

Education for Girls with Visual Impairments in Kenya: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *Until recent years, girls and women have been trailing behind in terms of educational access in Kenya just like in many other African countries. This situation is even aggravated when it comes to girls with special needs such as those with visual impairments. Whereas much has been documented concerning development of girls' education in general, there seems to be little documentation that concerns education for girls with visual impairments. It is in this regard that this paper sought to trace and document the historical development of education for Girls with Visual Impairments (GWVI) in Kenya. The research employed the use of the historical research design in data collection, analysis and interpretation. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Data collected was analyzed qualitatively through triangulation and emerging themes were deduced. The research findings present a slow progress of special education for the GWVI in Kenya. Having been started in the year 1954 at the Thika Institute for the Blind, education for GWVI would later be introduced in to other schools such as St. Lucy School for the Blind. As at 2015, the number of GWVI in both the specials schools and special units across the country was almost equal to that of visually impaired boys. The study concludes that even though the journey of education for the visually impaired girls in Kenya has been slow, the progress has been steady to the level of achieving parity in comparison to visually impaired boys. The number of visually impaired girls in school is however low compared to the total population of the visually impaired girls in Kenya.*

Keywords: Girls' Education, Special Education, Education for Visually Impaired Learners

1. Introduction

Despite the many gains that have been realized in education over time in Kenya, boys have been much ahead of girls in most of the educational aspects such as enrolment, progression and performance especially at secondary school level and colleges over time (Chege, Sifuna 2006). This is despite the fact that the society is more likely to achieve higher socio-economic development through educating girls and women. King (1991) acknowledges that female education is one of the most important forces of development and further observes that an educated mother raises a smaller, healthier and better-educated family, and is herself more productive at home and at the work place. Many studies have attributed this lingering behind of girls' education to a number of factors including cultural factors, socio-economic factors, biological factors and even historical factors (GOK & UNICEF, 2006). When combined with impairment such as visual impairment, girls become even more disadvantaged in their prospects to acquire and progress with education.

While history informs the present and the future, there has been little effort to describe the origin and development of education for girls with visual impairments (GWVI) in Kenya. Most studies have majorly focused on recent and current trends in girls' education. More so, since the onset of government's involvement in provision of education in Kenya, there were no any specific policies that could encourage girls to strive to acquire education until 1924 when the colonial administrators' policy on education was influenced by the recommendation of the Phelps-Stokes Commission which was mandated to survey educational programs, needs and the extent to which they were being

met. Among other things the commission considered the education of women and girls as an integral part of the education system and therefore encouraged support of girls' education (Lewis, 1927). The Phelps-Stokes report did not however address the issue of education of girls with impairments such as those with visual impairments.

Another effort in promoting girls' education could later emerge in 1949 when the colonial administration appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Archdeacon Leonard Beecher. The commission was mandated to inquire into the scope, content and methods of African education. The Beecher report recommended that it was fundamental that boys' and girls' education be placed side by side and principles applied with equal force to both. The report however did not address education for girls with visual impairments.

Whereas the first special educational institution Persons with Visual Impairments (PWVI) in Kenya was established in the year 1946, the institution initially targeted only boys that were blind with girls only coming in several years later (Chikati, Wachira & Mwinzi, 2019). This indicates that education for GWVI is an aspect that was not given due attention. There seems to be no literature concerning the progress realized in educating GWVI from the time of its establishment. It is in this regard that this study set out to document the historical development of education for GWVI in Kenya in order to illuminate on the progresses made and challenges encountered thereof. This may in turn inform the current decision making processes and help in prediction of future trends.

2. Methodology

In pursuit of collection of data related to the development of education for GWVI, the study employed the historical research design. The researchers systematically located, collected, evaluated and synthesized evidence related to education for the visually impaired girls from the past to the present. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources that were utilized include archival data and oral evidence from informants. Archival data search involved examination of reports as well as original documents such as educational reports and minutes of relevant meetings as well as records from Kenya National Archives (KNA) and special schools for the blind. Secondary sources that were examined include published materials such as journals, textbooks as well as online materials from the internet. After the collection of data, the data was verified and validated through external criticism, internal criticism and triangulation before being used as historical evidence for the study. The evidence was then analyzed qualitatively. The developments in education for GWVI as acquired from documentary sources and oral interviews were analyzed qualitatively through triangulation and emerging themes were deduced.

