



# The Cultural Factors Affecting Academic Performance of Orphaned Girls in Primary Schools in Meru South Sub- County, Kenya



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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the cultural factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in public primary schools in Meru South Sub-county. Descriptive survey research design was used. The target population was 600 orphaned girls in 150 public primary schools from which a sample size of 250 orphaned girls in class 6 and 7 was purposively selected for the study. In addition, 50 teachers who teach standard 6 and 7 were included in the sample for triangulation. Data from the respondents was collected through questionnaires. The computer based statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 17.0 was used to analyze the data. Data was presented by use of frequency distribution tables. The study found out that cultural factors such as; Inducement by orphaned girls' relatives to drop out of school to get married, cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents' property and performing heavy gender roles like cooking and washing negatively affected academic performance of orphaned girls. The government needs to enforce the law against retrogressive cultural practices such; as offering young girls for marriage to earn dowry, denying orphaned girls inheritance to their parents' property and pressure to undergo FGM which affects academic performance of orphaned girls.

**Keywords:** Orphaned girls; Cultural factors; Academic performance; Factors affecting orphaned girls; Performance of orphaned Girl.

## 1. Introduction

Since independence in 1963, it has been the policy of the Government of Kenya to provide basic Education to all its citizens. This is done because education is a fundamental right and a means of achieving economic and social development. It is through education that child mortality rates and gender inequalities can be reduced (Omoniyi, 2013). Education improves the quality of people's lives and leads to broad social benefits to both the individual and the society (Banathy, 2000).

Education plays a crucial role in securing economic and social progress as well as improving income distribution. It is through education that child mortality and gender inequalities can be reduced (Omoniyi, 2013). Education has socio-economic and political benefits, thus countries have significant economic and social returns to investment. This could be the reason why most developing countries devote large proportions of their revenue towards improving education. At the global level, education has been viewed as an important tool in the achievement of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 as agreed by the 147 Heads of states and Governments in the millennium Declaration in September 2000.

Girls' education saves and improves the lives of girls and women in the society (UNICEF, 2005). Studies have shown that education has a measurable impact on multiple roles of women in national development and household welfare, thus, education for women has a positive impact on succeeding generations' academic achievement (Republic of Kenya, 2007). However, Orphan hood encroaches in and impedes the educational progress of girls in

the society. Orphan hood is a condition where a child has either one or both parents dead (Beegle *et al.*, 2006). According to Adamson and Roby (2011) orphans can be classified as either partial; where the child has lost one parent, or total orphans where the child has lost both parents. According to Barnett and Whiteside (2002) the major cause of orphan hood in Sub-Saharan African countries is HIV/AIDS and other ailments like Malaria, cancer and other terminal diseases. However, deaths also have been as a result of other causes such as; accidents, terrorism, tribal and inter clan clashes among others.

The burden of raising orphans in most cases falls primarily on close relatives like grandparents, uncles, aunts and also friends (Subbarao and Coury, 2004).

Death of parents introduces orphans to changes that they are not prepared for (Chen (2005) The changes may involve moving from a middle upper-class urban home to a poor rural relatives' home (Cetinavci, 2012). It may also involve separation from siblings, which is often done arbitrarily when orphaned children are divided among relatives without due considerations of their needs (Wiseman, 2012). The children who do not move are forced to live alone and take care of their young siblings in their late parents' homes without the presence of an elderly person (Guest, 2001). These changes might be very stressful as they pose new challenges and constraints to the orphan's life. Orphaned girls may not endure such conditions and this may affect their academic performance (Tanga, 2013).

According to World Bank (2003), out of one hundred and twenty-one million children worldwide who are not in school, majority of them are orphaned girls. Girls are quite vulnerable when not in school as they are likely to suffer from abuses and are victims of domestic violence at homes. The UN has stressed protection of the vulnerable and orphaned children because uneducated girls are at risk of becoming marginalized. They are also more vulnerable to exploitation, and the spread of HIV/AIDS is said to be faster among such girls as compared to boys (Subbarao and Coury, 2004).

In China the term orphan loosely refers to children who are not cared for by their parents. China faces challenge of abandoned children especially girls due to their culture which value boys more as compared to girls; and when a girl is born most parents abandon them. The orphaned and abandoned children are taken to unregistered orphanages. According to High (2012) the orphans have no legal status-*Hokou*. *Hukou* refers to an individual residency permit under the Chinese household registration system and such children have difficulties in obtaining access to civic entitlement such as health care, education and employment. Therefore, they have nowhere to turn to and this creates a major challenge to their academic performance. In Thailand, orphaned learners have challenges in acquiring education because there are no policies catering for OVC's so they have no access to schooling.

