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Whose Gender?: Exploring Representations in Kenyan Social Studies Textbooks

One of the United Nations' (UN) eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aims
ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. Highlighting
the need to educate girls, the UN asserts that meeting the Education Goal will speed progress
toward every other Millennium Goal, asserting that educating children helps reduce poverty and
promote gender equality. "It is inextricably linked to Goal 3 – gender parity – as universal
primary education by definition requires gender parity."[1]

Considering the Kenyan education system and its relatively recent introduction of free
primary education (2003) and subsequent massive expansion of children's enrollment in the
classroom, gender parity has been achieved with gross primary enrollment (ratio of female rate
to male rate) is 0.96 and the ratio for net primary enrollment for females to males is 1.01.[2] The
reality of the women of Kenya is that they remain underrepresented in virtually all areas of
leadership and employment. Thus, if gender parity has been achieved in primary schools, what
other possible factors are contributing to the discrepancies between UN rhetoric and the Kenyan
reality? A UN assumption that physical presence in a classroom as the best way to alleviate
poverty ignores the relevance of what the students are learning, which is codified in textbooks.
This paper is a brief preliminary analysis of Kenyan Social Studies textbooks and will be the
foundation for a larger project to follow, which will include conversations with Kenyan primary
school students in three schools in Kitale, Western Kenya. Through content and situational

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[1] UNICEF, "Goal: Achieve Universal Primary Education," online http://www.unicef.org/mdg/education.html, accessed 1 December 2007.
[2] United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty, and the Global Water Crisis* (2006) available from http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006.

analysis, this study will investigate Kenyan textbooks' ability to address issues of gender and whether they successfully break through or reinforce gender stereotypes.

In an effort to reverse the process of female gender marginalization, the United Nations (UN) adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. According to the UN, the CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.[3] The Office of UN High Commissioner on Human Rights notes that Kenya ratified CEDAW on March 9, 1984.[4] To address these issues, in 2005, the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology created a point-based system focusing on the promotion of emerging issues, which included gender responsiveness. In order to get the Ministry's approval, every textbook must stress those emerging issues through both text and illustrations.

A. Brief Literature Review

Apple's theory that knowledge of certain groups dominates texts takes on a gendered perspective through a number of channels. The political and ideological climate of states often determines the content and form of curriculum.[5] In countries that favor patriarchal norms, curriculum and the accompanying textbooks reflect these norms. Moreover, according to Benedict Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' and the creation of nationalism, "This nation is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[6] This is achieved primarily through printed text, in which a nation creates an historic version of

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[3] "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women," Available online. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/. Accessed 26 April 2007.
[4] *Ibid.* Available http://www.ohchr.org/english/countries/ratification/8.htm.
[5] Michael W. Apple, "Textbook Publishing: The Political and Economic Influences," *Theory into Practice* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 286.
[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

itself through invented narratives rather than real stories.[7] What is important to note, however, is

that while the State may be gendered male, the nation tends to be identified as female.[8] This

model of woman-as-nation reflects both idealized notions of what defines a woman as well as

current political and national concerns, thinking effectively dispensed through the national

educational system.

Focusing on gender and textbooks in Kenya, while research is limited, one study proves

useful. In 1991, Anna Obura analyzed the portrayals of girls and women in Kenyan textbooks

using a number of qualitative and quantitative analyses.[9] In Obura's work, the findings

determined that there are fewer images of females and they are negative in relation to the images

of males. [10] These conclusions include a frequent failure to name females, females appear

subsequent to males on the page, in the paragraph, and within the sentence, lack of female

autonomy, and emphasis on physical appearance rather than on achievement of females, all

deemed to be negative portrayals of girls and women by Obura.[11]

B: Theoretical Framework

For a theoretical framework, feminist theory and cultural reproduction theory have been

selected for their tendency to draw on the importance of human agency in examining and

explaining existing social realities. To position the relationship between Western understandings

of gender and Kenyan gender definitions, the often-contentious relationship between liberal and

Third World feminisms will examine how gender discourses operate in representations to

