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**Bending the private-public gender norms: negotiating  
schooling for young mothers from low-income  
households in Kenya**

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## Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSA	Centre for the Study of Adolescence
DEO	District Education Officer
DHS	Demographic Health Survey
EFA	Education For All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
EYC	Elimu Yetu Coalition
GMR	Global Monitoring Report
GPI	Gender Parity Index
KESSP	Kenya Education Sector Support Programme
KIPPRA	Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MSPND	Ministry of State for Planning and National Development
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
MOPHS	Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSHP	National School Health Policy
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

## **Abstract**

Despite gender equity concerns in education emerging as a key area of interventions and debates within the global justice arena, the educational needs of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers have received minimal attention. This research is an attempt to make visible the experiences of young mothers from a rural community in Kenya and their efforts to realise their right to education. By interrogating the policy environment that guides the education of student-mothers and their lived experiences at schools, households and neighbourhoods, this research unveils how material and discursive dimensions of gender relations interact with other factors such as insecure livelihoods to mitigate schooling for student-mothers. The research findings point to the positive agency and resilience of student-mothers and their potential to transform gendered ideologies that seek to confine motherhood to the private sphere as they participate in formal education as pregnant schoolgirls and mothers. However, for the right to education for young mothers to be fully realised, policies must be attendant to the material and discursive situation of student mothers.

## **Keywords**

Gender relations, young mothers, education

# **Bending the private-public gender norms negotiating schooling for young mothers from low-income households in Kenya**

## **1 Introduction**

This silence—the low profile surrounding teen pregnancy [and student-mothers] in educational research, policy, and practice—is neither natural nor neutral. Rather, the gaping data holes are a constructed and highly politicized silence. A repoliticization of teen pregnancy as an educational policy issue shifts the usual framing... to a politicization of the education of pregnant and mothering students (Wanda 2006: 60 – 61).

### **1.1 Background**

Education has always played a pivotal role in the social and economic development of any country; this is more so in enhancing the quality of lives of its citizens. The recognition of the centrality of education to development and its effects as a multiplier of other rights (Tomasevski 2003:1) has led to increased international and national interest in achieving global educational goals; with a specific focus to girls' education within developing countries as a key pathway to gender equality (Unterhalter 2007:39). This significance is embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2 and 3 as well as the Education For All (EFA) Goals; specifically MDG 3 and EFA Goal 5 that recognises educational access as being unequal for boys and girls. Despite the substantial progress made over the post-Dakar period (2000–2009), girls remain over-represented among the count of children who are out-of-school. The 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) indicates that of an estimated 72 million out-of school children, 54% of them are girls (UNESCO 2010: 1-2).

Gender equity in educational opportunities and outcomes has therefore emerged as one of the main areas of interventions and debates within global justice arena. However not all girls face the same challenges in educational participation. Pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers face unique challenges in ensuring that their new mothering roles and identities do not translate into a premature exit from formal education. Evidence from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) point to the fact that early child bearing remains pervasive in developing countries and continues to constrain girls and young women from participating in education (Eloundou–Enyegue 2004:510). Unfortunately, the magnitude and plight of pregnant schoolgirls and students-mothers, especially in the developing context, has not been adequately highlighted as a crucial gender issue within education.

This research is an attempt to make visible the experiences of young mothers from a rural community in Kenya. Analysed against the backdrop of a normative education policy that allows re-entry of young mothers to school, the study brings to the fore the tensions that the young mothers encounter as they navigate a gendered and discursive school system in an endeavour to

realise their right to education. Drawing from literature on the household as a site where competing interests take place, the study also explores household factors and the way these factors interact with other institutions such as the school and the community to influence the education of young mothers. The empirical evidence from the study is drawn from case studies of seven student-mothers who have returned to the mainstream education system after child-bearing and five young mothers who had not returned to school at the time of the study. Their views are triangulated against those of their teachers and parents.

While most literature on early childbearing refers to the mothers under twenty years of age as either teenage mothers or adolescent mothers, this paper uses the term 'student-mothers' to refer to school-going mothers, while the term young mothers will be used to refer to young women below twenty years of age who have children. The term student-mothers is preferred for two main reasons; one is to capture the double and often times a socially 'troubling' identity of being learners and at the same time mothers and secondly it includes some of the study participants who were over nineteen years of age and were student-mothers in the schools reached.

## 1.2 Framing the research issue

As educational aspirations rise in both developed and developing countries, early childbearing among women below twenty years of age has been perceived as a social problem as it often leads to a premature end to many young women's educational careers. Among the 28 OECD countries, approximately 1.25 million teenagers become pregnant each year; of these 60% become mothers annually (UNICEF 2001: 2). In Africa, a review of the DHS data from 23 Sub-Saharan countries showed that pregnancies accounted for an average of 18% of all female dropouts in secondary schools and more than 20% in nine countries (Eloundou-Enyegue 2004:510).

In Kenya, estimates indicate that 142,000 babies are born to women below 20 years of age annually (CSA 2008: 26). The 2003 Kenya DHS (CBS et al 2004: 61) indicates that the proportion of adolescents that have started child bearing increased from 4% at age fifteen to 49% at age nineteen; crucial ages associated with improving educational stock. The Coast Province of Kenya, of which Magarini District (the study site) is located, was listed in the same DHS as one of the four regions 'where at least one-fourth of women aged 15–19 have begun child bearing' (*ibid*). Other statistics linking early childbearing and education in Kenya indicate that 9.9% of the out-of-school girls stopped attending school due to pregnancy and another 8.1% due to early marriage<sup>1</sup>. Chevalier and Viitanen (2003:335) point out that early childbearing 'reduces the chances of post-compulsory education by up to 24%'. Considering that Kenya's primary education Gender Parity Index (GPI) oscillated between 1.02 in 2002 and 0.94 in 2007 (KIPPRA 2009: 43-45) and the national primary–secondary transition rate stood at 47.3% by 2007 (*ibid*), it makes sense to

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<sup>1</sup> [www.girlsdiscovered.org](http://www.girlsdiscovered.org)



consider the gender equity benefits of addressing the impediments to young mothers' long term participation in education.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, passed in July 1990, affirms in Article 11(6) that 'State parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that girls who become pregnant before completing education are able to continue with their education.' Pursuant to this, a number of sub-Saharan countries including Cameroon, Madagascar, Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Zambia and Kenya, passed school re-entry policies allowing young mothers return to schooling (Chilisa 2002: 22). Kenya's school re-entry policy was passed in 1994, but despite this policy window of opportunity that allows the young mothers re-entry into education, it is acknowledged that very few of them do return to formal schooling (Lloyd and Mensch 2008: 1, CSA 2008).

School re-entry policies that require an initial disengagement from schooling during pregnancy have been criticized as being punitive on the affected girls (Chilisa 2002: 22, Tomasevski 2003:165). Chilisa argues that such policies constitute a subtle form of violence on the affected girls as the re-entry process is embedded in ideologies of exclusion (Chilisa 2002: 22). Studies attesting to the fact that girls who disengage from schooling while pregnant are less likely to re-engage (Chevalier and Viitanen 2003: 325, EYC 2003: 111, Wanda 2004: 118) also allude to the inadequacy of school re-entry policies as the only measure to encourage a return to schooling. Despite this criticism, it is important to note that these policies represent an important first step in dismantling discriminatory practises towards young women on the basis of pregnancy or motherhood. At the same time, evidence indicates that their enactment has not been accompanied by a corresponding discursive shift in the way student-mothers are perceived within the education system and the society as a whole. Young mothers that have taken advantage of this policy window of opportunity have had to contend with a hostile school environment, where they are isolated, humiliated and stigmatised by the fellow pupils; with hardly any effective interventions from teachers (Chigona and Chetty 2007: 9, CSA 2008: 46-47). Furthermore, the paucity of empirical studies in developing countries on student-mothers and their educational conditions makes it difficult to ascertain the magnitude and myriad of challenges that hinder the school re-entry process as well as their long term education participation.

Available literature that interrogates the school re-entry policies in developing countries and the circumstances of student-mothers have tended to focus on three broad areas. These are: the responsiveness of the policies in addressing the complex realities of student-mothers (Chilisa 2002, CSA 2008), the magnitude of early childbearing and its impact on girls educational participation (Eloundou-Enyegue 2004, Lloyd and Mensch 2008, Mensch et al. 2001) as well as establishing how conducive the school environment is to student-mothers already in schools (Chigona and Chetty 2007, CSA 2008). Despite these findings, not many studies have focused on the determinants of school re-entry for the young mothers at the household or family level. Yet these factors are important given the fact that most developing countries lack

social protection programs that can otherwise serve as incentives for the young mothers to return to schooling.

Evidently, household characteristics and behaviour have a strong effect on the re-entry policy; more so parental and community willingness to support school re-entry for the young mothers, most of whom are rural minors. At another level, how the households interact with other institutions and the external socio-cultural environment that mediates these interactions may affect the chances of schools re-entry. These factors have to be identified and understood by policy makers and programme managers if Education For All, including student-mothers, is to be realised. This research will therefore investigate the micro-processes at the household level and establish how gender relations within the household and community inhibit or enhance school re-entry for adolescent mothers.

### 1.3 Relevance and justification

The global agenda for increased educational participation for girls is grounded on two basic principles: the first principle, with strong instrumentalist notions, views educating girls as an investment that will enhance their future labour return and hence lift them out of poverty (Heward 1999: 4, Unterhalter 2007:39). The second, a moralist principle, argues for girls' education as a basic human right that should be accessed by all irrespective of their sex (*ibid*). The right to education is entrenched for girls and women, in several United Nations Conventions such as Universal Declaration for Human Rights (Article 26), in the International Covenant on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has been ratified by several countries, including Kenya.

It is this rights-based approach to girls' education that is the premise for this study. Bearing in mind that not all girls face the same challenges, realising the right to education for girls and women calls for the deconstruction of the categories 'girls and women' if all that encompass the two categories are to realise this right. Ramya Subrahmanian, (cited in Unterhalter 2007: 56) distinguishes three forms of rights that support gender equality and equity in education; these are *rights to* education, *rights in* education and *rights through* education. The complex realities of student-mothers cuts across the three dimensions of rights identified above, making it necessary to analyse the processes and power relations that determine their access to education, survival in school and ability to gain a quality of education that can translate into either future schooling at secondary levels or reasonable earnings. These are some of the issues that this research will attempt to unveil.

Although a substantive body of literature exists on teenage pregnancy and its consequences, there is little information concerning the educational experiences of young student-mothers in the developed and the developing parts of the world (Tomasevski 2003: 165, Wanda 2006: 60). Where information is gathered on cases of pregnant school-girls, it is done as a process towards change (Tomasevski *ibid*) as was the case when there was intensive lobbying for changing the rules from expulsion from school due to pregnancy. However since the policy was passed, there has been minimal and

consistent efforts in ensuring that schoolgirl pregnancy and early childbearing are looked at as educational issues (Wanda 2006: 60). This research seeks to contribute towards bridging this knowledge gap by engaging with early childbearing as an educational issue while simultaneously giving voice to the experiences of young student-mothers within the formal education system.