According to Kalaba (2010), orphans in Zambia have low access to education due to economic factors such as lack of basic school requirements which translates to poor academic performance According to Oyier (2013) orphaned girls in Uganda have lower self-esteem and negative attitude to education compared to non-orphans which affects their academic performance. Kenya's orphaned and vulnerable children have not fully benefited from Free and compulsory primary Education provided by government. The learners still lack proper meals, housing, parental care and free health care services. Orphaned girls lose 53 days per year due to lack of sanitary towels which has affected their academic performance (Njeru, 2017)

World Bank (2003) Report indicates that Kenya has a population of 2.6 million orphaned learners who need proper handling in order to cope socially and academically. According to Ombuya *et al.* (2017) orphaned girls in Rongo district are at a risk of engaging in prostitution, child labor, child abuse and contracting HIV/AIDS which poses a risk to orphaned girls not accessing and continuing with education.

According to MOE Report (2019) KCPE mean score for Meru South sub-county in 2018 was 262.7 and in 2015 the mean score was 256.4. The academic performance has gone down. Among factors associated with this was orphan hood especially orphaned girls who might be overburdened by domestic chores. Nduthu (2014), in a study evaluating social adaptation factors that affect academic performance of orphans in Meru South sub-county, concluded that social adaptation plays a great role in the orphans' academic performance. A study by Kiragu (2015), argues that orphan hood affects discipline, access and retention of orphans in schools in Meru South Sub-county. This study therefore seeks to find out factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in public primary schools in Meru South sub-county.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Benefits of girls' education to society are immense and cannot be ignored. Girl's education is vital in achieving the Millennium Development Goals on child mortality, improving maternal health and poverty eradication. Orphan hood may encroach and impede the educational progress of girls in society. Data from the Ministry of Education in Meru South Sub-county shows that academic performance of orphaned girls' is low. A society with many uneducated mothers has challenges in child health care such as proper nutrition and immunization. Uneducated women would be faced by unemployment and can only fit in low paying jobs where they earn very meager income hence the vicious cycle of poverty. If the issue of orphaned girls' education is not addressed, the country may not achieve its objectives on Education for all. Despite orphan hood encroaching and impeding the educational progress of girls in the society, no study has been done on social, cultural, economic, and psychological factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in Meru South Sub-county. There is need therefore to investigate factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in Meru South Sub-county.

### **1.2. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to establish the factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in public day primary schools in Meru South Sub-county, Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya.

### 1.3. Objective of the Study

The study was guided by the by following objective:

- To determine the cultural factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in primary schools in Meru South Sub- county, Kenya.

### 1.4. Research Question

The study was guided by the following question:

What are the cultural factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in primary schools in Meru South sub-county?

## 2. Cultural Factors Affecting Orphaned Girls Academic Performance

Culture plays a major role in deterring orphaned girls' academic achievement in primary education because it has defined the place of girls and women to be in kitchen performing domestic chores (Anastasia and Teklemariam, 2011). In a case where a mother dies, a girl is forced to abandon education and stay at home to take care of the family and siblings at the expense of schooling (Rono, 2002). Orphaned girls suffer from traditions such as early marriages in exchange for bride price so that their brothers can continue with education and also to lighten the family's economic burden, this interferes with the girl's education. Traditional law in many rural areas dictates that women and children cannot inherit property so relatives of the deceased come and claim the land and other property. It is reportedly a serious problem for widows and child – headed households in Kenya. Practice of property grabbing heightens the strain on extended families and increases the number of street children (Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2011). On paper Kenyan inheritance law provides children with important protections when both parents die without leaving a will, their property is to be divided equally among their children, whether male or female

Yet, in reality many children do not inherit the property they are entitled to from their deceased parent such as a house or apartment, land, or movable property (Kamau, 2015). Children rarely know their rights, how to get a lawyer, or how to access the office of the public trustee. When orphans are deprived of their inheritance and are left with nothing to support their education, they become stressed and spend time which they are supposed to be in school to defend their rights. Sengupta and Guha (2002), state that girls are married off at a young age as their education is viewed as a poor investment because it yields no long term benefits to the natal families and that education may instill "non-conformist behavior" in girls thus not being able to get spouses or sustain marriages.

