"It makes more sense to educate a boy": Girls 'against the odds' in Kajiado, Kenya

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Within a conceptual framework of Sen's capability approach, the paper explores aspects of girls' retention in Kajiado schools, Kenya. Drawing on a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 24 girls in four schools, the paper discusses the 'unfreedoms' the girls experience in relation to environmental, infrastructural and economic constraints, as well as the personal unfreedoms they experience in relation to their gender. The study found that despite these constraints, girls' retention was linked to their zeal for education and to the part played by key people, supporting and encouraging them and sometimes acting as catalysts for change.

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1. Introduction

The past decade has seen rapid progress towards universal primary education, with some of the world's poorest countries dramatically increasing enrolment, narrowing gender gaps and extending opportunities for disadvantaged groups (Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 2004; UNESCO, 2010). However, although primary enrolments have significantly increased in recent years, DIFD (2010) argues that a focus on enrolment masks deeper problems of attendance, retention, completion and low levels of learning, with only 60% of children in sub-Saharan Africa completing primary school. Even when they complete a full cycle of primary education, DIFD suggests that many children still lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Furthermore, it is increasingly the case, as Palmer et al. (2007) point out, that basic education in a world of more sophisticated technology is not sufficient to prepare people for jobs, yet 'participation rates at secondary and higher education remain stubbornly and dramatically skewed towards the richer end of society' (p. 62). In addition, even though there has been progress towards greater gender parity in school enrolment, being born a girl still carries with it a significant educational disadvantage in many countries (UNESCO, 2010). Indeed, as DIFD (2009) points out, evidence from all of its partner countries show that the gender gap in education increases dramatically as children progress through the education system.

At a broad level, the reasons militating against girls' enrolment, attendance and retention in school are well documented. Chege and Sifuna (2006), for example, in a study of girls' and women's education in Kenya, identified limiting factors that affect girls' access to formal education, citing the patrilineal nature of inheritance which favours boys, the high opportunity cost of girls' education given the critical nature of child labour for family survival, the belief that once married girls become part of another family so investment is lost, and the view that with too much education a girl may have difficulty in finding a husband. GCN (2004) adds school factors which inhibit girls' full participation at school, such as inadequate sanitary facilities and gender insensitive environments. Research reported by Colclough et al. (2000), meanwhile, further identifies negative cultural values that fuel teenage pregnancies and early marriages, whilst Hunt (2008) cites several studies which point to sexual harassment and violence by teachers and boys as major problems facing females in education. Gisemba Bagaka (2010) highlights, furthermore, the continuing importance of economic and political power in securing access to quality education in most sub-Saharan African countries.

However, whilst the reasons why girls do not enrol or do not persist with schooling appear to be fairly well known, Hunt's (2008) review of the literature on dropping out of school in countries across the global South found less research on drop-out than expected: 'few studies account for the complexities of access and the interactive, dynamic nature of factors which may contribute to dropping out' (p. 5). Hunt went on to suggest that there was even less research on retention, and to argue for more qualitative, smaller scale, nuanced accounts of localised studies. This paper seeks to fill this gap with respect to one area of Kenya. It aims to show the ways in which the factors mentioned above play out in particular places and communities, and why some girls, despite encountering a range of challenges, do nevertheless persist in attending school 'against the odds'. We take a gender equity perspective, recognising not just the importance of parity of access to, and participation in, educational opportunities, but the need to

understand the social construction of gender identity in a given context (Subrahmanian, 2007). From this perspective we argue, within a conceptual framework of Sen's capability thesis, that although experiencing a range of 'unfreedoms' that deny or restrict their access to educational opportunities, for some girls, education remains a valued functioning. Supported and encouraged by key figures within their schools, homes, communities and beyond, such girls are motivated to strive to achieve educational capability and attempt to overcome the unfreedoms that are part of their lives.

We begin with the context for our research study in the Kajiado District of south-east Kenya, outlining the educational situation in Kenya with respect to gender and describing the case-study area, before going on to an overview of the methodology used in a study of 24 girls from four schools. The conceptual framework for the empirical research is then discussed with reference to Sen's arguments concerning development as freedom, the concepts of unfreedom, functionings and capabilities, and their relationships to education. The paper then moves on to relate the findings of the empirical study. Firstly, in an attempt to explain the social context in which educational opportunities are mediated, we explore the unfreedoms the girls experienced. We then discuss their aspirations for the future, and their attitudes towards education as valued functioning, before finally recounting the role of key people in helping the girls to negotiate pathways through the hardships they faced as they aspired to a better future.

2. Research context and approach

The basic education system in Kenya comprises eight years of primary schooling (Standards 1–8 for children aged 6–13) and four years of secondary schooling (Forms 1–4 for children aged 14–17). The Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, taken at the end of Standard 8, determines those who proceed to secondary education or vocational training. At the end of secondary school the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education acts as the basic qualification for entry to university. Primary education has witnessed phenomenal growth since the introduction of free primary schooling in 2003, with a dramatic increase in the number of pupils in school from 5.9 million in 2002 to 7.2 million a year later (UNESCO, 2006). However, as Gisemba Bagaka (2010) points out, although the vast majority of Kenyan children attend primary school, completion rates are relatively low. Mukudi (2004) argues, in fact, that completion rates have been declining over the years. In addition, secondary education is not free, and so, as the UNESCO report of 2006 highlights, a characteristic feature of the secondary education system is low access, with (in 2005), slightly less than half of those completing primary schooling transferring to secondary school.