The choice of topic also relates to a personal motivation. Drawing on my own working experience in the development sector, I have in the past observed that gender and education proponents have ignored the educational needs and rights of young mothers forced to exit schooling prematurely due to pregnancy. The discourse has been one of advocating for alternative education or non-formal education programmes to cater for them. These discourses have failed to consider the nature and quality of such programmes (if and where they exist). In developing countries, Kenya included, 'non-formal education programs are often run on an ad-hoc basis with little coordination, guidance, control, or funding from the government' (MacPherson 2007 cited in Population Council 2009: 10). The programmes are also run by local communities and NGOs, often with poor linkages with the mainstream education systems (Okwany 2004: 178); inspection visits for quality assurance purposes are rarely undertaken by the government education officials. Consequently, discourses on non-formal education programmes for young mothers condemn them to an education of poor quality with limited mobility to professional careers. I was therefore excited to meet two young mothers who had managed to return to the mainstream education system and still had dreams of professional careers despite the disruption in their education. This research is therefore a partial attempt to give a voice to their experiences and understand the factors that enhanced their school re-entry.

#### **1.4 Research objective and questions**

This study aims to make a contribution to the existing literature on gender equity in education, specifically on the effects of gendered social relations at the household and community levels on the education of young mothers. By situating early childbearing as an educational issue, this research will also highlight the experiences of student-mothers in schools and the respective social arenas of school, households and neighbourhoods with a view to informing policy and practise regarding their situation.

To achieve this objective one main research question and three other related sub-questions were posed:

1. How do gender relations at the household and community level affect school re-entry among young mothers?

Sub-Questions:

- What are the young mothers' experiences of disengaging and re-engaging with the education system?
- How do the young mothers' experiences at the household, neighbourhoods and school interact to affect the school re-entry process?

- How do these experiences interact to influence the pathway that the young mothers take/create when returning to schooling?

## 1.5 Methodology

This is a qualitative case study research that makes extensive use of primary data. Anchored within a Feminist Standpoint theoretical perspective, this study privileges the voices of the young mothers and considers their views alongside those of teachers and parents so as to analyse the young mothers' experiences in disengaging and sometimes re-engaging with the mainstream education system.

### Research site

This study was conducted in Marafa Division of Magarini District in the Coast Province of Kenya between July and August 2010. Until September 2009, Magarini was a division of the larger Malindi district and was elevated to district status by the Office of the President in September 2009. The main ethnic communities, who were also the earliest inhabitants into the area, are Giriama and Watta. However other ethnic communities have over the years migrated and inhabited the area. These include Chonyi, Kamba, Kauma and Kikuyu. The 1999 census estimated the Magarini population at 180,160, with 69% of individuals living below the poverty line (CBS 2003 cited in MSPND 2008: 49). The main source of livelihood in the area is subsistence farming which includes both crop and animal production on a small scale (World Vision 2006). Most of the communities' housing structures are mud-walled, although there has been an improvement from the preferred traditional roofs made from palm fronds to the now more common iron sheet roofed houses. A baseline report by World Vision indicates that within Marafa division, distances to the nearest health facility range between 4-7 kilometres and the average walking distance to the nearest permanent water point stands between 5-7 kilometres (World Vision 2006). This backdrop of low development is important as the study aimed at reaching young mothers from low-income households.

### Sampling methods

The primary schools from which the study participants were drawn from were purposively sampled; this was done with the help of headteachers who reported that their schools had either student-mothers enrolled or pregnant girls that dropped out of school. The young mothers that formed the core of the study were selected on the basis of the fact that they fitted within the main study criteria of being students in public primary schools at the time they became pregnant and were drawn from five schools in Magarini District ; where they were either former or current students.

Of the 17 primary schools in Marafa Division of Magarini District; 6 schools were chosen to represent the three locations of Adu, Bungale and Marafa. However, due to the fact that schools closed earlier than the scheduled date only five schools were reached. While the headteachers of the five schools

confirmed having had schoolgirl pregnancy cases in their respective schools over the last three years, it is only in three of the five schools reached where pregnant schoolgirls had returned after childbearing. In these schools, all the enrolled student-mothers formed part of the study participants. The other two schools had school-pregnancy cases but had not recorded any returnees; in these schools young mothers living within the school vicinity and could be identified by the teachers were approached and requested to participate in the research.

While the research design had targeted 12 adolescent mothers (age 14–16 year old) due to the assumption that these were the main ages to be found in the primary schools; only one of the study participants fitted within this bracket. None of the student-mothers enrolled in school were below 16 years of age as they ranged between 17 and 20 years of age.

### **Sources of data and methods**

Due the nature of the research question and the type of information that I was soliciting from the study participants, semi-structured interviews were employed as the main research technique. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve young mothers; seven of them student-mothers enrolled in three different schools and five not enrolled in school. With the exception of three young mothers, all interviews took place at their respective homes. With one young mother, the interview was conducted at the place where she was working after getting consent from her employer. Two interviews were conducted at the school where the student-mothers were enrolled, after they pointed out that their homes was far off, and going home for the interviews would mean that they miss the afternoon classes. The interviews were conducted once with each young mother and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Seven of these interviews were voice recorded following consent from the young mothers, while five of them were not due to reservation expressed by the study participants.

In addition, interviews were also conducted with parents of the young mothers (four fathers and three mothers), three teachers from the schools where the student-mothers were enrolled, one area chief, and the Malindi District Children's Officer. The parents were selected due to the fact that they were in a position to give information on the experiences of the young mothers at the household and the community levels; while teachers had more information related to their schooling experience. Following repeated statements from the young mothers and their parents on the intervention of the area chiefs; one chief was interviewed so as to get his insight into the experiences of the young mothers. The Malindi District Children's Officer, who also covers the Magarini District, and a representative of an NGO working with single mothers were also interviewed so as to provide a more vivid understanding of the support available to the young mothers. A profile of the study participants is provided as Annex I.

While semi-structured interview were used as the main research technique, this study also engaged with a wide variety of literature on early childbearing, gender and education. One study report, on teenage pregnancy and school drop-out in Kenya, by the Centre for Study of Adolescence in 2008 was

consulted extensively. The following government policy documents and reports were also consulted; the Kenya Gender in Education Policy, the National School Health Policy and various Ministry of Education reports.

### **Researching young mothers: challenges and ethical dilemmas**

Punch (2002:323,328) states that ‘childhood as a social institution is constrained by adult society’; hence children have learnt to anticipate adult’s power over them, more so in schools that are children spaces under the control of adults (ibid: 328). In view of the fact that access to the student-mothers was facilitated by teachers from the schools they were enrolled in, most of the young mothers must have felt compelled to participate. The introductions mainly done by the headteachers, in their offices, already tilted the power scale in my favour. In one school, the teacher had the student-mothers sitting outside his office waiting for my arrival. A fact that not only made them completely powerless, but also drew so much attention to them as other students were curious to know why they were there.

Christensen and Prout (cited in Holland et al. 2010:362) point out that there will always be power asymmetries between a researcher and study participants depending on the socio-cultural contexts. However, the researcher needs to be aware of this and ‘rather than ignoring or blurring power positions, ethical practice needs to pay attention to them’ (Edwards and Mauthner 2002 cited in Holland et al 2010: 362). In order to address the power imbalance between myself and the young mothers and provide for their privacy, I chose to hold the interviews with the student-mothers at venues that were convenient for them, other than the school environment. Hence, for the seven student-mothers, four of them chose to have the interviews at their homes. One student -mother chose to have the interview at the boarding house where I was residing while two interviews were conducted at school due to long distances between home and school.

The young mothers were also free to respond to my questions as long as it was comfortable for them. A number of young mothers chose not to respond to certain questions that I had asked (although for some it was not an overt refusal but prolonged silences even when the same question was repeated and clarified that they had understood), and I chose to respect that. I agree with Holland & Ramazanoglu (1994:13) who argue that a researcher may have control and power over the questions she will ask as well as how data is analysed, but those being studied control what they will disclose. Strikingly, most of the young mothers choose not to answer the question requiring them to state the comments made by their peers in school when they were pregnant. Tellingly, this might have been a way of protecting themselves against reliving an otherwise unpleasant experience; one they did not see a need for recounting.

The young mothers that were out of school were much harder to reach than I had anticipated, as most of them had moved away either to work in the urban centres or had moved to their marital homes. This necessitated numerous visits to different homesteads within the villages in search of the out-of-school young mothers. Although the out-of school young mothers were

less influenced by teachers when it came to participating in the study, the young mothers and their parents were worried that they would be identified as out-of school children at a time when there was a push by government officials and civil society organizations to get children enrolled in school. However after explaining to the parents that I was a student and my findings were for academic purposes only, a few of them were willing to participate.

Over the different interviews, there were instances of inconsistent information from parents and their daughters regarding certain issues probed by this researcher, but more common was on the issue of financial support from either extended family members or the fathers of the young mothers' children. To address this dilemma I drew from the Feminist Standpoint Theory with its emphasises on situated knowledge and the argument that a 'specific social situatedness endows the subject with a privileged access to truth' (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002: 316). On the same issue, Alderson and Goodey (1996 cited in Punch 2002: 325) highlight the need for researchers to be aware of assuming adults' knowledge as being superior over that expressed by children and youth. With this in mind, I chose to privilege the information provided by the young mothers over that of their parents since they were better positioned to know the real story on issues affecting them and their children.

## **1.6 Organization of the paper**

This paper is organized into five main chapters; with this first chapter serving as an overview of the research topic of early childbearing and education. The second chapter provides a conceptual framework that serves as a critical lens for analysing the lived experiences of the young mothers in their community and school settings. Chapters three and four provide an analysis of the research findings; with Chapter 3 highlight the policy related issues that shape the educational experiences of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the key factors that intervened to either enhance or inhibit school re-entry for the young mothers. The concluding chapter provides an overview of the study findings and their implication on the education of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers.

## **2 Conceptual framework**

This research seeks to understand how young unmarried mothers and their guardians negotiate within the school, household and neighbourhoods and either conform with or subvert gender relations that constrain their return to school. To do this, it is important to provide a conceptual framework that serves as a lens from which the experiences of the young mothers can be viewed and analysed. The following concepts, deemed to be important to this research will be discussed: gender relations, the household, early childbearing, discourses on school-girl pregnancy and student-mothers, and agency.

## 2.1 Gender relations

Gender relations refers to interactions between women and men that are socially constructed, often in a manner that they also signify power relations between the two (Kynch 1998:108). These interactions have both ‘material and ideological’ dimensions that are constitutive in nature (Agarwal 1997: 1-2), often tilting the power balance in favour of men in most patriarchal communities. These material and discursive dimensions are visible not only in the socially recognised differential allocation of roles, responsibilities and resources, but also in ‘ideas and representations-ascribing to women and men [of] different abilities, attitudes, desires, personalities’ (ibid). At the ideological level, public and private spheres are separate domains that are associated with gender. Women and their socially ascribed roles are associated with the private sphere of home which is viewed as an arena for personal relations as opposed to the masculinised public sphere that is associated with impersonal relations (Harding 1986). Similar to other social relations, gender relations are culture specific and evolve with time; shaping the nature of interactions between the two sexes in both the private and the public sphere.