Culture plays a major role in deterring orphaned girls' academic achievement in primary education because it has defined the place for girls and women to be in the kitchen performing domestic chores (Anastasia and Teklemariam, 2011). In a case where a mother dies a girl is forced to abandon schooling and stay at home to take care of the family and siblings at the expense of schooling (Rono, 2002). Orphaned girls suffer from traditions such as early marriages in exchange for bride price so that their brothers can continue with education and also lighten the family's economic burden, this interferes with the girl's education.

Dickens (2011), postulates that culture over- burdens girls with more responsibilities than boys. He noted that in a case whereby a mother dies, a girl may be brought home to take care of the family and other siblings at the expense of schooling whilst the boys are allowed to continue with schooling. In addition, girls suffer from traditions such as early/post marriages in exchange for bride price transforming the school girls into a commodity for exchange; auctioned to the highest bidder so that their brothers can continue with education (Rono, 2002). It has been noted that the situation is made worse when the parents have died and girls remain under a care-giver.

According to Croll (2006) parents have very different expectations for girls and boys in that the sons are uniformly expected to live with or near parents, provide long term support and succeed in education, career or other income generating activities. On the other hand, girls are supposed to stay at home and learn the domestic chores so that they can become good wives in the future and acquire just basic education to facilitate them as manages of their homes. A study by Hannum *et al.* (2009) found that discrimination in girls' access to education persists in many areas due to attitudes that boys should be educated first and that since girls get married and take care of the children and homes, priority to education comes second. Family preference for boys' education and the need for children's labor service within and outside the household often limits the education of girls (Beneria and Bisnath, 2005).

According to Epstein (2022) adults and school girls pointed that women think more about becoming good wives and mothers and should get concerned with home management and not professional career. Such mentality really affects the girl- child performance as they do not give their best in schools. The same study established that most of the adults, local officials, elderly people and religious leaders indicated that parents prefer not to invest so much on the girl- child education compared to that of boy- child. Sengupta and Guha (2002), notes that in many regions, girls are married off at a young age. There are regions where Culture protects their daughters from contact with foreign cultures.

In regions where there is acceptance of the importance of education for women, some religions or people discourage girls from becoming highly educated as they will encounter some difficulties in finding husbands (Fatuma and Daniel, 2006). They further found that there was apperception that educated women are not co-operative and they are extremely Independent thus making marriages impossible. Their education is viewed as a poor investment, because it yields no long –term benefits to their natal families. Sometimes education may instill 'no-conformist' behavior in girls thus not being able to get spouses or sustain marriages (Sengupta and Guha, 2002). Heerden (1995) notes that some fathers, particularly in rural areas and slums, do not attach much value to education. They regard schooling for girls as unnecessary and a waste of money because girls would in any case stay at home after marriage to attend to their children and households. Boys on the other hand should be earning money from an

early age so as to sustain their families. The high cost of schooling and the inability of poor orphaned girls to buy uniforms and acquire other basic necessities may encourage the girls to seek sexual relationship with older men who can provide them with money to use. The effect of this relationship results into pregnancy of such girls who are then expelled from schools, thus cutting short their schools careers (Anastasia and Teklemariam, 2011). Even though such girls are encouraged to return to school after delivery of the baby, it becomes a difficult task for an orphaned girl because there would be nobody to remain at home with the new born, or their care-givers fear that they would become pregnant again, and sometimes the girls themselves fear being ridiculed or feeling stigmatized

Igbo *et al.* (2015), found that the African patriarchal society’s viewpoint favors boys over girls because boys maintain the family lineage. Additional reasons why girls do not have adequate access to education in Africa include the fact that many have to stay home to nurse relatives living with HIV/AIDS.

Practice of property grabbing heightens the strain on extended families and increases the number of street children Gaciuki (2010). On paper Kenyan inheritance law provides children with important protections when both parents die without leaving a will, their property is to be divided equally among their children, whether male or female. If the child is under 18 of age, a public trustee will administer the property until the court appoints a person who administers the property on the child’s behalf; this may be the guardian or any other adult. Yet, in reality many children in Kenya do not inherit the property they are entitled to from their deceased parent such as a house or apartment, land, or movable property (Kamau, 2015). According to Igbo *et al.* (2015) When orphans are deprived their inheritance they are left with nothing to support their education (Sengupta and Guha, 2002) states that girls are married off at a young age as their education is viewed as poor investment because it yields no long term benefits to the natal families and education may instill “non-conformist behavior” in girls thus not being able to get spouses or sustain marriages.