As Lloyd et al. (2000) point out, girls' enrolment begins to decline as compared with boys as children enter their teenage years. Thus in 2005, 48.6% of pupils enrolling in Standard 1 (primary) were girls, whilst the proportion of girls enrolling in Form 1 (secondary) was slightly lower, at 47%. In Kenyan public universities women comprised only 34.5% of all students enrolled (UNESCO, 2006). This, as Osongo (2006) points out, has implications when it comes to acquiring positions of leadership at policy-making level. The Kenyan government does, however, formally recognise gender equality as central to the attainment of the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals (Mondoh and Mujidi, 2006), and UNESCO's *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (2010) does show some improvement, suggesting that gender parity had been achieved in enrolment in Kenyan primary schools by 2007, when 86% of primary-aged pupils were in enrolled in school. Nevertheless, that report also suggests that the gender ratio had worsened since 1999 with respect to secondary education, with only 88 girls enrolling in Form 1 for every 100 boys in 2007.

Such national-level data furthermore hide considerable geographical variations across the country, not only in relation to enrolment, but with respect to performance in national examinations (Gisemba Bagaka, 2010; Leggett, 2005).

Kajiado District, the site of our research study, is one of eighteen Districts within the Rift Valley Province of Kenya, bordering Tanzania to the south-west and Nairobi to the north-east. It covers an area of approximately 22,000 km², with a population of 464,883 in 2002 (Republic of Kenya, 2005). The population is predominantly rural, with most people practising a traditional semi-nomadic way of life. According to the Kenyan National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development (KNCAPD), the District is characterised by illiteracy, frequent droughts, HIV/AIDS, poor infrastructure, acute water shortages and pressure on land; life expectancy averages only 43 years, and across the District as a whole, 28% of the population live in absolute poverty (Republic of Kenya, 2005). This is not high with respect to Kenya, where over half the population lives in poverty (Kristjanson et al., 2009), but there are undoubtedly spatial variations, with the more urbanised population close to Nairobi, and other towns in the region such as Kajiado itself, having lower levels of poverty than the people living in the more rural parts of the District where the research took place. Schools are scattered over a vast distance and in 1999 only 55.8% of boys and 50% of girls enrolled in primary school. The transition to secondary schooling was very low: in 1999 only 16.1% of boys and 10.5% of girls aged 14–17 were in secondary school (Republic of Kenya, 2005). The introduction of free primary education in 2003 will almost certainly have impacted upon the numbers of pupils enrolling in primary school in Kajiado District, as elsewhere in Kenya (Omwani and Omwani, 2010), but the high rate of school drop-out is identified by the KNCAPD as one of the major problems to be addressed. Gender issues are also highlighted, with low representation of women in education, employment and key institutions, low participation of women in decision-making processes and profound gender disparities in the provision of education and attainment of education at all levels of schooling. This description of Kajiado District accords with the account of life in pastoralist regions of Kenya portrayed by Leggett (2005), and by Ekuam (2006).

In order to understand why girls stayed in school despite living in the kinds of circumstances that could have militated against them doing so, we first obtained a research permit from the Ministry of Education. We then selected four primary schools from a total of 198 schools across Kajiado District, in discussion with the District Education Officer. Only four schools were selected, in part because, as the KNCAPD points out, schools are scattered over vast distances and access often involves a long journey across tracks which are difficult to negotiate. In part, too, the sample size was small because the aim was to engage in an in-depth qualitative study within each school, which is inevitably time-consuming. Furthermore, this was a pilot study, part of a much larger piece of research including a greater number of schools across three further areas of Kenya and which did, in fact, generate similar findings. The schools had different characteristics and were spread across the district; they were chosen on the basis that they were recognised as providing reasonably high-quality education, which would encourage retention (Lloyd et al., 2000). Visits were made to each school, the project was explained and the headteacher's permission to work with the school sought. Arrangements were made to interview six Standard 5 girls, who were from backgrounds where families were poor or where education was under-valued, but who nevertheless persisted with their education and were likely to continue to do so. The purpose of the research was explained to the girls, informed consent was obtained, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by one author with 24 girls between the ages of eleven and fifteen (numbered 1–24 in this

paper). Interviews were recorded and took place mainly in Kiswahili, with initial questions designed to put the respondents at ease and to develop rapport. A small gift of an exercise book and pen was given to each girl as a token of thanks. Interview tapes were fully transcribed and translated, with subsequent analysis conducted by the other author using the software package QSR NVivo 8. Analysis was initially undertaken deductively, using answers to the interview questions which had been formulated in relation to understandings formed through the literature. Inductive analysis followed, drawing out insights from the data themselves. Further analysis continued through discussion between the authors and the wider project team, including representatives from the Forum for Women Education-alists (FAWE) and UNICEF.

3. A capabilities approach

Amartya Sen's capability theory (1985, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1999) provides a useful theoretical framework through which to explore factors relating to girls' retention in school. For Sen, development is a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. The freedom of individuals, he argues, provides the basic building blocks of development because greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and influence the world (Sen, 1999). Since freedom to achieve is affected by social and economic arrangements, such as facilities for education, development requires the removal, he suggests, of major sources of 'unfreedom', which might relate to economic poverty, or lack of public facilities or social care, or from the denial of political and civil liberties. This broad approach to development allows acknowledgement of the role of social values and prevailing mores, which can influence the freedoms people can exercise. It places emphasis furthermore on human diversity, taking account of external and personal characteristics as well as differences in natural and social environments, such that the relative advantages and disadvantages people have can be judged in terms of many different variables (Sen, 1992).