Some of these culturally specific socially constructed norms, such as the gender division of labour in reproductive work and gendered norms on sexuality have become accepted in many societies as a ‘natural and self-evident part of the social order’ (Agarwal 1997: 15). Hence social norms on gender relations mediate interactions across the institutions considered in this research paper; namely the household, the community and the school. This concept will facilitate the analysis of the gendered experiences of the young mothers at school as well as at the household.

## 2.2 The household as a social arena

Theorization of the household<sup>2</sup> as a social arena of production and resource allocation evolved from unitary models that conceptualised the household as a harmonious unified entity that pools available resources and a ‘benevolent dictator’ who allocates these resources in a manner that maximises utility (Haddad et al, 1997: 3). These assumptions were later disapproved by anthropologists, setting off a set of collective approaches to theorization of household production and allocation behaviour based on bargaining theory (*ibid*, Ellis 2000: 19). These collective approaches accommodate power asymmetries among the household members and are therefore useful in analysing gender relations (Agarwal 1997:2). Hence, the household is conceptualised as a site of competing gendered interests, rights and obligations,

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this research the household is conceived to encompass co-residential arrangements and the kinship relationships that exists among the members in the shared residence and characterised by coordinated (Ellis 2000: 18). However, this view also recognises that ‘the maintenance of networks of mutual support between kin does not require co-residence or even close proximity’ (Bruce and Lloyd 1997: 214), as is most in Africa, families tend to have persons connected to them by blood or marriage residing outside the family but maintain economic connections.



with household members often involved in bargaining, negotiations, and even conflict (Moore 1994 cited in Kandiyoti 1998: 135).

Households in developing countries comprise of, the elderly, adults and children; each with varying rights and obligations that are determined not only from a jural standpoint (Greenhalgh 1985: 268) but also from a socio-cultural one. From a jural perspective, the relationship between children and parents is seen as an exchange of rights and duties, or obligations and counter-obligations, among family members (Greenhalgh 1985:268). While from a social-cultural perspective, social norms on gender relations place varying rights and obligations on the male and female adults/children; accounting for what Agarwal (1997: 15) termed as 'local theories of entitlement' that stipulate who gets what and through what sort of work. The interaction of these two standpoints forms the basis for intra-household allocation of resources, particularly investment in education. This makes the household a site where 'particularly intense social and economic interdependencies occur between a group of individuals' (Ellis 2000: 18).

From a livelihoods perspective<sup>3</sup>, Battacharya and Rani (cited in Mtshali 2002: 22) point out that by utilizing the resources accessible both internally and externally, household activities are an important part of the generation of livelihood security. Furthermore, it is argued that an increase in the family size, necessitated by the birth of a new child, has implications on the household livelihood arrangements especially when available resources are rendered inadequate; thereby necessitating new livelihood arrangements so as to meet the additional consumption costs (Koohi-Kamali 2008: 3, Okwany forthcoming: 12). Two of the five types of capital indentified within the livelihood approach are analytically useful for this research as they have a direct implication on the lives of young mothers and their schooling experiences; these are financial capital and social capital (especially kinship ties).

The new livelihood arrangements, necessitated by the birth of a new child, may include re-allocation of roles and getting more members of the family into the labour market for additional income. Here, the socially constructed gender relations discussed in the section above become a significant mediator of the social and economic interdependencies within the household and influence the decision making process. Subsequently, in patriarchal societies it is common to find that there is little investment in daughters as they are seen as temporary members of a household and will eventually leave for their marital home (Greenhalgh 1985, cited in Diane Wolf: 1997: 126, Stromquist 1999: 22). The household is therefore an important concept for this study as it is a site for decision making and resource allocations that affect educational access for young mothers and their daily life experiences.

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<sup>3</sup> The livelihood approach, mainly utilised in work on poverty and rural development defines livelihood as comprising 'the assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), activities and the access to these (mediated by the institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household.' (Ellis 2000:10)

### 2.3 Discourses surrounding pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers

Discourses can be understood as ‘historically constructed systems of knowledge...which facilitate the interpretation of issues’ (Hailonga 2005:8) and have the power to influence practice (Ramazanoglu 1993:2). The discourses surrounding sexuality among the youth are often ‘inconsistent and contradictory’ depending on whether they are deployed on a male or female person (Hailonga 2005: 195). Pregnant school-girls and student-mothers are surrounded by discourses that stem from what Foucault termed as the ‘repressive hypothesis’ that served as an ‘injunction to silence on sexuality’; a silence that should not be misconstrued as an absence of discourses (Foucault 1978:4). Schools have historically played a role in the monitoring and controlling of young people’s sexuality. While creating the impression that sex was not discussed, the discursive practices within schools, such as the elaborate planning of recreation lessons and sitting arrangements alluded to the assumption that the sexuality of adolescents was ever presented hence ‘institutional devices and discursive strategies have been deployed’ to monitor this sexuality (*ibid*: 28-30). However, Foucault also cautions that there is no clear divide between accepted and unaccepted discourses; contradictory discourses can operate even within the same social space (Foucault 1978:101-102). Two main discourses within educational institutions are relevant for this research paper; these are the discourses of immorality and contaminations; and discourses on pregnant school girls as ‘poor or incapable students’ (Wanda 2006: 64).

Socially constructed norms and perspectives are influenced by historical events. In post-colonial Kenya, the entwined history of colonialism and Christianity influenced indigenous perspectives and practices of sexuality (Ahlberg et al. 2009: 107). However, from both the indigenous and the non-indigenous; the institution of marriage is recognised and sanctioned as the morally right ‘arena for sexual expression’ (*ibid*) and childbearing (Nsamenang 2002: 71, Okwany forthcoming: 12). Sexual relations and childbearing outside the socially sanctioned institution of marriage are frowned upon. Pregnant school-girls and young unmarried student-mothers are evidence of intimate sexual relations outside the sanctioned arena and are therefore framed as immoral ‘wanton females’ or at the very least ‘victims’ of sexual exploitations (Wanda 2006:66). Within schools, unmarried student-mothers are judged to be immoral and assumed to be social threats that can potentially set off ‘an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behaviour’ within the student body (*ibid*: 67, Okwany forthcoming: 12). This had led to stigmatization of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers and a number of discriminatory practices that send negative messages on the educational prospects of student mothers.

Pregnant teenagers have also been framed as deviant students who were already underperforming in school and therefore had low aspirations (Chevalier and Viitanen 2003, Mulongo 2005:25, Phoenix 1991: 26). This casting of pregnant school-girls and student-mothers as ‘incapable’ or ‘poor students’ has had both short and long term implications on their educational experiences. In the short term, this framing lowers the academic expectations on student-mothers and reduces the educational support that teachers are

willing to extend to such students are they are already deemed to be incapable (Chigona and Chetty 2007:10, CSA 2008:42). In the long term, this framing is implicated in the type of educational programmes recommended for pregnant adolescents and young women with children (Wanda 2004:111). Important to note too is that the state and its other institutions can sometimes consciously or unconsciously draw from available discourses when enacting well intentioned policies and programmes for particular groups including school re-entry policies for student-mothers. This research will analyse the discourses deployed by pupils, parents and teachers and their effects in relation to the education of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers.

## 2.4 Early motherhood

Childhood and adulthood are taken to be experientially different; with adolescence<sup>4</sup> being the transition period that bridges the two. Even though adolescence is viewed as a transition period and preparation for adulthood (Phoenix 1991: 24, Nsamang 2002: 69), adolescents are still perceived as jural minors and children as is evident in the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC) that defines a child as anyone below the age of 18 years. Phoenix (1991) further states that young mothers below 20 years of age (often referred to as teenage mothers) are in an ambiguous status as they have taken on adult roles of mothering at a time when they are not considered mature enough. By taking on adult roles, the young mothers blur the social divide between childhood and adulthood (De Boek and Honwana 2005:4). This is more so as the pregnant body of a teenage girl is a constant reminder of an active sexuality, that is antithetical to the category of students, the 'silences' on sexuality within schools and the supposed innocence of children (Wanda 2006: 65, Foucault 1987: 34, Phoenix 1991: 25). Despite these discourses, the participation of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers in education has been made possible by the existence of policies; classified as either re-entry or continuation policies, that seek to ensure that pregnancy and motherhood are not grounds for denying females the right to education.

In her book 'Woman Born Motherhood as Experience and Institution', Rich (1976: 13, 34), differentiates between motherhood as an experience that encompasses the reproductive capacities of women and their relationships with children; and motherhood as an institution for women's social control; laden with a history and ideology more fundamental than nationalism. This ideology is behind the upholding of certain discourses of 'ideal' motherhood and ambivalence to motherhood depending on the context in which it occurs. Motherhood is met with approval and celebration when it happens within the approved social institution of marriage, and on the other hand, disapproval when it happens to unmarried women. This ambivalence is also evident within the cultural attitudes and practices towards young unmarried mothers. Hailonga (2005:195) points out that while parents may be upset with the young

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<sup>4</sup>The World Health Organization defines adolescence as between the ages of 10–19 years.

mothers for getting pregnant while single, they often welcome the baby as culturally children are viewed as a blessing.

The emphasis on the institution of marriage as the appropriate arena for childbearing fits well within the gender division of roles and responsibilities that placed different expectations on mothers from those of fathers (Phoenix 1991: 21). While fathers were ideally expected to provide the financial and material support, mothers were expected to meet the caring needs of their children and their fathers. This has made motherhood a role that is normally confined to the private sphere with its own ideal standards (Thorne 1982:11). These ideals are difficult for the young unmarried mothers, especially those in school, as it necessitates taking motherhood from the private into the public sphere of schools. A contradiction that is uncomfortable within the education system.

Among some Africa communities, including the study community, children born to unmarried mothers belonged to the woman's family and were under the custody of her male relatives (Obbo 1980: 34). For such children, the 'biological fathers rights to custody and filiation were only transferred upon the payment of compensation' (*ibid.*). Girls that became pregnant prematurely not only reduced their chances of being married to a bachelor, but also reduced the 'compensation' in terms of bride-wealth that her family would receive in exchange for her 'purity' and reproductive capacity (*ibid.*: 51, CSA 2008: 44). Obbo (1980:51) states that these actions conveyed the message that girls should give birth at their husband's and not the parents' homes. This view is also relevant for this study, since within the Giriama community, children born to unmarried mothers belong to her family, who have the responsibility to provide for the child unless the child's father has paid the 'compensation' for sexual relations with a woman who is not his wife.

## 2.5 Agency

Kabeer (1999: 438) points that agency is the 'ability to define one's goals and act towards it'. Apart from an individual's actions that can be seen as an obvious expression of agency; agency also includes the covert meanings and motivations that individuals give to their actions (Agarwal 1997:25; Kabeer 1999:438). Agency takes on a positive form when an individual is not only able to define and pursue their goals, but is able to do this even when faced with opposition (Kabeer *ibid.*). On the other hand, agency takes on a negative form when others are able to override an individual's choice of goals and actions through the use of violence and threats (*ibid.*). Agency is therefore a crucial concept that will provide an analytical lens to understanding the actions taken by the student-mothers to subvert, conform or negotiate with gender relations at the school, households and community level.