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[7] *Ibid*.
[8] Jan Jindy Pettman, "Boundary Politics: Women, Nationalism and Danger," in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds.), *New Frontiers in Women's Studies: Knowledge, Identity and Nationalism* (London: Taylor and Francis Ltd., 1996), 187. Also see Anne McClintock, "'No Longer a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism," In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, eds. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[9] Anna P. Obura, *Changing Images: Portrayal of Girls and Women in Kenyan Textbooks* (Nairobi: Acts Press, 1991), 23-24.
[10] *Ibid*, 57.
[11] *Ibid*, 114-116.

highlight that gender cannot be understood by the frequency of individuals with longer hair and breasts or by name alone. Regarding cultural reproduction theory, Bordieu believes education systems are used to reproduce the culture of the dominant class in order for the dominant class to continue to hold and release power.[12] To put it in the perspective of gender, education would then replicate gender relations according to the status quo. In the Kenyan case, whose culture is being reproduced?

C: Textbook Analysis

The chosen textbooks are Standard (Grade) 1-8 from the Kenya Literature Bureau (KLB) publishing house. These textbooks have been chosen because they are the only series currently approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. Kellner writes that texts require multivalent readings, and a set of critical or textual strategies that will unfold their contradictions and structured silences.[13] Considering this, and guided by feminist standpoint theory, I have done a preliminary analysis of textbook content, making notes of patterns and surprises. I have noted Western expressions, defined as images incongruent with Kenyan ethnic practices, to understand what constructions are based on Western ideals.

A preliminary analysis of KLB Social Studies textbooks, Standards One-Eight, illustrate that gender differences are not easily found in the text because of the usage of "us", "we", and "they". Accompanying illustrations are more indicative of gender performativity. Where the text will say "our parents", if the task is domestic, a woman is pictured. The sentences "Our parents buy for us clothes", "Our parents make for us sweaters", and "our parents repair our clothes

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[12]Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977).
[13] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and Postmodern* New York: Routledge, 1995: 112.

when they get torn" all show women performing these tasks.[14] Women's work is in the home while men are shown working in income-generating positions outside of the home.[15] When teaching children various tasks, women are shown working with children in the kitchen while men work outside of the home.[16] When women are in scenes involving the division of labor outside the home, they sit on edges of the image or equated to animals. In one particular scene, the son is purchasing foodstuffs while his pregnant mother stands to the side and behind the transaction.[17] Another image demonstrating modes of transport, two women carry barrels on their backs.[18] Other examples of transport in the same image are donkeys, camels, and carts.

Representations of the female body tend to indicate occupation. Manual labor in the area surrounding the home (farm, front yard) is shared equally among all family members.[19] In the books, girls and women are identified by their smaller waist, breasts, head wraps/longer hair, and wear dresses. Women in illustrations representing typically male-dominated occupations, like pilot and police officer, have a noticeably larger build and greater muscle definition than women in female-dominated occupations, like teaching.[20] Photographs of national police and military forces show only male employees.[21] There are, however, efforts to show that men are also teachers who are do not seem to have given feminine features.[22]

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[14] Omwoyo Mogeni and Enos Oyaya, *Primary Social Studies Standard 1,* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2003): 34, 42, 44, 50

[15] *Ibid*, 49, 75.

[16] Omwoyo Mogeni and Enos Oyaya, *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2003): 53, 55.

[17] Omwoyo Mogeni and Enos Oyaya, *Primary Social Studies Standard 1,* 46.

[18] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 137.

[19] *Primary Social Studies Standard 1,* 32, 35.

[20] *Ibid,* 74, 76.

[21] Omwoyo Mogeni and Enos Oyaya, *Primary Social Studies Standard 8,* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2003): 210.

[22] Omwoyo Mogeni, *Primary Social Studies Standard 2*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 2003: 69.

Issues of conflict resolution are also gendered. Photographs of a police force, complete with shields and batons, show men only.[23] Another photograph of civil justice reveals a group of men attacking another.[24] An image accompanying a lesson on school behavior depicts a male faculty member disciplining a young male student with a stick.[25] The only image of a woman dealing with conflict shows her as the peacemaker between two arguing men.[26] From these depictions, it appears that women in the text do not engage in battle, on any level, but rather serve as diplomats of compromise.