3. The Development of Education for Girls with Visual Impairments in Kenya

Upon the analysis of data, it emerged that the development of education for GWVI could be categorized into different phases that are characterized by different time and activities. For clarity, the phases have been presented chronologically from the early activities to the most recent developments. The phases as presented form the subtopics under this topic and they include: The early beginnings of education for PWVI in Kenya; Introduction of education for GWVI in Kenya; Developments in education of GWVI in Kenya; and post-primary-school education for GWVI in Kenya.

3.1 The Early Beginnings of Education for Persons with Visual Impairments in Kenya

Whereas the earliest institution in Kenya to offer education for PWVI was established in the year 1946, there is evidence of some activities that were aimed at caring and training of the blind persons before then. Khanani (2015) for instance attributes the training of Persons with Blindness (PWB) to the Church Missionary Society mission station that had been established at Rabai in the year 1944. The mission station was under the leadership of Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebmann who had arrived in Kenya in the year 1844 and 1846 respectively. In their mission station which Rebmann and Krapf set up a school for rehabilitating former slave children, some of whom were blind (Khanani, 2015).

In the year 1942, there emerged a slightly more organized and focused training for PWB in Kenya at the Salvation Army mission in Nairobi (Chikati, Wachira and Mwinzi, 2019). This training was conducted on a voluntary basis by Mrs. Colonel Barell. Before coming to the Nairobi station, Mrs. Barell had obtained an experience of training PWB for several years in Jamaica. She started by gathering a few

PWB into temporary quarters in Nairobi and began teaching them how to read by the Braille system

Mrs. Barrell's training activities at the Salvation Army Nairobi station attracted the attention of the government who seemed to be impressed with the training activities of PWB. In 1944, the government promised to provide financial assistance to the Salvation Army mission if they would organize and maintain on a larger scale the welfare work for the blind which had already commenced (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2019b). Upon consideration, the Salvation Army mission decided to expand the training services for the PWB and therefore plans were made to establish a training institute for the Blind at Thika town. Thika town was preferred for establishment of a training institute for the blind because of its central location in Kenya with easy accessibility from various parts of the country. It was also considered suitable due to its proximity to Nairobi, the country's capital city. The SA mission at Thika was only 27 miles from Nairobi along the Nyeri-Nanyuki branch of the East African Railways

The Salvation Army Mission agreed with the government that the institution was to remain under the management of the Salvation Army mission on behalf of government with the government's education department providing supervisory role and generally safeguarding government interests. An advisory committee was appointed to manage and provide guidelines on expansion of the institute. Accordingly, the Institute for the Blind was opened at Thika, early in 1946. Senior-Major Edward Osborne, who had studied various phases of work among the blind in England, was appointed as the Superintendent of the institute (KNA, MOH/3/282).

3.2 Introduction of Education for Girls with Visual Impairments in Kenya

In the early years of Thika Institute for the Blind, the first institution to cater for PWVI in Kenya, admission was limited to only boys and men with blindness. Whereas there were several requests by girls with blindness to join the institute, such requests were rejected because the institute had not started training of girls (KNA, DC/KTI/3/7/11). As the first educational institution for persons with visual impairments in the country, absence of girls' education meant that GWVI lacked access to special education that catered for their needs. As a result of the several requests for consideration of girls training, the management of the Institute at Thika made plans to commence education for blind girls in the year 1949. This training however took a long time for it to start because the institute was considered to be operating in experimental period and therefore girls were to be only brought on board after evaluation of the success of the training programs that were in place (KNA, CA/3/49).

In 1953 a clear plan to enroll the girls to Thika Institute for the Blind was established. This followed the recommendations of the ad hoc Committee for the Blind that resolved to change the Thika Institute for the Blind to a mixed primary school with the rule that approximately one-third of the pupils were to be girls (KNA, DC/KJD/3/11/7).

It was after this that plans were laid out to admit girls who with blindness from the age of six to fifteen years. The requirements for admission were however severe in the researchers' view considering that the GWVI that were to be admitted were required to be of sound health with no any long standing illness (KNA, DC/KSM/1/29/32).