### 3. Research Design

The research design guides the researcher to collect, analyze and interpret data. This study adopted a descriptive survey design and employed qualitative and quantitative approaches. Descriptive survey design was used because it was not possible to manipulate subjects. Orodho (2003), defines research design as a scheme outline or plan that is used to generate answers to research problems. It constitutes the blue print for the collection, measurement and analysis of data (Grant and Osanloo, 2014).

### 4. Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) sampling is a process of selecting few cases in order to provide information that can be used to make judgment about a larger number of the population. simple random sampling was used to select 50 public primary schools for the study. In each of the schools, purposeful sampling was used to identify orphaned girls in class 6 and 7. The researcher then used simple random sampling to pick 5 orphaned girls and 1 teacher from each sampled schools. The sample size therefore, was 300 respondents comprising 250 orphaned girls and 50 teachers,

### 5. Results and Discussion

The study sought for perceptions from teachers and orphaned girls to determine whether cultural factors negatively affect the academic performance of orphaned girls in public primary schools. Orphaned girls’ responses are presented on table 1.

Table-1. Response pupils on cultural factors affecting Academic performance of Orphaned Girls

| Factors  | Strongly Agree % | Agree %     | Not Sure % | Disagree % | Strongly Disagree % |
|--|------------------|-------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
| The pressure from the community for orphaned girls to undergo FGM affects their academic performance.                          | 12.8             | 15.6        | 4.0        | 22.8       | 44.8                |
| Inducement by orphaned girl’s relatives to drop out of school to get married affects their academic performance.               | 14.0             | 20.8        | 9.6        | 28.8       | 26.8                |
| Cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents’ property affects academic performance of orphaned girls. | 18.0             | 18.8        | 13.6       | 20.0       | 29.6                |
| Exposure of girls to premature sexual act affects academic performance of orphaned girls.                                      | 18.0             | 13.6        | 8.0        | 26.0       | 34.0                |
| Offering girls for marriages to earn dowry affects academic of orphaned girls.   | 40.0             | 17.2        | 4.8        | 20.8       | 17.2                |
| Heavy gender roles e.g. cooking and washing affect academic performance of orphaned girls.                                     | 20.5             | 17.9        | 6.4        | 21.2       | 31.6                |
| <b>Mean</b>  | <b>57.5</b>      | <b>34.9</b> | <b>1.9</b> | <b>2.4</b> | <b>2.0</b>          |

Information presented in table 1 indicate that 92.4% of orphaned girls agreed that offering orphaned girls for marriage to earn dowry negatively affects their academic performance. this concurs with Heerden (1995) who noted that some fathers, particularly in rural areas and slums, do not attach much value to education. They regard schooling for girls as unnecessary and a waste of money because girls would in any case stay at home after marriage to attend to their children and households only. The findings further agrees with those of Sengupta and Guha (2002) that girls are married off at a young age as their education is viewed as a poor investment. 57.2 % of the respondents agreed that the culture of offering orphaned girls for early marriage affected orphaned girls academic performance which his concurs with a study done in Ethiopia by Beneria and Bisnath (2005) which found that girls were married off at a very tender age and they face early pregnancy leading to responsibilities of taking care of their children which make it difficult to engage in effective learning. 38.4 % of the respondent indicated that the agreed that cultural gender roles overburden girls especially orphans with heavier responsibilities of household chores which hampers their academic performance. this agrees with findings by Dickens (2011) that culture over- burdens girls with more responsibilities than boys and in a case where a mother dies, a girl may be brought home to take care of the family and other siblings at the expense of schooling whilst the boys are allowed to continue with schooling

The responses from the teachers to cultural factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls are shown on Table 2.

**Table-2.** Teachers’ responses on cultural factors Affecting Academic Performance of Orphaned Girls

| Factors   | Strongly Agree % | Agree %     | Not Sure%   | Disagree %  | Strongly Disagree % |
|---|------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------|
| The pressure from the community for orphaned girls to undergo FGM negatively affects their academic performance.                          | 35.7             | 26.2        | 16.7        | 14.3        | 7.1                 |
| Inducement by orphaned girl’s relatives to drop out of school to get married negatively affects their academic performance.               | 33.3             | 28.6        | 21.4        | 14.3        | 2.4                 |
| Cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents’ property negatively affects academic performance of orphaned girls. | 33.3             | 28.6        | 21.4        | 14.3        | 2.4                 |
| Exposure of girls to premature sexual act negatively affects academic performance of orphaned girls.                                      | 38.1             | 19.0        | 16.7        | 19.0        | 7.1                 |
| Offering girls for marriages to earn dowry negatively affects academic of orphaned girls.   | 54.8             | 38.1        | 7.1         | 0.0         | 0.0                 |
| Heavy gender roles e.g. cooking and washing negatively affect academic performance of orphaned girls.                                     | 50.0             | 40.5        | 4.8         | 4.8         | 0.0                 |
| <b>Mean</b>   | <b>40.9</b>      | <b>30.2</b> | <b>14.6</b> | <b>11.1</b> | <b>30.66</b>        |