## 2.6 Intersectionality

Intersectionality reveals how categories such as ethnicity, class and gender, are social locations that converge and interact to place individuals from specific groups in particularly disadvantaged situations (Dance 2009: 180). Leslie

McCall has analysed three main intersectional methodologies that can be used as methodological tools for conducting an intersectional analysis; these are ‘anticategorical complexity’ that seeks to deconstruct categories, ‘intracategorical complexity’ that does not reject categories but seeks to expose doubly marginalized identities and ‘intercategorical complexity’ that can be used to analyse inequalities among social groups (McCall 2005:1773-1774). This research will utilise the ‘intracategorical complexity’ methodology to analyse the challenges and opportunities available to the young mothers in their different identities as learners, daughters, and young mothers.

The concepts of gender relations, discourses of school-girls pregnancy, early motherhood and the household will be analysed as encompassing the social structures and locations in which the young mothers are embedded in and has therefore shaped their experiences, but as social actors, their agency will be an important concept on how they shape and are shaped by the social structures and arenas. The differences among the young mothers’ experiences will be highlighted through an intersectional analysis.

### **3 Disengaging and re-engaging with formal schooling: policy and practice**

This chapter provides an analysis of the policy environment that guides the young mothers’ experiences of disengaging and sometimes re-engaging with schooling. The analysis is based on the Kenya School Re-entry policy guidelines, published in the CSA report (2008:45) as well as the more recent National School Health Policy (NSHP) that has relevant sections on schoolgirl pregnancy (MOPHS and MOE 2009:23-24). The policy stipulations within these two documents, which form the principal guidelines for school administrators, will be reviewed against the experiences of the young mothers and the narratives of the teachers. An overview of the two policies will first be provided<sup>5</sup> and will be followed by a review of the implementation process as deduced from the experiences of the young mothers and discussions with the teachers that participated in this study.

#### **3.1 Overview of the Kenya school re-entry policies**

Kenya is among a handful of African governments that have put in place policies on pregnant girls within the education system. The policies on schoolgirl pregnancy have been categorised as either continuation or re-entry policies (Chilisa 2002: 24). Continuation policies allow for uninterrupted continuation of schooling by pregnant schoolgirls and an immediate return to schooling after delivery; these kind of policies are deemed to be more transformative as they challenge gendered ideologies and practices and are also sensitive to the educational needs of pregnant schoolgirls (Chilisa 2002:24). On the other hand, re-entry policies necessitate a disengagement with schooling and only allow for re-entry after a specified period of compulsory leave during pregnancy and lactation (*ibid*). The re-entry policies are deemed to

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<sup>5</sup> Excerpts of the two policies are provided as Annex II and III.

have failed to engage with and transform existing gender relations as they are seen to be based on cultural and traditional ideologies on pregnancy and motherhood (*ibid*).

Kenya's policy (passed in 1994), has the characteristic features of disengagement and re-engagement with schooling and therefore falls under the category of re-entry policies. More recently (in 2009), the Kenya Ministry of Education (MOE), in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation (MOPHS) launched the National School Health Policy (NSHP) which also articulates the specified action that school administrators should take when dealing with schoolgirl pregnancy cases. Both documents clearly state that girls that become pregnant while in school should be allowed to continue with their studies for as long as possible. Since there is no pre-determined mechanism for ascertaining how long is long enough, the decision is left to teachers, parents and the schoolgirls, who have interpreted and implemented this provision disparately. Both policy documents place a great emphasis on the counselling of affected school-girls, their parents and others girls, and at the same time encourages the parents to seek re-admission for the student-mothers in schools, other than those that they were enrolled in while pregnant, so as to avoid 'psychological and emotional trauma' (CSA 2008: 45). This acknowledgement that pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers are possible victims of stigmatizing discourses and practices is not accompanied by any stipulations on how to deal with the perpetrators of the abhorrent practices.

### **3.2 Kenya re-entry policies: mis-categorization or weak implementation?**

Kenya's school re-entry policy, passed in 1994, has been said to be plagued by weak and inconsistent implementation (CSA 2008: 46). This inconsistency was evident within the five schools that were part of this research. The inconsistencies ranged from how teachers identified pregnant girls in their respective schools, what they did once they confirmed pregnancy and all the way to the re-admission of student-mothers into schools.

#### **'Officialising' suspected pregnancy cases and next steps**

The guidelines for implementing the re-entry policy passed in 1994 states that:

Intensive guidance and counselling should be provided to affected the girl, parents, teachers and others girls in schools. Once a girl is sent home the parents should be summoned to schools and receive some counselling after which they should take their daughter home (CSA 2008: 45).

These guidelines leave out the question of how teachers should determine that there is a pregnancy in the first place so as start off the recommended actions. The NSHP tries to address this gap by stating that 'girls will undergo voluntary medical screening once per term' (MOPHS and MOE 2009: 23). While the question of how "voluntary" pregnancy testing can be within the Kenyan

school context has been a subject of intense debate<sup>6</sup>, this study takes it to mean that the student suspected to be pregnant must, on her own free will accept to take the pregnancy tests if and when requested. It is therefore likely that schoolgirls suspecting themselves to be pregnant will not volunteer for the tests.

This can be interpreted to mean that the onus is on the teachers to take the first step. Some teachers pointed out, and rightly so, that they do not have the mandate to force girls to take a pregnancy test even when rumours of a girl being pregnant have reached them. While a few teachers took charge and summoned girls that were rumoured to be pregnant so as to ascertain the truth, two of the three teachers in this study pointed out that they often adopted a 'wait and see' attitude towards such cases. These teachers reported that they waited for parents or guardians to come and inform them of the pregnancy so that they can then take action.

In one case, during the planning and sampling stage of this research with the District Education Office, one headteacher when asked if he had any cases of pregnant girls or student-mothers in his school, stated that he had some 'unofficial cases' as they are yet to be reported to his office by the girls' parents. Upon further probing on the issue of 'officialising' pregnancy cases and why he would not take the initiative to confront such cases he pointed out that this was due to fear of parents' reaction to news of their daughter's pregnancy. Depending on the prevailing religious and socio-cultural beliefs, parents are more likely to react negatively to news of their daughters' pregnancy. This view was shared by two other teachers from the schools that took part in this research.

Some parents may already be aware of the pregnancy and are planning for an abortion, as such a confrontation from teachers may disrupt their plans, and they do not like this. Some parents may go as far as asking you how you knew of the pregnancy and try and implicate you. We recently had a case of a Standard Seven girl who was pregnant and a few months later the pregnancy was not there. (JD teacher)

This, 'officialising' dilemma provided some space for pregnant schoolgirls to prolong their stay in school until the time when they are confronted by their teachers; a space that was exploited by some of the young mothers in this study:

I did not stop attending school even after my pregnancy rumours were all over the school and one female teacher used to give me a 'bad eye'. I attended school, did my end of term 3 exams, by then I was either 8 months pregnant (MK1, 17 year-old student-mother).

After my wife had informed me that our daughter was pregnant, I went to inform the teacher at her school, strangely the teacher was not surprised...he said he had been expecting us to come and inform him as he had noticed

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<sup>6</sup> An article by Vukets, in one Kenya's leading daily newspapers collated the divergent views on voluntary pregnancy testing on school-girls from parents, teachers and religious leaders. The article is available at: <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/-/1056/829400/-/vo7vw2/-/>

“something”. Luckily he did not object when asked to let my pregnant daughter stay in school (JSK, father of one student-mother)

This prolonged stay in school while pregnant was important as it helped the pregnant schoolgirls develop the resilience necessary for a return to schooling as a student-mother.

As part of the next steps after establishing pregnancy, is the question of which official channels should be followed to ensure that pregnant schoolgirls received the required support. The NSHP calls for teachers to work with Children’s Officers (government officials in-charge of ensuring children’s rights and wellbeing) so that legal action can be taken if those responsible for impregnating the schoolgirls are found to be over 18 years of age.

Behind this policy directive is the assumption that all school-going girls are less than 18 years of age, since there are no guidelines for what steps the teachers are to take should the pregnant-school girl be more than 18 years. Yet the reality on the ground is that girls aged more than 18 years of age are still in primary schools (two student-mothers that participated in this study are a case in point). Late enrolment in school, coupled with the fact that teachers force children that are not performing well to repeat classes is a major cause of overage learners in the Kenya; factors that disproportionately affect girls (EYC 2003: 111). The lack of guidelines of how to handle such young women complicates that situation for both headteachers and parents. The District Children’s Officer interviewed as part of this study pointed out that parents who came to report that their ‘school-going children’ had been impregnated, would get shocked when told that no action could be taken once the government dentist<sup>7</sup> has ascertained that their ‘children’ are 18 years of age or above and are therefore considered consenting adults.

Clearly schooling is considered as an experience for children by both policy makers and parents, even when the ‘children’ have in reality attained the age of majority. The pregnancy therefore serves as a sharp departure from childhood and sends a clear message to parents and teachers; that the schoolgirls are no longer children as they have now taken on the adult roles of motherhood. In only three of the twelve young mothers’ cases were government officials, other than those from the education sector involved. In these three cases, the local Provincial Administration such as the area chiefs were involved and facilitated, to a great extent, the securing of some form of child support for the young mothers.

Parents tended to stop pursuing any form of action once the young men involved with their daughters had acknowledged paternity and pledged to provide financial support for the unborn child. The financial support was an important factor to consider when parents needed to decide whether to support the young mothers’ to return to schooling and will be discussed in the next chapter. Unfortunately the lack of guidelines on how to handle cases of

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<sup>7</sup> Due to a centralised system of birth registration, children from rural areas are often not registered, making it difficult to ascertain the age of affected girls. This is compounded by low literacy levels among the parents. The services of the government dentist are therefore used to determine the approximate age of the pregnant school-girls.



pregnant schoolgirls over 18 years of age is a major cause of attrition as both parents and teacher do not feel the compulsion to ensure that the young mothers complete their basic education cycle.

### **Disengagement and re-engagement: timing and processes**

The NSHP guidelines states that pregnant schoolgirls can continue with schooling for as long as possible, but the re-engagement process is expected to take place anytime between four and six months after childbearing. However, it is not clear who should determine what is considered as long enough for the pregnant schoolgirl or whether there is any medical report necessary to ascertain that the pregnant schoolgirl can no longer attend school. Left to the individual interpretation of the policy implementers, this has led to a wide discrepancy on the actual practice.