Another condition imposed was that GWVI to be admitted were required to be ascertained as being trainable yet there were no clear guidelines on how one was to be determined as trainable or not. The researchers did not however come across similar requirements in admission of boys with blindness. In an effort to find an answer to this, the researchers established that the school had created capacity for only a few girls and therefore the stringent measures were used as means of elimination for the large population of GWVI who would have wanted to be admitted.

In 1954, the plan of the ad hoc Committee for the Blind was implemented leading to enrolment of the first eight girls to the newly renamed Thika School for the Blind. The girls were admitted for free schooling and the school provided uniform for them at no cost (KNA, DC/KSM/1/29/32). The school built a new dormitory for girls through the funding of an anonymous donor in 1954. Four years later, an extra building was constructed in order to increase the capacity for training of GWVI from thirty to sixty due to the many applications that were being received from GWVI.

3.3 Developments in Education for Girls with Visual Impairments in Kenya

At Thika Institute for the blind, the girls were to learn together with boys if they were taking the same course or were at the same level of study for academic training. If a girl was six years old on admission, she received approximately eight years of primary school education, domestic training, shamba (farm) training and handwork (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2019a). The period however varied according to the age of the girl on admission. Girls judged to be too old to undertake the eight years of schooling would undertake the domestic science course. Whereas the establishment of education for GWVI was a milestone in the development of education in Kenya, the type and nature of education was more oriented in vocational training than academic training. Even though this form of training helped girls to be independent by enabling them to carry out most of the domestic chores on their own, it depicted the existence of negative societal attitudes towards PWVI. By not focusing on academic education which would lead to advancement to higher education, the GWVI may have been deemed to have low ability of excelling in education.

With regard to trainees' prospects, an effort was made by the school and the community leaders in linking the school leaving girls to the activities of the 'Maendeleo' Clubs (Development Clubs) in their own villages where their skills could be demonstrated and taught to others (KNA, BY/12/21). Following the establishment of the kindergarten section at Thika School for the Blind in the year 1959, domestic science training was made to include care for the infants in the kindergarten.

In 1958, a second school for the learners with visual impairments (LWVI), St. Lucy's School for the Blind was established. Unlike Thika Institute for the Blind which started by admitting male persons only, this school opened its doors for training of both boys and girls with visual impairments for the primary school education. With a few GWVI admitted at St. Lucy and Thika School for the Blind, there was a positive change in attitude towards educating the GWVI. Further access to primary school education by GWVI would later emerge through the establishment of St. Oda School for the Blind in 1961, Likoni School for the Blind in 1965, Kibos School for the Blind in 1965 and St. Francis School for the Blind in 1979. All these schools admitted both boys and girls therefore increasing the number of the GWVI that were enrolled in educational institutions.

The establishment of more schools after Thika Institute for the blind made the visually impaired girls to not only to have increased access to education but also to undertake the same kind of education that was being offered to boys with blindness and even persons without visual impairments. By 1960 for instance, there was a large number of girls studying together with the boys in the primary section of Thika School for the Blind and St. Lucy School for the blind (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2019a). This was a great achievement towards empowering VI girls not only in Kenya but East African region at large since by 1961 some countries such as Uganda and Tanganyika had not started their own training for blind girls (KNA, BY/27/4).

The special schools for the blind have continued to admit both boys and girls with visual impairments in almost equal proportions from 1960s up to the present but in most cases, the number of visually impaired girls is below that of boys. As at 2002 for instance, Thika Primary School for the Blind had a population of 190 students comprising of 108 boys and 82 girls. In 2014, the school had 214 students comprising of 106 girls and 108 boys. By 2017, Thika Primary School for the Blind had a total of 304 students of which 131 were girls and 173 were boys (TSB, P/6/2018).

3.4 Post-Primary School Education for Girls with Visual Impairments in Kenya

Despite the establishment of the first institute for the blind in 1946 that led to enrolment of GWVI in 1954 and the subsequent establishment of other schools for LWVI, there was no provision of special education at post-primary school level for persons with visual impairments for several years up to the year 1967. There was also lack of consideration in education for LWVI at higher educational level. The education provided to the GWVI at the existing schools for LWVI was therefore more of elementary in nature with main focus on equipping learners with simple vocational skills that would enable them to be more independent in life. As time went by however, there was eminent need for provision of secondary school education especially after the schools started offering primary school education. Learners from the primary schools required to proceed with secondary education necessitating the arrangements for secondary schooling for the learners with blindness.