Sen develops his ideas through the concepts of 'functionings' and 'capabilities', emphasising the difference between actual achievement and the freedom or opportunity to achieve. The concept of functionings 'reflects the various things a person may value doing or being' (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Valued functionings may vary from elementary ones such as being adequately nourished, to complex activities such as having self-respect. Functionings reflect actual achievements, or 'the choices that an individual makes in daily life that reflect what that individual aspires to do and be'. A person's 'capability', meanwhile, 'is the umbrella reality that makes functionings possible' (Selvam, 2008, p. 209). It 'refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)' (Sen, 1999, p. 7). One's capability set (comprising all a person's capabilities) represents the freedom to achieve the kind of life a person has reason to value. Thus, as Walker (2006) expresses it, capability is the opportunity or potential to achieve; a functioning is the actual achievement or outcome: 'for Sen, it is not so much the achieved functionings that matter, as the real opportunities (freedoms) that one has to achieve those functionings' (p. 165).

Sen's capability approach therefore concentrates on the capabilities of people to do things, and the freedom to lead their lives as they wish. Since its formulation in the early 1980s, capability theory has been widely discussed, critiqued, developed and applied in the field, with the literature growing exponentially over the years across a breadth of disciplines (Robeyns, 2005). In particular it has been developed in some depth by Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2006), who, as Robeyns (2005) discusses, approaches the concept from a philosophical perspective, using

the capability approach to develop a partial theory of justice and a well-defined but general list of 'central human capabilities' that should be incorporated in all constitutions.

In a practical sense, capability theory provides a broad normative framework for the conceptualisation, evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society (Robeyns, 2005). The capability approach can be used at varying levels of sophistication (Sen, 1992). Thus besides providing an approach for the assessment of human development in general, the theory can be applied, as Unterhalter et al. (2007) point out, to areas of social policy such as education, providing a tool to conceptualise and evaluate educational inequality. It has the advantage, Subrahmanian (2007) suggests, of shifting thinking on education away from standardised measures of inequality to the nature of education in relation to individuals. A focus on capabilities, Unterhalter et al. suggest, requires us to question the range of real educational choices available and thus enables us to ask how free children are to participate in education. This is a point touched upon by Selvam (2008), in his consideration of the capabilities approach as a framework for addressing youth rights in East Africa, and by Polat (2011) in considering the inclusion of children with disabilities in countries of the South, and in Tanzania in particular.

In a recent paper, Tikly and Barrett (2011) extend the capability approach by usefully bringing the work of Sen and Nussbaum together with that of Fraser (2008). In so doing they develop a theoretical approach which conceptualises the relationship between the quality of education experienced by disadvantaged learners in low income countries and the concept of social justice. Critiquing both human capital and human rights approaches to understanding education quality, they argue persuasively that a social justice approach can provide a further rationale for a policy focus on education quality through emphasising the role of education in providing a range of basic freedoms. On this basis, the authors define three dimensions of education quality for social justice, namely inclusion, relevance and democracy. Inclusion is particularly relevant for our own work, since it is 'concerned with the access that different individuals and groups have to a good quality education and the opportunities they have for achieving desired outcomes' (Tikly and Barrett, 2011, p. 9). Important here is the recognition of difference, and the way in which socio-cultural identities influence the development of valued capabilities. Tikly and Barrett (p. 10) argue, in fact, for 'more qualitative evidence concerning the barriers to achievement found by different groups of learners [with] attention to the cultural dimensions of schooling including the impact of norms and values that can constitute barriers to disadvantaged groups accessing resources and converting them into capabilities and functionings'. The research presented here speaks closely to this agenda.

Although Unterhalter (2005) suggests that Sen's and Nussbaum's work on the capability approach has largely been focused on clarifying concepts, rather than applying them in specific institutional contexts, capability theory is seen as a valuable tool for this research, providing a framework for evaluating both educational inequality and gender inequality in a practical context. The scholar whose work perhaps most closely links to our proposed approach is that of Melanie Walker who, in her 2006 paper considers how to apply the capability approach in education, with a particular focus on gender equity in context of South Africa. Walker highlights Sen's concept of agency in her work, that is, one's ability to pursue the goals one values and that are important for the life one wishes to lead. Since agency is central to freedom, she contends, a lack of agency, or a constrained agency, equates to disadvantage. However, although the capability approach is individualistic, it differs from neoliberalism, Walker argues, because of its acknowledgement of the relationships one has with

others, and the social conditions and contexts within which freedom can be achieved. Thus although agency is important, social and economic arrangements such as access to educational resources, are also integral in enabling functionings in and through education. As Walker points out, Sen argues that education itself is an enabling factor in the expansion of freedom, with an instrumental role for each person in helping them to achieve many things. Education in itself is therefore a basic capability.