On disengagement with schooling, the experiences of the study participants varied; with some leaving school as early as when four months pregnant and others staying until the very last days of the pregnancy. Two young mothers reported that they had stopped attending school as early as four months into the pregnancy. One of them stated that the headteacher had told her to 'go and rest' and return after childbearing. Since I did not get to interview this teacher, it is difficult to assess whether his statement was motivated by his concern for the girls health or he was conforming to the ideology that pregnancy is something that should happen in the private space. However this points out the unreliability of individual interpretations of the policy directives. The girl in question went to work as a child minder for a woman who owned and managed a teahouse at the nearby shopping centre, and was therefore denied an opportunity to continue with schooling for no apparent reason. This leeway to send pregnant girls home at will is consistent with Chilisa's (2002: 24) theorization of re-entry policies as having failed to challenge existing discursive dimensions of gender relations and a constitute a subtle form of violating the girls' right to education.

Similarly, the young mothers' process and timing of re-engaging with schooling varied from one school to another and even when applicable to different student-mothers within the same school. Among the seven student-mothers, the shortest turnaround time between disengaging and re-engaging turned out to be three (3) weeks after delivery and the longest two years. The return time was partly a function of the caring demands of the new born babies; a gendered role that is reinforced by the NSHP that emphasises the need for the young mothers to bond with their new born babies as much as possible as well as places the full burden of care arrangements on the young mothers and their parents.

### **Deafening silences**

All the teachers and education officials I came across concurred that early childbearing was prevalent in the District. In fact, one teacher pointed out that I had come to the right place for my research as there will be no shortage of study participants. Unfortunately, this verbal information could not be backed up with documented cases at the schools visited, it was therefore not possible

to get documented records of all school-girl pregnancy cases reported over the last 3 years; neither were there any official records on of the number of young mothers that had returned to school. Hand written letters from the headteachers were seen by this researcher at the DEO's office but copies of the same letters were at times not available at the school from which they originated. Teachers pointed out that they did not have access to photocopying machines; yet carbon papers could have served the same purpose.

One of the Investment Programme within the Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) highlights the need to invest in a detailed Educational Management Information System (EMIS) that can provide useful in-formation for education planning and decision making (MOEST 2005a: 135-136). One main product of this investment programme is a 'Core Data Collection instrument' (MOEST 2005b:43) that is used for conducting an 'annual school census' on the number of children enrolled in schools by sex, orphan status, and children with disabilities (by type). But conspicuously missing from this instrument is the provision to collect data on pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers; a deafening silence that I interpret as a deliberate denial of the active sexuality of adolescent learners that fits within with Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault 1978: 28).

While policy guidelines, such as the need for voluntary pregnancy testing (MOPHS and MOE 2009: 23); point to the awareness of the ever present adolescent sexuality that needed to be monitored; collecting data on pregnant on pregnant schoolgirls and student mothers will therefore be a tacit acknowledgement that schools have failed to rein in the sexuality of schoolgirls'. This interpretation is supported by the resistance demonstrated by religious leaders in 1997 that forced the MOE to abandon plans to introduce family life education, which would have initiated sex education in schools (Ahlberg et al. 2001: 26). Christian religious leaders, joined by their Muslim counterparts, organised public burning of condoms and sex education materials in various parts of the country to protest the planned introduction of family life education (ibid). In view of this background, attempts to track the number of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers is also likely to be met by the same resistance as it acknowledges the active sexuality of schoolgirls outside the socially sanctioned arena of marriage. This silence also demonstrates the low priority given to the education of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers as argued by Wanda (2006:60)

### **Gendered discursive undertones in Kenya's re-entry policies**

These government policies on school-girl pregnancy have also not escaped the socially constructed gendered ideologies and discourses, and have implicitly set different standards on educational participation and parenting between the young mothers and child-fathers. The NSHP encourages the young mothers to take on their mothering roles, breastfeed their babies exclusively for six months and develop strong bond with their new born babies. On the other hand, while the pregnant schoolgirls disengage from learning and learn to take on the "good mother" roles, child-fathers (in cases where they were also learners, and have been identified) continued learning, and at most, were

expected to receive counselling and rehabilitation (MOPHS and MOE 2009: 23).

Within the policies is the apparent conformity with the dominant discourses of childcare as a feminine responsibility that can only be fulfilled by the young mothers and a permissive attitude towards the sexuality of male pupils. It is therefore evident that schools are not ‘neutral entities...[but]... mirror and reproduce the social norms and inequalities in wider society’ (Okwany forth-coming:13). In this case pregnant schoolgirls, who are perceived as an promiscuous females and therefore required to bear the indignity of pregnancy tests every four months (MOPHS and MOE 2009:23) as well as the consequences of the pregnancy while the child-fathers are treated as a naughty children that only require counselling. This also conforms to the dominant notions of women as having a natural tendency towards promiscuity (Mulongo 2005:29) and therefore a dangerous sexuality that needs to be regulated (Okwany forth-coming:12).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion the above dissonance between policy and practise points to a number of issues. The first issue is the fact that underneath the attempts to provide education for pregnant school girls and student-mothers, state re-entry policies have not escaped the gendered discourses that set different parameters for the male and female students involved in the pregnancy cases. Secondly, is whether with this kind of practise, Kenya’s policy can correctly be categorised as a re-entry policy, especially in view of the fact pregnant girls are able to stay in school until a day before delivery and return as early as one month after childbearing. This second issue is important as I argue that the inconsistencies provided spaces for negotiating a prolonged stay and early re-engagement with schooling by pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers and is at the same time a demonstration of Kenya’s potential to go the whole hog and introduce the more transformative continuation policies.

Realising Kenya’s potential for transformative policies and practices on schoolgirl pregnancy and student-mothers will therefore necessitate that the state confronts the gendered ideologies and discursive practices on youth sexuality that permeate the social space of which the state itself is embedded. At the same time, in view of the need to cater for the post-partum health of the young mothers as well as the new born babies; greater synergies will be needed between the Ministries of Health and Education to see to the well-being of pregnant schoolgirls, young mothers and their new born babies.

## **4 Mitigating factors in school re-entry for student-mothers**

This chapter reviews the experiences of the student-mothers within their households, neighbourhoods, schools in relation to their educational participation. The findings presented demonstrate the young mothers’ efforts to balance the triple roles of learners, daughters and mothers as well as negotiate with factors emanating from the social locations of the young

mothers; namely the household, neighbourhoods and school. These factors will be reviewed in light of how they affect the young mothers return to formal education. Finally the agency and resilience of the young mothers as analysed from their narrated experiences is explored.

#### **4.1 Triple roles, triple burdens**

Gender relations shape the way individuals live their daily lives in the family as well as within the wider community and even in schools. Writing on the Nigerian context, Nnameka (2003 cited in Fennel and Arnot 2008:528) states that 'women's lives do not fall into time mediated compartments of girl, sister, mother...but these may overlap and co-exist through her life.' This was evident from the young mothers that participated in this research as their roles as mothers, daughters and learners co-existed simultaneously, and sometimes conflicted. As young unmarried mothers, living under the authority of their parents meant that they had to fulfil the socially prescribed roles of daughters within the gender division of labour regime.

I wake up at 5 a.m. I fetch water and help to water our family vegetable garden. After that I go home with some water, boil it and bath my son. Then I make for him breakfast and feed him...Schools start at 6.45 am with early morning study time, so I am normally late or sometimes I miss the preps, and if the duty teacher is strict, I get punished for that...In the evenings, I wash my son's dirty clothes, then I cook the evening meal, pound maize, fetch water for house use and clean up the dishes. Since I feed my son between 6-7pm, I stop other duties so as to prepare his evening meal and ensure that his food is ready on time as he sleeps early (MK1, 17 year old student-mother).

My sister helps me during the weekdays, but over the weekend I have to do everything, from cleaning the house, cooking for everyone and taking care of my son. She complains that she does all the work during the weekdays, so she rests on weekends and I take over. It is hard to study over the weekend. (SA, 17 year old student-mother)

From the time I had my baby, I stayed home for one year and two months because there was no one to take care of my son, my mother had delivered my younger sister a few months earlier and she was busy with her. When my son started walking I was able to return to school (DM, 19 year of student-mother).

A similar trend was noted among all seven student-mothers, as they simultaneously balanced the triple roles of learners, daughters and mothers simultaneously. Each of these roles that they had taken on had both 'material and ideological' dimensions (Agarwal 1997:2) that dictates the proper behaviour for daughters, mothers and students. As 'good' daughters they had to help in the housework as this was one way of preparing them for their future roles as wives (Okwany forthcoming: 11). As mothers they had to ensure that their children's caring needs were met and as learners, they had to adhere to a rigid school routine and calendar. These roles often conflicted, such as the times when student-mothers reported that they had to miss school to attend to their sick babies. This is consistent with the findings of a

'burdened femininity' among young girls in urban slums of Kenya by Okwany (forthcoming: 11).

From the student-mothers narratives, it can also be deduced that the identity and roles of the young mothers as learners was often subsidiary to the other roles of daughters and mothers. The young mothers as well as their parents deemed schooling not as an entitlement, but as an option that could be considered only after it was confirmed that there was adequate female labour to support the household chores and childcare responsibilities.

An intersectional analysis of the experiences of the young mothers reveals that balancing the triple roles came at a high cost for young mothers from households without adequate female labour to support the gender roles reserved for women and young girls. For these young mothers, the option of leveraging on their kinship ties to negotiate and bargain for their school return was not an option. This situation was compounded when the older mothers were still in their childbearing ages, with their own small children to take care of. However, young mothers with older sisters, as well as mothers that had stopped bearing children were better able to leverage on their available labour and return to schooling.

#### **4.2 Household factors: competing, gendered and normative interests**

At the household level, three key factors prominently influenced the likelihood of young mothers returning to formal schooling. These factors were; fathers support over the decision to return to school, the structure of the household, and finally the availability of financial support from either the young mother's partners or the extended family.

The Mafara communities' way of life and culture favours men more than women. This patriarchy is evident in the fact that 'all the resources within the society (including women and children), belonged to men' who had unrestricted access, ownership and control of resources; including the land that the women depended on for subsistence farming (World Vision 2006). Hence, decision making on school re-entry was influenced by the interests of fathers; sometimes in consultation with older sons.

My elder brothers asked me to stop attending school since I was pregnant...I could not say anything to oppose them as they are older than me. My father also took their side and also said I should not go to school. But my mother really wanted me to continue with school...but she could not convince my father...After I had my baby my father said I should get married and he collected dowry'. (EN, 15 year old out of school mother, married to a child-father who is still attending school)

Immediately my step-father heard that I was pregnant he insisted that I leave his house immediately. My mother pleaded with him but he refused so I went to live with my maternal uncle, but there I have to work and take care of myself (RC, 15 year old young mother).

I had my child two weeks before the national exams... due to heavy rains, our region was inaccessible and we had to sit for the exams at a school near the

district headquarters...I had to leave the baby with my mother for 5 days, but my step-father refused to buy milk for my daughter, since he said he cannot take care of another man's child...one of teachers ended up buying the milk...My grades were not bad, so my mother said I should continue, but my step-father said if I had wanted to learn, I would not have gotten myself pregnant (LH, 18 year old young mother of 1 and married).