Information presented in Table 2 indicates that majority (91.9%) agreed that offering girls for marriage to earn dowry affects academic performance of orphaned girls. A total of 61.1% agree that inducement by orphaned girl’s relatives to drop out of school to get married affected academic performance of orphaned girls while 57% agreed that exposure to premature sexual acts affected the academic of orphaned girls.

Overall perception of orphaned girls and teachers shows that 54.64% indicate that cultural factors negatively affect academic performance of orphaned girls. Only 38.4% of the orphaned girls agreed while majority (71.1%) of the teachers indicated that they agreed that cultural factors negatively affected orphaned girls academic performance.

Information in Table 2 further indicates that 92.9 % of the respondents agreed that offering girls for marriage to earn dowry negatively affects academic performance of orphaned girls. This concurs with Rono (2002) who found that orphaned girls are offered for early marriages in exchange for bride price so that their brothers can continue with education and lighten the family’s economic burden, this interferes with the girl’s education. The study established that cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents’ property negatively affected orphaned girls’ academic performance. This concurred with Pemunta (2017) that traditional law in many rural areas dictates women and children cannot inherit property so the relative of the deceased claim land and other property which adversely affects academic performance of orphaned girls.

The study found out that 61.9 of the respondents agreed that inducement by orphaned girls’ relatives to drop out of school to get married lowered their academic performance, this concurred with Sengupta and Guha (2002) who found that girls are married off at young age at the expense of their education. The study established that 57.1 of the respondents indicated that they agreed that exposure of orphaned girls to premature sex acts negatively affected their academic performance. This concurred with Joseph-Williams et al. (2014) that orphaned girls are abused as they exchange sex for food, money, clothing or are coerced into having sex with their teachers which negatively affect their academic performance.

The study established that offering orphaned girls for marriage to earn dowry negatively affected their academic performance which concurs with Rono (2002) who found that orphaned girls are offered for early marriages in exchange for bride price so that their brothers can continue with education and lighten the family's economic burden. The study established that performing heavy gender roles like cooking and washing negatively affected academic performance of orphaned girls which concurred with (Anastasia and Teklemariam, 2011). Culture as defined the place for girls and women to be kitchen, so in case a mother dies a girl is forced to abandon schooling and stay at home to take care of the family and siblings at the expense of schooling hence their academic performance is negatively affected.

## 6. Summary of the Findings

This study sought to establish the cultural factors affecting academic performance of orphaned girls in public primary schools in Meru south sub-county. The study established that academic performance of orphaned girls was negatively affected by inducement by relatives to drop out of school to get married and cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents' property. The study also found that exposure of orphaned girls to premature sexual acts, offering girls for early marriage to earn dowry and engagement in household chores like cooking, washing and looking after other siblings affected their academic performance.

## 7. Conclusion

From the findings of this study it was concluded that retrogressive culture like female genital mutilation, early marriages, gender discrimination in property inheritance and attachment to dowry are still practiced in Tharaka Nithi county and are major impediment to orphaned girls' academic performance. Orphaned girls' academic performance is negatively affected by inducement by orphaned girls' relatives to drop out of school to get married, cultural belief that girls are not supposed to inherit their parents' property and performing heavy gender roles like cooking and washing. All these cultural beliefs and practices affect orphaned girls' attitude toward learning and discourages them from working hard hence poor academic performance.

## Recommendations

- In view of the above findings that retrogressive culture was an impediment to orphaned girls' academic performance. The government needs to enforce the law against retrogressive cultural practices by; protecting young girls from being offered for marriage by their relative in order to earn dowry, female genital mutilation and early marriages,
- The government should further follow up and ensure that orphaned girls get their share of inheritance of their parents' property. This property will help them settle down and concentrate in academic work hence improve their academic performance.
- The non-governmental organizations working with the vulnerable populations should focus and put more efforts in helping the orphans especially the girl child.

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