Prior to the establishment of secondary school section at Thika School for the Blind (TSB) in 1967, a few blind girls who completed primary school education went into tertiary institutions to pursue vocational and industrial training. These institutions included the vocational center at Thika School for the Blind, Machakos Training Institute for the Blind that was established in 1958, Kolanya Institute for the Blind in Busia that was established in 1956 and a Shamba training Institute established at Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya in the year 1958. Another vocational Institute for the Blind was established later at Sikri in Nyanza region of Kenya in the year 1970 (Ojwando, 1990). A few other girls however joined mainstream secondary schools where they learned alongside learners without visual impairments. As one of the informants explained, the experience for these learners was challenging because they were to work extra hard in order to catch up with sighted learners by use of their Braille machines for writing.

Efforts of establishing a secondary school at Thika Primary School for the Blind were initiated leading to the formation of a secondary school by 1967 (KNA, BY/12/21). Despite the various challenges that were encountered by the school as the pioneer institution for educating LWVI, the school started admitting both girls and boys with visual impairments who had excelled in their primary school level education. By the year 2003, Thika High School for the Blind was the only special secondary school for the VI in Kenya. Other special secondary schools would later emerge in the special primary schools that had been established. Such schools include St. Lucy's Secondary School for the Blind established in 2005, St. Francis Secondary School for the Blind established in 2007, Kibos Secondary school for the Blind established in 2009 and Nico Hausa Secondary School for the Blind established at St. Oda School for the Blind in 2013 and Likoni Secondary School for the Blind. Besides these six special secondary schools for the LWVI, there are six other mainstream secondary schools that have special units for the LWVI that provide education for GWVI. These include Kericho Tea Secondary School, Aquinas High School, Upper Hill Secondary and AIC Girls Secondary School in Kajiado (MoEST, 2016).

Despite some commendable progress that has been realized in establishment of secondary schools for the LWVI, it was the researchers' conviction that there is still limited access to secondary school education for the persons with visual impairments in Kenya. This is informed by the large number of LWVI who have to travel for long distances to access education making all the special schools to be residential schools. This is a limitation because not all parents in Kenya are willing and able to enroll their children with visual impairments more so girls in boarding schools. This state therefore locks out most of the GWVI who may be forced to attend regular schools with no specialized facilities for their state. The enrolment of GWVI in secondary schools in Kenya has however tremendously increased even though it is still lower than that of boys. By 2003 for instance; there were 84 girls at Thika High School for the Blind out of the total population of 200 students (TSB, S/3/2003).

In terms of higher education for GWVI, it is the government's policy that a learner can be admitted to any

university or college regardless of their physical or sensory disabilities (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2019a). As a result GWVI in Kenya are admitted to various courses in different universities across the country provided they do qualify just like their sighted peers. Most of these learners however face a myriad of challenges since most the universities do not have specialized personnel to cater for their impairments. Learners with visual impairments in public universities also encounter mobility related challenges (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2019a). Some universities in Kenya have however started special education departments that target both learners with visual impairments and those without visual impairments who train as teachers for the LWVI besides other categories of special education. These include Kenyatta University, Moi University, Maseno University and Methodist University. These universities offer degree and postgraduate courses in special education which goes a long way in providing qualified teachers for the LWVI.

4. Conclusion

Development of education for the GWVI in Kenya has been a slow but promising journey. Having started in the year 1954 in form of trade training at Thika Institute for the Blind, GWVI would later have more access to education through other special schools that emerged later such St. Lucy School for the Blind and Likoni School for the Blind among others. It was until 1967 that special secondary school education for LWVI was introduced in Kenya through the establishment of Thika High School for the Blind. The school not only provided the opportunity for GWVI to undertake secondary school education but it also gave them a chance to proceed with higher education. Even though there is open access to higher education for persons with visual impairments in Kenya, most of the universities do not have the necessary support system for LWVI thus disadvantaging their academic growth. Whereas there has been growth in provision of education for GWVI in Kenya, much needs to be done in terms of improving the friendly access to education.

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