However, although Walker's (2006) theoretical approach accords with our own, and her context is not too dissimilar, her purpose was to set out to select a set of capabilities for assessing educational inequality, based on her research in South African schools. Our intention is not to seek to develop or test such a model, but rather to use the theory empirically to evaluate the functionings expressed by the girls who took part in the research; in other words, what they aspired to or desired in their lives. This takes account of Comin's (2003, in D'Agata, 2007) argument, very relevant as far as children are concerned, about the need to enlarge the capability approach by introducing a time element, and therefore includes the notion of 'becoming'. It also enables us to explore the extent to which the girls appeared to possess the capabilities to achieve those expressed functionings, and the unfreedoms or capability deprivations that stood in the way of their doing so. It is to this intention that we now turn.

4. Experiencing a set of unfreedoms

Analysis of the interview data shows that it is possible to conceptualise three levels of unfreedoms experienced by the research participants: environmental and infrastructural (affecting almost everyone living in the area), economic (occurring at both local and household levels) and personal (impacting at the individual level). We consider firstly the specific environmental and infrastructural challenges which beset the areas where our respondents lived. Households in rural areas of Kenya, as Wagura and Nyangena (2009) point out, rely on natural resources such as land, water and forests, with women and children bearing the burden of collecting water and firewood. Only one girl in our study said her family had piped water and used charcoal or gas for cooking, whilst two others obtained water from tanks near their homes; the rest were dependent on firewood for cooking and on water from wells, rivers or lakes. Vulnerability to environmental uncertainty was strongly evident in our fieldwork observations and interviews, since at the time of the research Kajiado District was several months into a severe drought and this was having a number of impacts on the girls' education.

Wagura and Nyangena's (2009) research concludes that children's school attendance and progress are affected through increased work that results from the scarcity of natural resources: as resources become more scarce, households spend more time collecting them and less time is available for children to study. Our findings concur with their conclusions. Girls 21 and 22, for example, each described a 5-h round trip to fetch water, undertaken three times a week; in the latter case, the journey to collect firewood took an additional 2 h and had to be done almost daily. Because of the drought, some girls also talked about missing days of school when they were required to take animals further afield to seek water, or missing longer periods as the family moved from place to place to find pasture and water.

In addition, several girls spoke of having to remain at home for several days each month because of lack of water to wash the cloths they used when menstruating, or even staying at home through being unable to wash their uniforms. At one school they mentioned leaving lessons part-way through the morning to fetch water which arrived by train. A few girls talked about walking to school having had nothing to drink, or to eat because there was no

water to mix the staple food, ugali (a thick porridge made from maize meal). As Girl 7, who had a 2-h walk in each direction described to the interviewer (I):

G7: At home we have no water. When we wake up in the morning we can't even prepare tea.

I: So do you eat anything before you come to school?

G7: We wake up and just come to school.

I: Will you get food at school?

G7: No, we just wait until githeri (a mix of maize and beans provided through the government feeding programme). And if we don't get that we go home to look for food.

I: How does this hunger affect your studies?

G7: You can't study: some will just sleep in class, or you just sit.

I: So how many times do you get githeri in school?

G7: When there is no water, if the train has not brought water, we will not be cooked for githeri.

The lack of any basic infrastructure providing households with water and electricity, exacerbated by environmental uncertainly brought about by frequent droughts, is compounded by the inadequacy of the educational infrastructure. Mukudi (2004) draws attention to the failure of the Kenyan government to keep pace with the demand for education by providing enough schools, and so as already mentioned, schools in Kajiado District are scattered over a wide area, and this clearly had significant impacts on children's freedom to participate in education. Girl 24 only started school at the age of 10 because she asked her mother to allow her to stay with an aunt twenty kilometres away in order to go to school: there was no public school anywhere near her home. Because we had been intent on understanding girls' retention, the particular schools which took part in the research were schools where education was generally of high quality, but two girls had previously attended schools where teachers had frequently not turned up and had shown little interest in the pupils. Both had had to move away from home to live with a relative in order to attend a school where the quality of education was better.

Except for six of the girl participants who were boarders, most girls reported walking long distances to school – often 2, or sometimes 3 or even 4 h each way. Girl 18 spoke about leaving home with her sister at 3 am for a 7 am start. Girl 21 described the impact of having to walk such long distances to and from school, compounded for her and her peers by the household chores that also formed part of their daily routine:

We leave school at 4.10 pm and I get home at 8 pm. Because I'm tired, I walk slowly, and when I get home my mum asks me to cook, and by the time I'm through it's 9 pm. I'm tired, I sleep, there's no time to study.

Staying with a relative who lived close to the school, or boarding at the school, clearly had advantages in that such girls were not exposed to the dangers of walking long distances in the dark; nor were they susceptible to tiredness impacting on their ability to engage fully in their education. It did nevertheless mean that some girls were unable to see their families, even during school holidays, because of the financial costs involved: Girl 6, for example, had not been home for almost a year, her mother having had to sell a goat in order to raise enough money to collect her from school for the previous Christmas holidays.

This underlines the fact that the environmental and infrastructural constraints are compounded by economic unfreedom which characterises the area and impacts on the communities in which the research participants lived. The families had to provide for their own water and fuel needs because of a lack of state provision of piped water, sanitation and electricity in the area. Only two had stone dwellings and three iron sheet houses; the rest, except for

one who lived in a grass hut, inhabited traditional manyattas, built of mud by the women. Some families owned bicycles or radios, but generally the standard of living was very low and diets were poor. The poverty of the area was intensified at the household level for those who had few or no animals, and in the four families where the father was deceased.

