprecarity**. Through wedding dowry systems, families inunderprivileged areas typically see girls as economic assets, thereforeencouraging early marriage over education (Chege & Arnot, 2012;

Rotich et al., 2014). This cultural-economic nexus reduces girls'enrollment in secondary and tertiary education, with transition rates touniversity as low as 1.0% in Narok North (Rotich et al., 2014). These dropoutpatterns are exacerbated by **poverty**, which forces households to prioritize boys'education, perpetuating gendered resource allocation (Abdinoor, 2012; WorldBank, 2018).

Systemic enrollment disparities further entrench these inequities. WhileKenya's university expansion has increased access, only 9.2% of qualifiedstudents secure admission annually, with public institutions overcrowded andprivate universities financially inaccessible to marginalized groups (Mulongo,2013; Statista, 2024). Already underprivileged by cultural andfinancial constraints, women experience further exclusion: they make just 35%of registrationsand are underrepresented in STEM disciplines (22%) andleadership roles (15%) (Onsongo, 2007; Kinyanjui, 2014). The lack of representation is a reflection of institutional prejudicial views that simulatemore general patriarchal standards, therefore supporting the view of highereducation as a venue dominated by men.

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty and unstable familystructures compound these challenges. Poverty drives families to deprioritizegirls' education, pushing young women toward early marriage as a survivalstrategy (Chege & Arnot, 2012; Mensch & Lloyd, 1998). Broken homes,which disproportionately affect girls' academic motivation and performance,further limit their ability to compete for scarce university slots (Adenike etal.,2021). Meanwhile, **underfundedpublic universities**—reliant on tuition fees—exclude low-income students,disproportionately women, creating a feedback loop where economic hardshiplimits educational access, which in turn entrenches poverty (Mutiso et al.,2015).

Policy failures amplify these interactions. Though anti-FGM laws and constitutionalassurances of gender equality (Government of Kenya, 2010) inadequateenforcement in rural regions letsdestructive practices continue. (Andiema, 2021). Similarly, Vision 2030's gender equitygoalsremain unrealized due to inconsistent funding and a lack ofintersectional frameworks (Muigua,2020). For example, the high cost of

privateuniversities—which marginally improve gender representation—excludes low-incomewomen, illustrating how policy gaps intersect witheconomic and culturalbarriers (Onsongo, 2007).Ultimately, these intersecting barriers createa **hierarchyof disadvantage**: girls from marginalized ethnic communities,low-income households, or unstable families face compounded exclusion. Forinstance, a Maasai girl from a broken home in rural Narok confronts culturalpressure to undergo FGM, economic incentives to marry early, and systemicbiases in university admissions—a convergence of oppression that stifles hereducational trajectory. This hierarchy is sustained by **structuralinertia**, where each barrier legitimizes and reinforces theothers, normalizing gender inequality as an intractablefeature of Kenya'seducation system.

VI. Conclusion

Gender disparities in Kenya's tertiaryeducation system are sustained by a complex interplay of **socioculturalnorms**, **systemicinequities**, and **socioeconomicbarriers**. Harmful practices like female genital mutilation(FGM) and early marriages—rooted in patriarchal traditions—disproportionatelycurtail girls' educational trajectories, particularly in marginalizedcommunities such as the Maasai and Pokot, where university transition rates forwomen remainas low as 1.0% (Rotich et al., 2014; Andiema, 2021). Women, who make only 35% ofenrollments and15% of educational leaders, are further marginalized by systematic hurdles likecongested public universities, gender-specific field-of-study discrimination,and biassededucational environments (Onsongo, 2007; Statista, 2024). Economic precarity exacerbates theseinequities, as poverty forces families to prioritize boys' education, whileunderfunded institutions rely on tuition fees that exclude low-income students(Mutiso et al., 2015; Chege & Arnot, 2012). These barriers intersect tocreate a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion, limiting women's opportunitiesand perpetuating broader socioeconomic inequalities.

Recommendations for Policy
Interventions and Systemic Change

1. **StrengthenAnti-FGM and Gender Equity Policies**:

o Enforce existing bans on FGM andearly marriages through community-led initiatives, leveraging local leaders andNGOs to raise awareness in marginalized regions (Andiema, 2021).

o Integrate intersectionalframeworks into Kenya's *NationalGender Policy* to address overlapping disadvantages faced byrural, low-income, and ethnic minority women (Muigua, 2020).

2. **ExpandEconomic Support for Marginalized Women**:

o Establish government-fundedscholarships and childcare subsidies for women in tertiary education,prioritizing STEM fields and marginalized communities (World Bank, 2018).

o Partner with private universitiesto reduce tuition fees for low-income students, ensuring equitable access toinclusive institutions (Onsongo, 2007).

3. **ReformInstitutional Practices**:

o Implement gender-responsiveadmissions quotas and mentorship programs to increase women's representation inSTEM and leadership roles (Kinyanjui, 2014).

o Mandate gender audits inuniversities to address biases in hiring, promotions, and resource allocation(Morley et al., 2019).

4. **AddressPoverty and Family Instability**:

o Scale up poverty-alleviationprograms, such as cash transfers tied to girls' school attendance, to reducedropout rates (Chege & Arnot, 2012).

o Provide psychosocial support andcounseling services in universities to assist students from broken homes,improving retention and academic performance (Adenike et al., 2021).

5. **EnhanceFunding and Accountability**:

o Increase public funding forhigher education to 6% of GDP, aligning with UNESCO benchmarks, to reducereliance on exclusionary tuition fees (Mutiso et al., 2015).

o Create oversight bodies tomonitor policy implementation, ensuring alignment with *Vision 2030* and the *SustainableDevelopment Goals* (SDGs 4 and 5) (Government of Kenya, 2010).

Final Comment

Reaching gender equity in Kenyan highereducation calls for institutional responsibility,community involvement, andcoordinated policy action to destroy structural inequalities. Kenya may usefocusing the needs of underprivileged women and addressing the intersectionalcauses of exclusion to turn its educational system into a driver of fairdevelopment.

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