Gender relations conferred unequal power between fathers and mothers over the decision making process within households. For three out-of-school young mothers, their mothers' preference that they return to school was overruled by their husbands who did not support the idea. The power asymmetries were amplified in cases where the young mothers were living in households not headed by their biological fathers. The interaction between patriarchy and the household structures meant that where the young mothers lived with step-fathers, older mothers were unable to protect their daughters' right to remain within the household after childbearing and by extension their right to educational support. Older mothers that were not under direct male authority had more leeway to negotiate for the young mothers' school re-entry. As one widowed mother pointed out:

My husband's relatives do not help me with anything...I take care of my children, all by myself...therefore there is no way they can come and tell me what to do with them (TA, mother to 17 year old student-mother)

This male authority over the decision making process was evidently grounded on the material support that they provided for the older mothers and the entire family. The livelihood and educational participation of the young mothers and their siblings necessitated continuous material support and the fear for losing this support restrained older mothers from overtly opposing their husbands' decisions. Hence patriarchy interacted with the insecure livelihoods to affect the young mothers' chances of school re-entry.

Another household factor was the young mothers' family's socio-economic backgrounds. With the exception of one young mother, all other young mothers reported that their biological/step-fathers were engaged either in small enterprises that supplemented the subsistence farming or were gainfully employed. None of the older mothers was gainfully employed, but a number of them were engaged in small enterprises such as tailoring, vegetable farming (for subsistence and selling), and selling dried fish to supplement the subsistence farming. While the socio-economic background cannot be said to be the most determining factor for school re-entry (two of the out-of school young mothers were from families where the household heads were either accomplished skilled workers or gainfully employed), it had more to do with how the livelihood arrangements had to be re-organized to cater for the needs of the new babies.

Rural poverty had made it difficult for the young mothers' families to fully take on the responsibility of meeting the needs of the new born babies. While the babies could eat from the family pot once they were weaned; the young mothers' families could not afford to provide additional requirements such as milk and soap. Young mothers from households with limited livelihood options had no choice but to engage in paid work so as to supplement their natal families increased consumption needs; especially when the fathers of the

new babies had not acknowledged paternity. This had implications on the young mothers' chances of returning to formal schooling.

Young mothers whose partners had acknowledged paternity either willingly or coerced by the threat of legal action, provided financial support that reduced the push for young mothers to be engaged in paid work on a full time basis. This financial support was a crucial factor that intervened in the decision making on school re-entry for the young mothers. Of the seven student-mothers, three of them reported that they accessed financial support from their male partners. While acknowledging that sometimes the money was not received as expected, the three student-mothers highlighted that they would have had to work on a full time basis to support their children were it not for this financial support. This support also made their parents more amenable to the idea of returning to school as it released them from having to meet some of the needs of the new-born babies and the income also supplemented family consumption needs. Significant to note, is the fact that none of the out-of-school young mothers received any financial support from their partners. One young mother that engaged in paid work used the income earned as a leverage to negotiate for school re-entry.

After working for as a house help for one year, my daughter came and informed us that she wants to return to school...I told her that I had no money to take her back to school and also take care of her child...When she said that she had saved up some money that she will use to buy her school uniform and pay the required monies...I had no reason to object. Now she does some casual work in the evenings and week-ends so she can take care of her school needs and her son (JSK, father to 18 year old student-mother).

### **4.3 Tabooed images: pregnant schoolgirls and mothers within the school environment**

All the twelve young mothers reported that the teasing and taunting from their peers start once rumours of pregnancy start circulating. For two of the young mothers, the taunting left them with emotional scars; they broke down and cried when talking about this experience. One student-mother pointed out that while in school, boys would start making sarcastic comments that would trigger off laughter from the rest of the students.

I can smell a pregnant woman in this classroom...what is a pregnant woman doing here, go home and cook for your husband! (DM, 19 year old student-mother)

This taunting intimidated some pregnant schoolgirls who stopped attending school, never to return.

I stopped attending school when I was four months pregnant...because I was ashamed and afraid of what the other pupils will say about my being pregnant...I cannot even consider going back...I am too afraid. (FK, 18 year old young mother)

One teacher when asked why none of the pregnant schoolgirls in his school had returned after childbearing retorted that:

How can they come back to school...they are ashamed of what they have done. They know their peers will laugh at them and tease them mercilessly. (MK3, teacher)

Pregnant schoolgirls that stayed on despite the taunting developed resilience towards the sarcastic comments from their peers.

After a while they (other pupils) get tired of talking about you...If they see that you are not shying off, they leave you alone after sometime (MK2, 18 year old student-mother)

The student-mothers that participated in this study had returned to the same schools where they were enrolled while pregnant. The choice to go to a different school, where no one knew about the pregnancy, was not an option available to them, as the alternative schools were far from home and they could not afford the transport costs necessary to access them. This increased the chances of student-mothers being exposed to the hostile school environment. In this instance poverty interacted with the marginalizing discourses to affect the student-mothers educational choices. Given the taunting during pregnancy, returning to the same school was therefore an act of bravery.

Going to school while pregnant is not easy, you have to be very strong and put on a 'wooden face' (she means a blank and emotionless facade), but if you are the shy type and cry every time people say something bad about you...you will not survive it'. (DM, 19 year old student-mother)

It is evident that discourses on immorality had constructed the pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers as 'immoral'. The pregnancy was evidence of their immorality as the young mothers had been 'caught' and judged to have broken the moral codes that approve of sexual expression only within the marriage institution (Ahlbert et al. 2009:107). At the same time, motherhood was expected take place in the private sphere of home and in the adult arena of marriage. By bringing their pregnant bodies and motherhood into the public sphere of schools, the young mothers were contravening these gendered sphere norms. In line with Butler's (1990) ideas of gender as performative and therefore has space for gender bending through repetition of subversive gender performance (Butler 25, 271-273); I interpret the pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers as engaging in "sphere bending" that subverts the hegemonic confinement of motherhood in the private sphere of home and marriage. The male pupils were not comfortable with this violation of sphere norms and demonstrated their displeasure through the comments that pointed towards their perception that the young mothers should be at home, taking care of their husbands. Since teachers rarely intervened firmly, the ceaseless ridiculing was some form of punishment for the 'deviant' student-mothers for bending the gender sphere norms. This covert form of violence on the pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers in schools was a deterrent to school participation.



Academically, teachers did not hold high expectations of the student mothers in their schools. Two teachers, from separate schools, concurred on the views that:

It is very difficult for them [student-mothers] to concentrate in class, they have a lot on their minds' (JM and MK3 teachers).

One parent had also expressed similar sentiments:

My father told me that even if I were to return to school after childbearing, there will be so many things going through my mind that I may not concentrate in class and will end up failing (EN, 15 year old married young mother)

For these teachers and parents, pregnancy and motherhood seemed to have a debilitating effect on the young mothers' cognitive abilities. This is in line with what Wanda (2004:111) has pointed out as the casting of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers as 'poor students' or 'incapable students'; discursive frames that have influenced the quality of educational support available to the young mothers.

#### **4.4 Neighbourhood factors: community's perception of student mothers**

##### **Young mothers as immoral and having a dangerous sexuality**

Discourses on young unmarried mothers as both immoral and incapable students were also prevalent within the young mothers' neighbourhoods. As a result of these discourses, community members discouraged parents from supporting the young mothers from returning to school. These discourses were internalised by one parent who discouraged her pregnant daughter from continuing with schooling.

Many of my peers told me that once a girl has tasted honey (euphemism for sex) she will always want more of it...so I should not waste my time taking her back to school, instead I should take dowry from the boy's father and let her get married (CM, father of a 19 year old student-mother)

One student-mother pointed out that her own mother asked:

Why do you want to return to school...your peers will laugh at you now that you are a mother (MK1, 17 year old student-mother)

These discourses are consistent with Okwany's findings where parents and community members perceived 'girls' sexuality as dangerous and their fertility could only be constrained by marriage' (Okwany forthcoming: 12). The discourses also marginalised young mothers and reinforced the framing of student-mothers as incapable students; a framing that is also articulated by teachers in schools.

##### **Religious discourses of forgiveness**

Two parents that chose to support their daughter's return to school despite the breaking of social norms justified their actions through a religious discourse.

One common discourse, stemming from the Christian religion was that people should be forgiven of their sins.

According to traditions, my daughter is supposed to be married as she has tasted things meant for adults. But I am a Christian, and the church teaches us to forgive just as we were forgiven by Christ. I forgave her and gave one last chance' (CM, father of a 19 year old student-mother)

This contradiction in using religious discourses of forgiveness, to justify support for what the same religion had judged as a sin is consistent with Hailonga's findings (2005:196) on the contradictory and inconsistent discourses on adolescent sexuality in Namibia.

### **Re-casting the images of student mothers: a discourse of capability**

The five parents supportive of the young mothers participation in education named other young mothers from the neighbourhood that had been in the same situation and returned to school as role models. This was a strategy employed especially when the parents were encouraging their pregnant and mothering daughters to return to school; they shared with them examples of older women who were in professional careers despite having had children while in school.

When I was in Standard 6, I had an English teacher whom I knew had had a child while in secondary school, but she had returned to school and later trained to be a teacher. Also my wife's elder sister got pregnant while in school, but she went back and is now a teacher. So I know getting pregnant is not the end of a girls' education and I support my daughter because of these examples (CM, father of 19 year old student-mother)

The successful examples shared by the parent above were of career women who could provide for themselves and their children; this brings out the material grounding of the discourses on early childbearing. Unmarried mothers that had achieved some level of financial independence were perceived differently than those that had become single parents but continued to be dependent on their natal families. By gaining financial independence, the unmarried mothers gained temporary reprieve from the debilitating discourses, and served as positive role models.

This view was reinforced by what community member presented as the fragile state of marriages among young people. The young men were presented by the older fathers as being undependable as separations and divorces were becoming more common. One fathers stated that:

Among these young people, there are no marriages to speak of. My eldest daughter is back at my house with her three children after separating with her husband, if she had gone through school she would have been able to support herself but now she looks at me for everything. (JSK, father to 18 year old student-mother)

As such supporting girls to complete their education was a strategic decision that was taken as a step towards enabling the young mothers become financially independent just in case their marriages fail in the future.

### **Discourse of girls' education as a right**

The push to get many children into schools in line with the discourse of universalising primary education, emanating from the area chiefs and NGOs working in the community influenced the community's reactions.

I was afraid that the chief will come to ask me why my daughter is not going back to school...so I sent her back to school as soon as her son was old enough (KN, father to 17 year old student-mother)

Parents feared being reported to the area chiefs that their children were not going to school; hence pushing young mothers back into schools oblivious of the hostile and marginalizing discourses that shaped their learning experiences.

### **4.5 Pathways into the schools**

Young mothers that re-entered the formal education system used different pathways that were influenced by their caring responsibilities as well as the livelihood options available within their respective households. Three main pathways could be discerned from the narratives of the student-mothers. One pathway, taken by 4 student-mothers, was straightforward as they had disengaged from learning during late pregnancy and returned to school after a period between three weeks and 14 months. Another pathway involved one student-mother who worked away from home for one year, before returning and re-engaging with schooling. Two student-mothers ran away from their homes; one during pregnancy and the other after childbearing, before being brought back home by their parents and returning to school. An analysis of the factors that influenced the different pathways used by the student-mothers is discussed below.