Concerning community and civic engagement, a photograph of community meetings present women as recipients of information given out by a male leader[27] and an illustration of a community discussion shows men only.[28] One woman is in the scene but only as a passerby. The texts show men and woman equally engaged in the electoral process with photographs showing a group of men and a group of women voting in an election.[29] Photographs of political leaders, former and contemporary, are exclusively male.[30] Standard Two's inclusion of images of a female chief and a male chief are a clear effort to improve gender parity.[31] The appearance of a female chief, however, is not relevant for the overwhelming majority of Kenya's patrilineal ethnic groups. Furthermore, the female chief stands before a crowd of nine while the male chief draws a much larger crowd, thus requiring a microphone.

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[23] *Ibid*, 210.
[24] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 207.
[25] *Primary Social Studies Standard 1,* 62
[26] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 208.
[27] *Primary Social Studies Standard 8,* 172.
[28] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 200.
[29] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 216. *Primary Social Studies Standard 8,* 173.
[30] *Primary Social Studies Standard 8,* 145, 153, 160, 161, 184.
[31] Mogeni, *Primary Social Studies Standard 2,* 110.

Children during recess, women knitting, and men playing a board game offer a gendered perspective of leisure. At school, the girls jump rope while the boys play soccer.[32] Three women sit on a couch and knit.[33] Two men play a game while another plays a musical instrument.[34] It is likely that the depiction of the children and men's leisure time, knitting as leisure for women is debatably an urban phenomenon, although this also becomes an issue of class.

Illustrations showing the different forms of family offer much in terms of the relationship between Western experiences and Kenyan realities. A nuclear family in a rural area appears while eating at an American-style kitchen table,[35] a scene highly unlikely in such a context. Most rural families do not sit for meals in the same ways as American families. Single parent families are highlighted through the text and accompanying images.[36] The textbooks discuss the terms "nuclear family" and "single parent family" yet this idea is foreign in a Kenya context because in patrilineal societies, it is unlikely for a child to live in a single father home, as seen in the Standard 1 textbook.[37] Images of typical ethnic group homes of a number of Kenya's ethnic groups are labeled as temporary or are given a short lifespan while the picture of a permanent home is a decidedly Western-style two-story home.[38] This is not to say that these homes do not exist in Kenya, because they certainly do. The implication that a non-Western home is not permanent carries significance in terms of its connection to the idea of the home as the woman's domain, as well as in what defines "home" in relation to the nomadic nature of a number of Kenya's ethnic groups. More research is certainly needed on this topic.

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[32] *Primary Social Studies Standard 1*, 105.
[33] *Primary Social Studies Standard 5,* 69.
[34] *Ibid*, 58.
[35] *Primary Social Studies Standard 1,* 12.
[36] *Ibid*, 24-25.
[37] *Ibid*, 25.
[38] Mogeni, *Primary Social Studies Standard 2*, 91-93.

While this analysis is exclusively textual, it offers a strong foundation to understanding the evolution of gender representation in Kenyan textbooks. Relative to Obura's analysis, and considering the new regulations for Ministry approval, strides have been made. The authors and publishers have made clear efforts to gender-neutralize the language. The accompanying images, however, prove counterproductive to this goal. Women remain in the home and in the margins of Kenyan society. The Western notion of gender equality that all men and women are equal in the home and in the work place makes use of Western definitions of man and woman. Where Western ideals of gender neutrality have been imposed (woman as officer, woman as pilot), the Kenyan translation hints that these women are not really so in the Kenyan context, implying that gender is not understood in the same manner as it is in a Western environment. In addition to gathering student opinions and input on the images in their texts, what is required for greater understanding of this phenomenon is an understanding of multi-ethnic constructions of gender represented in Kenya. For example, how does the matrilineal history of the Kikuyu influence their patrilineal norms today? Using these approaches will advance the discourse on the political nature of school textbooks and analyze the textbook's role in shaping ideology, specifically gender, by listening to the voices of students who are consumers of this textbook knowledge. Relating these perceptions to students' lived realities and the contextual analysis initiated here can both improve curriculum content and understanding of gender constructions outside of a Western environment.

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