As Kristjanson et al. (2009) point out, women and rural dwellers in Kenya are particularly affected by poverty, with drought explaining two thirds of the descent into poverty in pastoral zones. Poverty meant that, although boarding facilities were cited by a number of the girls in day schools as something that would make their lives much better, few families could afford the fees to send their children to boarding school. As a result, in one school, only 20% of the boarding facility was occupied, and in another school, the girls, the majority of whom has been rescued from FGM (female genital mutilation) and early marriage, had their fees paid by charitable organisations. Furthermore, although primary education is free in Kenya, at least 96% of the government's budget for education is spent on teachers' salaries (Ackers et al., 2001), leaving little to provide other educational resources. A policy of cost-sharing requires that primary education be provided through partnership between government, parents and communities (Ackers et al., 2001), and therefore, as Plank (2007) points out, the indirect costs of schooling can be substantial. Parents may be asked to provide contributions for school construction and maintenance, textbooks and other materials and equipment, as well as paying for compulsory uniforms. In one of the schools we worked with, parents were expected to provide desks for their children. Indeed, Ackers et al. (2001) suggest that on average parents pay 65% of the costs of primary education in Kenya. Thus it is not surprising that Kattan and Burnett (2004) argue that household income is a significant correlate of school enrolment, especially in Africa, with user fees accounting for one of the factors keeping poorer children out of school and making it harder for them to stay in school long enough to achieve functional literacy.

Half of the girls interviewed mentioned fees as a problem affecting school attendance, citing cases of children they knew whose parents could not afford for them to go to school at all. In some families, only some of the children received education. Girl 14's father had two wives and 16 children; she was the youngest child of the second wife, and was in school only because an aunt had insisted on removing her from the family home and paying for her and a sister to attend school. Only one other child in the family had received education – a boy, who was unable to proceed to secondary school for lack of money. Two other girls described being sent away from school, only being able to return once their fathers had sold a cow to raise money for school fees. One suggested that the Maasai tradition of not selling animals made no sense, when those with large herds could sell livestock to pay for education. However, given that many of the interviewees described considerable losses to family herds during the drought, selling animals might not in any case be an option in the future. This may well impact on these girls' futures, particularly given the even higher costs associated with secondary education.

Once at school, children need books, pens, paper and so on, and whilst Kenyan schools make some provision for these, there was evidence of shortages, sometimes with dependency on outsiders, and sometimes with girls sharing books, equipment and even sometimes pens. More often, facilities at home did not enable them to study, even if they had time to do so, either because of lack of space, or of light, with some families unable to afford kerosene for their lamps.

The third aspect limiting girls' full participation in education comprised a set of personal unfreedoms related to their gender, with gender inequality existing as part of the fabric of their daily lives. Within a strongly patriarchal culture, where fathers were described repeatedly as the main decision-makers, it was clear that the voices of girls and women were often silenced, not least in relation to rights over their own bodies. There were two main aspects to this. Firstly, there was FGM and early marriage, practised almost universally among Maasai in Kenya (Pinheiro, 2006). Child marriage (undertaken under the age of 18) 'is one of the most pernicious manifestations of the unequal power relations between females and males', according to De Silva-de-Alwis (2008, p. 1), severely limiting access to education because of domestic burdens, childbearing and family pressures. Tradition saw most girls in this area circumcised between the ages of 10 and 14 at the instigation of the father, and soon after that, leaving school and getting married, then moving to live with her husband's family. Marriage of a daughter would not only mean one less mouth to feed, but a girl would also yield value on marriage:

> They say in the Maasai community that when a girl is circumcised, she is now a woman, and she can get married because she is a woman. And not only that, but they also want her to be married off because they want to exchange you with cows. Maybe for me they wanted to exchange me with maybe ten cows (Girl 24).

Because of the emphasis on early marriage, education was often seen as being pointless for a girl. Some girls interpreted this as a girl herself having no value: Girl 5, for example, talked about her father seeing girls as 'nothing'; Girl 21 said that to her father 'girls are useless'.

Education for girls was therefore an economic cost, the benefits of which would not be recouped by her family (Jensen and Thornton, 2003). As Girl 4 explained, 'it makes more sense to educate a boy'. Although boys are also likely to be excluded from school in contexts of poverty, they are often advantaged over girls in access to schooling (Subrahmanian, 2005). Thus Girl 21 said that only the boys in her family were given paraffin lamps to study by, and even if they were willing to share, this must be done secretly, without her father's knowledge. She also claimed that if there was insufficient money for both her and her brother to attend school, her father would make her stay at home and would prioritise schooling for her brother. In fact, 10 of the girls said that their fathers did not value education for their daughters; these fathers had had minimal education themselves, with only three attending primary school, and none completing it. Girl 5 was 'rescued' and taken to a boarding school, as described later, but in her family of 14 children, most of the boys had gone to school, but not the girls:

> My father does not want to give girls education. That's the thing he has said in his own family, that he will never, because girls don't know anything.

Such findings resonate with those of Leggett (2005), who, in his research in the pastoralist region of Wajir District, found that 'there is only a limited acceptance of the notion that girls have an equal right to education' (p. 129).