#### **Straight pathway**

Among the four student-mothers that took the straight pathway back to school, it was evident that some of the household factors identified earlier played a role. The availability of female labour (from female relatives) at the household to support the childcare responsibilities enabled an early return to school. The socio-economic background of the families and the financial support received from the fathers of their babies was also an influencing factor. Three of these student mothers used the income received as child support to leverage for a straight pathway to school.

After my father and the area chief went to the police station to report my son's father, he agreed to provide some money for the child...but because my mother also had my baby sister to take care of...I stayed home for more than one year, and only returned to school when my son started walking, so by then my mother could look after him. (MK1, 17 year old student-mother)

However, even where financial support was available, the absence of female labour to support the caring responsibilities necessitated a delayed return to schooling. The ability to draw on existing kinship ties was therefore a key factor in enhancing an early return to schooling.

### **Working first, then home and school**

On the other hand, household vulnerabilities in meeting the survival needs of its members necessitated one student-mother to engage in paid work; extending the pathway from home to school to include work. For MK2, a severe drought that had led to crop failure in their family farm forced her to leave her household with her baby and move to a neighbouring urban centre to work as a house-help. The income she made from this work, supplemented the earnings from a brother (also engaged casual work in the same town) for her family survival and that of her child. With the next good harvest, MK2 was able to stop working and return to schooling; she used her savings to purchase school uniform and pay for levies demanded by the school. Since the father of MK's baby had refused to acknowledge paternity, no financial support was received from him towards childcare. Consequently, the student-mother continued to engage in paid work after school and on weekends, to raise income towards purchasing items like soap and second-hand clothes for her son.

### **Running away from home and school**

Another group of the student-mothers opted to run away from home once it was known that they were pregnant. Two student-mothers run off to stay with the families of their partners; these stays ranged from two weeks to 2 months after which the parents managed to get them back home.

The night after scolding my daughter about the pregnancy, she sneaked out at night and ran away. We were worried as we did not know that she had run off to the father of her baby. Two days after her disappearance, the young man's father came to see me and informed me that my daughter was at his home-stead...I was angry, but I also pitied her...I knew the home she had run to...she will be going without food. That is the same thing that happened to her elder sister, and now she is always at my house with her children (CM, father to 19 year old student-mother)

Parents expressed concern that their daughter ran off to young men whose families could take care of them. These two parents worked with the area chiefs to get their daughters back as they were below 18 years of age (the legal age when they could consent to marriage). This leaves one wondering if they would have taken the same view and actions had the girls run off to wealthy homesteads.

## **4.6 Agency and resilience: subverting and contesting and material and discursive barriers**

Despite the issues highlighted above, a number of young mothers made a conscious decision to return to schooling after childbearing. This necessitated some of them to engage in paid work so as to meet the associated costs of schooling. One student-mother, had to work as a house help after childbearing, so as to meet not only material needs of her child, but also to get money that she used to purchase school uniform as well pay the required school levies. For this study participant, the work was not only a mean to facilitate survival but

was also to facilitate a return to school. This is consistent with Kabeer's conceptualisation of agency as the power to choose a course of action and pursue it (Kabeer 1999:438). This positive agency was also a key factor in bending the private-public gender sphere norms especially when the student-mothers placed motherhood firmly in the public realm of schools; a clear demonstration of the transformative nature of student-mothers positive agency.

While in school, the student-mothers resisted the derogatory comments made about them by fellow pupils. One student-mother pointed out that in many cases the boys that teased them also had sisters that had become pregnant while in school, or dropped out of school; and they would point out these cases to the boys. The girls also drew strength from the examples of other girls that had been in the same situation and got pregnant. Three student-mothers from one school, talked with pride of a former student-mother who had passed her national primary examinations and transited to a secondary school. This not only empowered the student-mothers, but also challenged the debilitating discourses of student-mothers as 'poor and incapable pupils' (Wanda 2004:111). By reinventing and invoking new identities of 'capable student-mothers', these young mothers were able to successfully put into public scrutiny these negative discourses.

On the other hand a number of girls chose not to return to school, even when faced with pressure from family to return to schooling. In one of these families, the father pointed out despite trying to persuade his daughter to return to schooling after childbearing she refused and threatened to commit suicide when he persisted. This girl chose not to return to schooling due to the fear of being taunted by her peers. Knowing that she could not disobey her father and remain in his homestead, she saw marriage as a better option. Two of the out-of school mothers stated that they had wished to return to school, but their family members prevailed upon them not to.

My father said...If I had wanted to learn, I would not have gotten myself pregnant (LH, 18 year old out-of-school mother)

My father and brother told me not to go back to school...he told the head-teacher that he was taking me to another school. But he married me off to the father of my child (EN, 15 year old out-of-school mother)

My mother told me that now I have responsibilities...I need to make money so as to provide for my son. So I help my mother with her fish business. I now help to bring home some income...since I can come with the baby to the market, my mother is free and she can also make money in other ways (FK, 18 year old out-of school young mother).

Kabeer (1999:438) states that agency can take on negative meanings when other actors override the agency of others overtly, through the use of force, or covertly when social norms ensure certain outcomes without the exercise of agency. The actions of these fathers, as narrated by the young mothers point to negative meaning of agency influenced by the dominant notions of women as prone to promiscuity (Mulongo 2005:29). At the same time, the poverty in which the young mother's families were caught in made the young mothers'

labour an important input to the family livelihood; schooling was therefore low on the priority of these young mothers and their families. This demonstrates the constrained and ambivalent nature of the young mothers' agency; as others are able to use the similar circumstance to achieve different outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Gender relations have shaped the lived experiences of the young mothers, necessitating a delicate balance of the roles and associated burdens of being daughters, mothers and learners. These triple roles and triple burdens had different implications on the pursuit of education for these young mothers; with young mothers from families with additional adult female labour to support in the gendered roles faring better. While the triple roles sometimes conflicted, it was evident that the roles associated with young mothers as learners were deemed to be subsidiary to their roles as daughters and mothers. These triple roles interacted with family livelihood insecurities and the marginalizing discourses on schoolgirl pregnancy and early childbearing (pervasive in schools and neighbourhoods) to mediate the schooling opportunities and experiences for the young mothers.

The young mothers' agency was often constrained and ambivalent. In line with the positive aspects of agency, student-mothers were able to gain access and survive in schools by deploying different strategies such as naming other student-mothers that had pioneered "sphere-bending" and were now in professional careers. The exercise of positive agency by student-mothers demonstrated their potential to transform the gendered ideologies of pregnancy and motherhood as roles that had no place within the public spaces such as schools. However, teachers were unable to fully protect the pregnant school-girls and student-mothers from the marginalization and stigmatization that stemmed from the discourses deployed against them in schools; a discursive terrain in which the teachers are also embedded in.

## **5 Gender relations and the right to education for young mothers**

The aim of this study was to establish how gender relations affected schooling for pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers in Kenya. To establish the nature of interaction between gender relations and the education of young mothers, the two main policies that shape the young mothers experience of disengaging and re-engaging with the education system were reviewed. The study also explored how household factors interacted with other institutions like the school and community to influence the way the young mothers re-engage with schooling. This concluding chapter brings together the issues emanating from the study into a conclusion from the perspective of the research questions. The chapter also reviews the implications of the study findings in as far as realising the right to education for young mothers is concerned.

## 5.1 Gender relations and the education of pregnant school-girls and student-mothers

Educational participation of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers in Kenya has been facilitated by school re-entry policies. Although these policies are important first steps in dismantling discriminatory practises towards young mothers in education, they fall within the category of policies that are deemed to have failed to challenge gendered ideologies (Chilisa 2002:24). The findings of this study point how the current policies guiding the education of student-mothers have set different parameters for the male and female pupils and also conformed with gendered discourses of reproduction by placing the responsibility for nurturance of children on student-mothers. At the same time, these policies have an in-built permissive attitude towards the sexuality of male pupils as evident in the way student-fathers are allowed to get away from the 'moral' responsibility and 'discursive burden' through provision for counselling and rehabilitation.

The study has also revealed a gendered and normative nature of the well meaning policy prescription that requires schoolgirls to "volunteer" for pregnancy testing every academic term. The analysis reveal that such a prescription seeks to "catch" and penalise schoolgirls that have been found guilty (with pregnancy as proof) of breaking social norms on sexuality that confer different sexual behaviour on female and male youth. This conforms to the gendered 'dominant notions of women as having a natural tendency towards promiscuity' (Mulongo 2005:29) and is also a covert form of violence on the young women as it is a violation of their reproductive health rights; specifically the right to privacy.

The findings of this study also established a dissonance between the policy prescriptions and practise in that there was no consensus on when a pregnant schoolgirl can be sent home from school and at what point affected girls can re-engage. The implication of this dissonance on the education of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers had two faces. On the one hand it created critical spaces for negotiating a prolonged stay in school while pregnant as well as an early re-engagement for student-mothers. On the other hand the inconsistencies disadvantaged young mothers that were forced to leave school in the early months of their pregnancy. In instances where the teachers' policy interpretations allowed pregnant schoolgirls to stay in school until late into their pregnancy, the likelihood of a return to schooling after childbearing increased.

The young mothers, either in school while pregnant or as student-mothers, had to contend with endless taunting from their peers that stemmed from gendered discourses. Motherhood was expected take place in the private sphere of home and in the adult arena of marriage. By bringing their pregnant bodies and motherhood into the public sphere of schools, the young mothers were seen as violating the public-private sphere norms and as such deserved to be reprimanded through marginalizing discourses. This reprimanding for "sphere-bending" was permitted through an evident lack of firm policies to deal with the stigmatisation of young mothers in school. These findings are consistent with Chilisa's arguments that re-entry policies that require a

temporary disengaging with schooling for pregnant school-girls violates young mothers' right to education and are based on gender inequalities, that are supported by traditional ideologies and institutions, eventually making school re-entry difficult for the young mothers (Chilisa 2002:21).

The push from both state and non-state actors to get out-of-school children, including the young mothers, enrolled in school also influenced school re-entry for the young mothers thus enhancing the principle of equality in education. Unfortunately, this push was done without considerations of and engaging with the hostile school environments that awaited the student-mothers. This was compounded by the fact that the student-mothers could not afford the financial cost associated with moving to different schools after childbearing. Subsequently, poverty at household level interacted with the marginalizing discourses to enhance the young mothers' exposure to hostile school environment and deterred the out-of-school young mothers from re-engaging with schooling.

## **5.2 Gender relations and contradictory discourses at the household and community**

Gender relations were also implicated on how young mothers strived to maintain a balance between their triple roles as mothers, daughters and learners; roles that co-existed simultaneously and sometimes conflicted. As young unmarried mothers, living under the authority of their parents, they had to fulfil their socially prescribed roles of daughters within the gender division of labour regime and at the same time attend to the needs of their children, while as learners; they had to keep up with a rigid school routine and expectations. These roles not only conflicted, (such as the times when student-mothers had to miss school to attend to their sick babies), but were also hierarchical. The role of the young mothers as learners was deemed to be subsidiary to the other roles of daughters and mothers. This made schooling an option that could be considered only after it was confirmed that there was adequate female labour to support the household chores and childcare responsibilities.

