



# Girls' Educational Experience in Dadaab Refugee Camp: Challenges and Perseverance



Karen Meyer<sup>1</sup>, Cynthia Nicol<sup>1</sup>, Ali Hussein<sup>1</sup>, Abdikhafar Ali<sup>1</sup>, Philip Karangu<sup>1</sup>, Hassan Hassan<sup>2</sup>, Samson Nashon<sup>1</sup>, Mohamud Olow<sup>1</sup>, Mohamed Bulle<sup>1</sup>, Siyad Maalim<sup>1</sup>, Abdihakim Muse<sup>1</sup>, Rita Irwin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of British Columbia and <sup>2</sup>Simon Fraser University, Canada

## Abstract

UNHCR and partners in the education sector within Dadaab Refugee Camps attach great importance to equal education for both girls and boys. However, a large gender disparity still exists related to:

- ❖ School performance
- ❖ Enrolment rates in both primary and secondary levels
- ❖ Class participation
- ❖ Number of female refugee teachers

The aim of our pilot study is to explore the challenges girls and female teachers experience in Dadaab Refugee Camps. The exploratory study draws from interviews with 5 young women who lived, studied and became teachers in Dadaab Camps. In the interviews, the participants talk about the obstacles and possibilities to overcome them.

## Background

Our pilot study explores challenges girls face while attending school in Dadaab Refugee Camps. Out of Dadaab's estimated population of 347,980 (mainly Somali refugees), half are female; and 60% of females are younger than 18 years. A third of girls in Dadaab between the ages of 6 and 13 years go to school. For girls between 14 to 17, only 1 in 20 is enrolled (UNHCR, December 2015).

Level	School age (years)	GER: Boys	GER: Girls	Average
Pre-primary	3-5	28.7%	23.1%	25.9%
Primary	6-13	51.8%	33.5%	42.7%
Secondary	14-17	12.1%	4.6%	8.3%

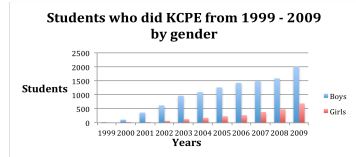
From: UNICEF/UNHCR gross enrolment rates (GER), April 2012 p.5)

As the data for 2012 (table left) show there has been no significant change in girls' participation.



A typical high school classroom in Dadaab shows this gender disparity.

The chart shows increasing number of girls who sat Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) from 1999 to 2006. However, the gender disparity is still evident.



## Participants and Methods

- ❖ This pilot study uses data collected from interviews with 5 female teachers who completed both their primary and secondary education in the Dadaab Camps.
- ❖ Four of the women are currently teachers in Dadaab schools and enrolled in the Teacher Education Diploma program offered by University of British Columbia, Canada, and Moi University, Kenya, as part of Borderless Higher Education of Refugees (BHER). The fifth woman is now studying at Vancouver Island
- ❖ Interviews were based on focus group discussions, and by phone calls, lasting 25 - 50 minutes. Interviews were transcribed using Transana software, coded and analysed by our research team.
- ❖ Transcripts were coded according to challenges and obstacles they experienced as girls and experience currently as teachers.
- ❖ The study also draws upon data about the Dadaab Camps and schools from various official websites and research articles regarding gender.



## Results

### • Challenges to Educating Girls

#### Socio-cultural factors

- ❖ Girls face cultural expectations and restrictions that undermine their education. Doing household chores is one expectation. One participant recalls:  
*"You may see a family and there is maybe five boys and three girls, around eight children. Then the boys may be sent to school while the girls may remain at home and cook for the boys."*
  - ❖ Girls are prone to forced marriages at an early age before they complete their studies. Early marriage hinders their future ambitions.  
*"... in our class, there were seven girls who were learning in that class, so four of them drop out due to early marriages and they have not reached even secondary education."*
  - ❖ Girls experience sexism and gender discrimination. Girls' activities toward open socialization with boys are perceived by many as behaviour not appropriate. Intimidations for female refugee teachers stem from cultural perceptions that female teachers are intellectually inferior and not as authoritative as male teachers. One participant recounts:  
*"... Maybe, you are a lady and you do not draw something on the board and you tell your students to come up and draw it, and they will tell you if she doesn't know how to draw then why is she coming to class."*
- Cultural restriction plays a part here as girls are conscious or afraid to be in culturally inappropriate postures.

#### Socio-economic factors

- ❖ The harsh economic reality in the camp makes girl education difficult compared to their male counterparts. Boys from poor families are able to stay with relatives and sleep at school at night. For girls, however, this is not possible as there are stereotypes associated with girls not staying with their families.
- ❖ The lack of learning resources, such as books and other school equipment, hinder girl education (one book for every ten students). Boys can share books together at night or through study groups. For girls, however, opportunities to participate together are rare due to cultural restrictions/bad images projected when girls gather with their neighbouring boys to study.
- ❖ Repatriation is also a factor. Girls move with their family when parents decide to return to their homeland. This move disrupts their education since they are not able to stay behind to finish school. Cultural perceptions on girls living alone and safety issues make it impossible for girls to stay behind.

#### School-based factors

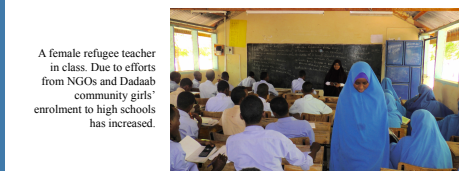
- ❖ Schools are located far from family homes and many students walk for at least two hours to and from school. It is difficult for girls to arrive on time or go home for food during break times. It is also difficult for girls when they have to cook breakfast for the family at home before going to school.
- ❖ The lack of female refugee teachers discourages girls from finishing school and becoming teachers themselves. Female refugee teachers act as role models and girls feel comfortable approaching them when facing difficulties.

### • Perseverance

- ❖ Despite difficulties to education, girls have developed ways of adopting and overcoming the challenges presented them. Leilo, who is currently a teacher, said:  
*"Despite all the challenges we are undergoing, we tried to manage and overcome, because we know that the roots of education are bitter but its fruits are sweet. So harvested on how to get those fruits."*
- ❖ Those girls who have managed to persevere and complete their studies have inspired and motivated many in Dadaab society. They have acted as role models to younger girls in the camp. This accomplishment has had consequences among parent perspectives. Some have started educating their daughters like their sons. A female refugee teachers describes it:  
*"The parents have seen many so many girls who have finished schools and who want to pursue their higher education there in Canada and they have helped their parents and relatives a lot, so now each and every person is taking their daughters to school because they realized that education is very important."*



Muna Osman, a former refugee from Dadaab who recently graduated from University of Ottawa motivating girls in Dadaab through the WUSC-WTK KEEP program.



## Conclusion

Indeed the obstacles and challenges for girl education are many in Dadaab, from early marriage to the distant walk to school. Low school enrolment and high dropout rates for girls are alarming. With the realization that education is powerful and valuable to the people of Dadaab, some girls and young women have received support from their parents and brothers to overcome the key challenges facing them. They serve as role models to other girls and community members. Such accomplishment, however, does not eliminate the socio-cultural practices and harsh economic reality that exist in Dadaab. However, many girls and young women are interrupting the reality rather than adapting to it as part of life, alongside the encouragement from their family members. We acknowledge their perseverance and hard work.

## About the Authors

As a research team and authors of this work, eight of us grew up in the Dadaab camp, became teachers in secondary schools there, and currently are studying on scholarships in Canadian universities. Five of us who have taught secondary teachers in the camp within a Teacher Education Diploma Program are curriculum researchers in a Canadian university.



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