Secondly, though not asked about it directly, two thirds of the girls introduced the subject of harassment, violence or threats of violence from parents, teachers or male members of the community. The practice of corporal punishment both in school and at home is widespread in Kenya (Archambault, 2009), and so it is not surprising that girls in three of the four schools mentioned being beaten by both male and female teachers. Although this was the only critical thing they had to say about their schools, it clearly had a negative impact on their relationship with teachers. As Subrahmanian (2007) points out, violence against girls in school contributes to under-achievement and girls dropping out of school. Perhaps more for our respondents, however, was their fear of violence outside school, particularly rape and its consequences, a

fear which was justified through their own experiences and those they knew:

G4: There was a girl who was picked up by her uncle, and then when it was at night he took her into the bush and raped her.
  I: Was he picking her up for the holidays?
G4: Yes.
  I: Ok, and where is she now?
G4: She has left school.
  I: Did she ever come back after that?
G4: No.

A number of the girls, when asked about the challenges they faced, talked about their fears of violence from young Maasai warriors (morans), who hid in the woods waiting to attack them on their way to school, as the following interchange explains:

G7: When we are coming in the morning there are some morans who want to trap us.
  I: Have they hurt you?
G7: They tried to hurt me, but I ran very fast. When you are coming to school they grab you. If they beat you and catch you, they do you bad manners and you get pregnant.
  I: Do you know anyone who was caught?
G7: Yes, she got pregnant, and her father gave her to the moran who raped her.

Pregnancy is a significant cause of drop-out for teenage girls (Hunt, 2008; Were, 2007), and for the most part, it appeared to be the case that early pregnancy in this area led to a cessation of education, whether the result of early marriage, rape or consensual sex. Yet whilst the schools frequently and consistently warned girls about the risks of unwanted pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection, the girls described continual harassment from boys and young men to 'do bad manners', as they put it, in a context where 'gender dynamics dictate that sex is the means through which males legitimise their masculinity' (Nii-Amoo Dodoo and Frost, 2008, p. 443). Girls were also at risk through the custom of pubescent girls not being permitted to sleep in the house where their father was sleeping. This meant that a number of the girls we interviewed were left to fend for themselves at night. Sometimes it was possible to sleep in a relative's hut, or, in the case of polygamous marriages (about half the households), in another wife's hut, but otherwise girls were left to sleep in the open, and hence were prey to male abuse.

Finally were the 'unfreedoms' the girls experienced with respect to domestic labour. We have already described the hours spent collecting wood and water, but in addition were a range of other domestic tasks girls were required to perform, such as looking after younger siblings, washing, cooking and herding animals. In essence, the girls frequently reported carrying the burden of domestic labour whilst their brothers' responsibilities were far fewer (Kane, 2004). Such demands and expectations at home frequently meant no time for study outside school, even if the resources such as books, light and space would otherwise have made it possible to undertake homework. The nature of the work girls do may therefore impede their participation in schooling because their work is far more time-intensive than that of boys, and may be incompatible with schooling (Subrahmanian, 2007).

5. Education as a valued functioning

Capability theory, as we have already discussed, takes account not only of natural and social environments, but also of human diversity. Therefore, despite the seemingly insurmountable hurdles which stood in the way of their schooling, in a context where large numbers of pupils, especially girls, attended school intermittently if at all, we found in our interviews an amazing commitment to education. During the interviews all the respondents were asked what they thought every girl deserved, and every single one named education first. In fact, most mentioned only education. Girl 5, for example, had what she described as a 'vision for education':

> I was just looking after the goats and sheep there in the forest. I was very small. Then one day I was just saying, 'me, I want to educate' – just having that vision: 'I want to educate.' . . . When I was not educated I just had a vision for education. But it was very difficult to wish something and not get it. I was wishing to be in school, but it cannot be because I don't know where to go and get help.

Girl 24 had a similar zeal for education. She said her very difficult background had not had a negative effect on her aspirations; on the contrary, it encouraged her to go forward and work hard with the implication that she could make a different kind of life for herself. As Girl 9 said, 'education can take you to another place'.

Education, then, was perceived as opening up career opportunities and providing the route to independence, a finding echoing the girls in Walker's (2006) study in South Africa: 'What then emerges is that these girls value learning and the opportunities education will open up for them'. (p. 176). All the girls interviewed in our study had aspirations to progress through secondary school to college or university, and all had ambitious career aspirations, for example as pilots, doctors, lawyers or teachers. Education was seen as the way to get a good job and earn a high salary, and was thus the route out of poverty and for some a way of leaving behind the place where they had grown up. A few wanted money to be able to drive a big car and buy various consumer goods for themselves, but most also expressed a desire to give something back to their communities in some way. For example, Girl 24 aspired to become a lawyer so she could help other girls who were unable to fight for their rights. Girl 6 wanted to become a doctor in order to treat people in her village who had access only to traditional medicine. Like several others, Girl 5 wanted to contribute to family finances, and particularly to help her mother, but more than that she wanted to inspire others by her example:

> You know in our area it's only my niece who is in school, at college – no other girl has ever finished school. But now me, I want to show them that there is a girl that succeeds in life. I would like to advise those who lost hope, and help them, and even in that area I want to build a school, so that children can get a place to study.

Despite the pressure on girls in these communities to marry young, often soon after the onset of puberty, and despite a culture where there is considerable social stigma attached to non-marriage and childlessness (Nii-Amoo Dodoo and Frost, 2008), none of the girls interviewed anticipated marriage in the near future and some discounted it altogether. Several said they had not thought about it, or were too young to think of getting married or having children. Early marriage was condemned by all the respondents, mainly because it was seen as synonymous with giving up any chance of education. The following exchange between the interviewer and Girl 10 represents the perceived conflicts between education and marriage:

  I: What are your thoughts on marriage?
G10: It is a good thing if you are well educated.
  I: So if you are not educated, what happens to you in marriage?
G10: You can drop out of school, you can be married off when you are very young, and that is suffering.