The gendered discourses on sexuality that framed young mothers as immoral and incapable students were prevalent in both the schools and neighbourhoods; however contradictory discourses were deployed by parents when supporting school re-entry for young mothers. The religious discourse of forgiveness of 'errant' young mothers and the naming of young mothers that had succeeded to transit through school after child bearing as role models were deployed to encourage young mothers return to schooling. These discourses of role models shifted the discursive frame and re-casted student's mothers as capable of achieving academic and career success. The findings also established that patriarchy interacted with insecure livelihoods to affect the young mothers' chances of school re-entry. The male authority over the decision making process was grounded on the material support that they provided for the older mothers and their other children; the fear of losing this support prevented older mothers from pushing for a school re-entry for the daughters against the wishes of their husbands.



### **5.3 Pathways for re-engaging with schooling**

Household livelihood security interacted with household structures to shape the pathways taken by the young mothers that re-entered the formal education system. Three main pathways were discerned from the experiences of seven student-mothers. The first pathway, a straight forward one, was taken by student-mothers from households with two key features: financial support either from relatives or the baby's fathers as well as the availability of additional female labour (mainly from relatives) to take on the household chores and the childcare responsibilities. The second pathway, involved working first then a return to home and later school, was taken by one student mother. In this case, exogenous factors, such as a drought compromised the household's ability to meet its survival needs pushing the young mother to engage in paid work. The income raised by this young mother went into supporting the survival of her family and child as well as meeting education related expenses necessary for a school re-entry. The insecure livelihood has necessitated that this young mother continues to juggle paid work and schooling. The third pathway was taken by two young mothers who opted to run away from home once it was known that they were pregnant. Parental concern over the livelihood security of their daughters in the homes that they had ran to made them bring them back home and convinced them to return to school.

### **5.4 Realising the right to education for pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers**

The above findings have a number of implications on the education of pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers. The first implication is the need to engage with the state policies on school re-entry with the aim of making them more responsive to the educational needs of young mothers. Agarwal argues that the state can also be an arena for cooperation and bargaining (Agarwal 1997:32-34). A rights-based discourse must be at the heart of education policy making. In this regard, gender-progressive organizations can negotiate with the state for transformative continuation policies that take on the gendered ideologies. This engagement should also coalesce around achieving a discursive shift in issues of sexuality of young unmarried women and motherhood in the public sphere of school. These continuation policies should be accompanied by firm policies to deal with the perpetrators of marginalizing discourses within the school setting.

The findings that point to how caring demands and insecure livelihoods affected the pathways and ultimately the chances of school re-entry for student-mothers, implying the need to look beyond the school factors in enhancing the education of pregnant school-girls and student-mothers.

Care arrangements for children of student mothers also require attention if students mothers are to realise the three dimensions of rights in education highlighted by Subrahmanian (cited in Unterhalter 2007:56). The success of young mothers re-engaging with schooling rested on the support of female relatives who were willing to take on the household chores and child care responsibilities while the young mothers were in school. Non-state actors have the capacity to mobilise communities to initiate community managed crèches

that can run by the older women from the same community. The women's labour and time can be compensated in creatively sustainable ways that can transform traditional perspectives and present child caring as valuable work that deserves recognition.

Rural poverty and livelihood insecurities also need to be combated if families are to stop using their daughters' labour for consumption smoothing in times of crisis (Okwany forthcoming: 11). This necessitates gender sensitive social protection programmes that will protect the young mothers and the families from both economic and social vulnerabilities (Holmes and Jones 2010:1).

## Conclusion

This study has provided a glimpse into the experiences of young mothers in relation to their educational participation. The narratives of the young mothers point to spaces that provide for negotiation for schooling for pregnant schoolgirls and student-mothers. The young mothers' positive agency and resilience within schools has also challenged gender norms on pregnancy and motherhood. However this challenging of social norms comes at a cost to them as they experience stigmatization and isolation in school and are pushed by poverty to find means of generating income for their children and sometimes their own natal families even when they are in school. The findings indicate that for the school re-entry policies to be transformative; they must be attendant to the material and discursive situation of student mothers.

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## Appendices

### Annex I Profile of the study participants

Name	Background	Date of Interview
MK1	17 year old mother of two and a half years old boy. At the time of the interview, MK was a Standard 7 pupil at a public primary school on the time of the interview	Interviewed on July 27 <sup>th</sup> 2010 at her parent's home
MN	17 year old mother of six months old boy. At the time of the interview MN was a standard 7 pupil at a public primary school	Interviewed on July 28 2010 at the school premises
SA	17 year old mother of two months old boy. At the time of the interview SA was a standard 8 pupils at a public primary school	Interviewed on July 28, 2010 at her parent's home
SK	20 year old student-mother of 2 year old daughter. At time of the interview, SK was a standard 7 student-mother	Interviewed on July 28, 2010 at the school premises
EN	15 year old mother of a three months old daughter. At the time of the interview EN was married.	Interviewed on July 28 at her marital home where she was living with her husband and parents in law
MK2	18 year old mother to a two year old son. At the time of the interview, MK2 was a standard 7 pupil.	Interviewed on July 29, 2010 at her parents' home
AK	20 year old student-mother of 1 year old girl. At the time of the interview the student-mother was a standard 8 pupil	Interviewed on July 29,2010 at her parents' home
DM	19 year old student-mother of 3 year old daughter. A former student in one of the public primary schools reached by this researcher. At the time of the interview she was a Form 1	Interviewed on August 2, 2010 at the boarding house where the researcher was residing

Name	Background	Date of Interview
	pupil at a secondary school	
LH	18 year old young mothers of 1 year old daughter. At the time of this interview she had completed her class 8 examinations and was married	Interviewed took place on July 30, 2010 at her Aunt's place, which is a few metres away from her matrimonial home.
RC	15 year old year pregnant out-of-school girl. By the time of the interview she was seven months pregnant and had stopped attending school three months earlier.	Interviewed on July 30, 2010 at an open field near the tea house where she was working as a child minder
FK	18 year old out of school young mothers to a 7 months old daughter. She stopped attending school while four months pregnant	Interviewed on August 1, 2010 at her mother's house.
PK	17 year old pregnant out of school young mother to 4 months old daughter. She stopped attending school while four months pregnant and now helps her mother in selling of dried fish at the local market.	The interview took place on August 1, at her mother's house
JM	Headteacher, has been in the current station for the last 8 years	Interview took place at the school premises on July 27, 2010
MK3	Teacher, has been at the current station for the last three years	Interview took place at the school premise on the July 29, 2010
JD	Teacher, has been at the current duty station for the last 4 years	Interview took place on July 30, at the school premises
CM	Father of DM, a student-mother	Interview took place on July 27, 2010 at his premises
ANC	Father of SK, a student-mother	Interview took place on July 29, 2010
KN	Father of MK1, student-mother	Interview took place on July 27, 2010 at the home
DK	Mother of MK1, student-	Interviewed on July

Name	Background	Date of Interview
	mother	27, 2010 at the home
JSK	Father of MK2, student-mother	Interviewed on July 29,2010
WK	Mother of FK, out-of-school young mother	Interviewed on August 2, 2010
TA	Mother of SA, student-mother	Interviewed on July 28, 2010
CN	Area chief	Interviewed on July 28, 2010 in his office
PT	Programme Manager of an NGO working in Marafa District	Interviewed on August 3, 2010 in his office
JWG	Programme Manager of an NGO working in Malindi District	Interviewed on August 16,2010 in her office
EM	Children's Officer	Interviewed on August 13, 2010 in his office



## **Annex II Excerpts of the school return policy passed in 1994**

- Girls who become pregnant should be admitted back to school unconditionally
- Headteachers, District and Municipal Education Officers should assist such girls to be readmitted to other schools to avoid psychological and emotional suffering
- Intensive guidance and counselling should be provided to the affected girl, parents, teachers and other girls in the school.
- Once a girls is sent home, the parents should be summoned to the school and receive some counselling after which they should take their daughter home. Headteachers and other teachers should understanding when handling cases of this nature.
- The school should keep in touch with such girls and their families so as to monitor what is happening and provide the necessary moral, emotional and spiritual support. Counselling for both the girl and parents should not be discontinued.
- The Parents should seek readmission of their daughter to school after the baby is weaned. Headteachers should provide the necessary help in this regard. In case of any problem, the Provincial, District and Municipal Education Officers should assist.
- Other girls in the school should be counselled on consequences of irresponsible sexual behaviour, adolescent sexuality, boy/girl relationships, negative peer influences, building self-confidence and self-esteem
- Those who make girls pregnant should be exposed. For example teachers and other adults in the community should face legal action. Boys should be given counselling so that they can take responsibility for their actions.

Source: MOE December 1998 (cited in CSA 2008:45)

### **Annex III: Excerpts of the National School Health Policy**

#### **Teenage pregnancy in school**

Teenage pregnancy is one of the key causes of school drop out by girls. Girls therefore need to be protected from teenage pregnancy and supported if pregnancy occurs to enable them pursue their education. Therefore:

- Girls will undergo voluntary medical screening once per term;
- A pregnant female learner shall be allowed to continue with classes for as long as possible;
- Both the student and her parents shall be counselled on the importance of ensuring good outcome of the pregnancy by attending Ante-Natal Clinic and ensuring safe delivery, and the possibilities of continuing with education after delivery;
- Efforts shall be made to get information on the circumstances leading to pregnancy and about the other party involved. A children's officer shall be informed
- Action, including legal action will be taken if the father of the unborn child is an adult (over 18 years). Child-fathers (boys less than 18 years) shall receive counselling and rehabilitation;
- Young mothers shall be encouraged to learn to look after their child in order to bond with the child as much as possible;
- New born babies must be allowed the benefit of breastfeeding as much as possible including exclusive breastfeeding for six months and introduction of complementary feeding at 6 months of age while continuing breastfeeding;
- Young mothers shall be encouraged to attend child welfare clinics (youth friendly) and ensure that babies are fully vaccinated.

At the appropriate time the adolescent mothers may seek readmission into the same school or if they wish so join other schools.

The following practice shall be observed in the event of re-admission:

- Her parents/guardian shall be encouraged to make adequate arrangements for the care of the child at home while the young mother is in school. This is to avoid unnecessary interruptions to the teenage mother's studies.
- As far as possible, the teenage mother shall be allowed to join at the level where she left;
- The school administration shall make all efforts to treat the teenage mother like other students and not keep reminding her of her mistake. To all intents and purposes the school fraternity shall act as if nothing had happened to her;

- Teenage mothers in school shall not be allowed to form groupings e.g of young mothers clubs.
- Counselling services shall be available to the teenage mothers including re-emphasis on life skills for avoidance of future unplanned pregnancies;
- Confidentiality and professionalism shall be adhered to in handling the teenage mother

Source: National School Health Policy (2009: 23-24)