I: Ok, and if you're married when you haven't finished schooling?

G10: That will be a bad marriage. You will never see eye to eye.

I: Why?

G10: Your husband will want you to take care of the animals and you will want to do your own things, follow your own interests, and you will never be able to do that.

Marriage was seen, therefore, as restrictive not only in terms of ending educational chances, but also in terms of personal freedom. Indeed, a few girls, having experienced firsthand the burden of domestic labour carried by their female relatives, and the violence they suffered at the hand of their husbands, said they never wished to marry at all:

> I have seen with my own eyes. Back in my village there are so many women who are beaten for no reason at all by their husbands. Even when you have done no wrong, you are just beaten, or he sends you away (Girl 6).

6. Realising capabilities

It was true that some girls felt a lack of agency in dealing with the challenges that confronted them. They felt powerless in the fact of attacks from men on their journey to school, for example, and some saw no way of continuing their education if there was no money for school fees, or if their parents 'gave them out' to be married. It was clear, nevertheless, that many of the girls had put in place personal strategies to help themselves. They talked about developing self-reliance, about being single-focused on their work whilst in school, about the importance of being attentive in class and studying as hard as possible. Their aspirations and dreams for the future gave them goals to strive towards.

The quality of schooling is critical to retention, with a supportive learning environment making a crucial difference (Lloyd et al., 2000), and girls participating in the research benefited from the quality of education they received. Corporal punishment aside, most girls said there was nothing they did not like about school, and were highly complimentary about their teachers, who were said to teach well, explain carefully until the students understood and discuss with them when they went wrong. Classroom learning involved discussion and question and answer sessions, and teachers were said to be approachable both inside and outside lessons. Girl 5 described in detail how although she had started school late, 'knowing nothing', her teacher had taught her patiently and thoroughly, encouraging and motivating her to become more confident, so that at the time of the interview she felt able to approach even the headteacher if she had any problems.

Some teachers went further than supporting, encouraging and advising their pupils of the importance of education, and acted as a catalyst for change in their lives. We were told of teachers who campaigned on the girls' behalf, approaching NGOs for sanitary protection, or for toiletries or clothing for them, for example. On other occasions teachers were instrumental in enabling girls to avoid FGM and early marriage. Girl 14, for example, described how she ran away from home because her father wanted her circumcised, and simply turned up at the school, where the headteacher took her in as a boarder and found a sponsor for her. For Girl 4, it was her teacher who, seeing her academic potential, took the initiative and intervened:

G4: My parents wanted to circumcise me and give me away [in marriage].

I: So what happened?

G4: My teacher there knew this and when we closed school she told me she knows what my parents are planning to do. She came with a car, I got in and we came here.

I: How did she know you had this problem?

G4: Maybe because she lived near us. She had asked me and I had told her that I don't want [to get circumcised], and she told me she will think of what to do.

I: Is it that she had known you for long and that's why she helped you?

G4: No, she was my teacher and I used to be number one in the class.

I: So tell me what happened when you came here.

G4: A woman was the headteacher then. That was her house there [points at a house in the distance]. She took me and I lived with her because schools had closed. School opened on a Monday and she bought me uniform.

The headteacher found a sponsor for Girl 4, which would make it possible for her to continue to secondary school.

Given that the schools selected to take part in the research were those where the quality of education was seen to be good, it might be expected that the role of teachers in motivating and keeping girls in school would be important. A key finding of the research, however, was the role played by a range of other people in these girls' lives in enabling them to realise their capabilities. First, and most obviously, was the role of the parents and other family members. We have already discussed the way in which a number of fathers saw little value in educating daughters, yet our interviews also revealed that a third of fathers *did* support their daughters' education. Given that the education level of household members is influential in determining whether and for how long children access schooling (Hunt, 2008), it is perhaps significant that all but one of these fathers had been educated at least to the end of primary school. Both of Girl 17's parents strongly supported education and even held family meetings from time to time to encourage their nine children to work hard. The father was seen as the main supporter of education, having been denied education as a child, and worked as a herdsman to save money to go to school after he was married. He was also unusual in allowing his wife to take up adult education after they married. Such was this family's attitude towards education, that even though Girl 17's sister had become pregnant and had a 4-month baby boy, she was about to return to school, with her mother looking after the baby. Girl 23's father also encouraged his children to study, helping them with their homework and giving them extra maths to do. Despite resistance from his own parents, he was willing to sell cows to pay for his children's schooling. Girl 23's mother, who had been educated up to class 7, also had high aspirations for her children, and so, like Girl 17, her household chores were comparatively light, enabling her to study in the evenings.

Despite for the most part having very little education, or even none, it was mothers who were generally more strongly supportive of their daughters' education than fathers. It was usually the mothers who gave permission for the girls to attend school, and who sometimes threatened fathers with being reported to the local chief if their reluctant husbands did not allow their daughters to go to school:

> She [my mother] says I have to go to school and if he dares stop me she will go to the authorities, and he is scared of the authorities' [Girl 22].

Girl 21's mother appeared unusual in the extent to which she challenged her husband. Uneducated herself, she insisted her daughters were educated, and despite her husband arguing that he wanted to marry off his daughter when she finished primary

school, Girl 21's mother was insistent that the girl be allowed to go on to secondary school unless she herself chose to marry then. She was angry, on returning from a trip away, to find that her daughter had been kept at home to herd the animals, and she herself took on herding and fetching water during the week (a 5-h round trip) so that Girl 21 did not miss school. There were two other instances of mothers taking over herding the animals to enable girls to attend school against their fathers' wishes.

For a number of girls, education was seen by their mothers as a means of being able to help them in the future. Thus whilst a number of fathers placed little value on girls' education, for mothers, their value sometimes lay in the girls' education being the route to a job and hence financial support. As Girl 21 explained:

> To the fathers girls are useless, but the mothers think the girls are very important and want them to be educated.

Girl 21 said her mother supported her education because she believed that daughters looked after their mothers when they were successful, whilst sons were dismissive of them. Nine girls spoke of sisters, grandmothers, aunts and female cousins who had helped them by arguing their case, moving the girls away to live with them nearer a better school, helping them to avoid FGM and early marriage or giving advice or sometimes even financial support.

However, interestingly it was often brothers, some of whom had dropped out of school themselves, who played a key role, with a third of the girls mentioning brothers who supported them, either financially or through actively intervening to persuade their father to allow a sister education. Girl 5, for example, told of two of her brothers making it possible to go to her current school:

> I have a brother who is a teacher. . . . When he was in Form 4, he told my father, 'I want you to help me get J. [Girl 5] an education'. But my father said, 'I cannot give any girl an education'.

Later on, her younger brother was instrumental in helping her to wave down a car containing a female NGO representative, whom he said would help her to escape threatened circumcision. Girl 5 was indeed rescued, despite threats of curses and violence from her father, and was taken to boarding school with the support of the local chief and police, where her older brother continued to visit and support her:

> My brother was just encouraging me in the car, saying, 'make sure you go to school, now you have got the education – go and work hard, and I will come'. Then we went.

That NGO representative was just one of a number of outsiders who were among those who also helped girls realise their capabilities in a positive way, particularly through responding to cries for help to avoid FGM, and through enabling girls to attend boarding schools away from home. One school also regularly brought in potential role models, often former pupils who had done well in their education and were now in stable employment. Some girls were inspired by these women, or occasionally by other women in their local communities who had finished school, wanting to emulate them. Some local chiefs were also playing a part in some communities, holding meetings to extol the value of education for girls. There were church leaders, too, who stressed the importance of sending children to school, and encouraged the children themselves to take advantage of the opportunities offered to them.

7. Conclusions

This paper has taken Sen's capability approach as a conceptual tool for the analysis of girls' retention in four schools in the Kajiado District of Kenya. It has shown the unfreedoms experienced by young women on a daily basis, which impact upon their education. Firstly, school attendance and the ability to focus on school was affected by the ongoing scarcity of natural resources, made worse at the time by an intense drought. This was augmented by the fact that schools were widely dispersed, and many children had to walk very long distances to school, leaving them too tired to study effectively. Secondly, economic unfreedom impacted on access to education in a context where, although supposedly free, the significant indirect costs of education meant that some families could not afford to keep all their children in school. Even if they did attend school, some children had no space or light to study by at home.

Whilst environmental, infrastructural and economic unfreedoms impact on boys and girls alike, the girls in this study furthermore experienced a set of personal unfreedoms related to their gender. The tradition of FGM and early marriage meant that education for girls was often seen as pointless, and therefore, where resources were short, such money as was available was devoted to boys' education. Girls were also subject to harassment, violence or threats of violence at school, on the journey to and from school, and through the custom of sending adolescent girls to sleep away from the family dwelling when the father was there. Early pregnancy was therefore common, and generally led to a cessation of education. When they were at school, girls were in addition required to carry a greater burden of domestic work, leaving them little time for study.

All of these unfreedoms provide a context where girls are less likely to enrol in school, or to persist with education through primary and into secondary school. Why, then, despite experiencing such a range of unfreedoms, were the girls in the study reported here present in school and, according to their teachers, likely to persist with schooling? How were they able to realise their aspirations? Firstly we found an incredible commitment to education: for these girls, education really was a valued functioning. They saw education as opening up career opportunities, providing a route into independence and an opportunity to give something back to their families and communities. Secondly, we have highlighted the important role played by the schools the girls attended, providing a supportive and high-quality learning environment. Furthermore, besides teachers, there was a network of key people – parents and other families members, community leaders and outsiders – who played a critical role in supporting and encouraging the girls, acting as facilitators, role models and informal mentors, and sometimes being catalysts for change.

The research reported here has therefore helped to fill the gap highlighted by Hunt (2008) with respect to qualitative studies on girls' retention. It has added, furthermore, to the breadth of studies which utilise Sen's capability approach, showing the way in which, despite the unfreedoms which form the fabric of our respondents' lives, these young women do, as Sen himself argues, have some agency. Retention for these girls was underpinned by their zeal for education, their belief in its power to transform their lives. Hunt argues that drop-out is a process rather than an event, and we argue that retention too is a process. Thus the girls' aspirations are generated, supported and nurtured through the intervention of key people with whom they live and come into contact, people whose roles are critical in enabling them to realise their capabilities.

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