



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY TO MITIGATE HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES
AND VALUE SYSTEMS

*Dr. Florence K. Nyamu, Dr. Leah N. Wanjama, Ms. Rose M. Irungu and Mr. Fred N. Kariuki

Kenyatta University

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ABSTRACT

As the basic root of a community, culture defines a way of life, value systems, beliefs, attitudes, structures and systems of education. Each society has clear expectations and outcomes of the education process. Learning is through observation, imitation, participation and instruction particularly during ceremonies associated with rites of passage. Within culture are social, economic and political systems of educating the young to uphold the value systems of the community. Culture also provides mechanisms of moulding the behaviour of the youth to conform to societal expectations as they transit from childhood to adulthood. Within the culture, the young are assigned socio-economic roles that prepare them for adult life. However, some of the values inculcated are at variance with the realities in modern society causing feelings of inadequacy and pressure to conform. There is evidence that as dynamics of the world change, culture also evolves such that some practices become unnecessary, harmful and repugnant. Despite increased access to formal education and new knowledge, harmful traditional processes and practices continue unabated resulting in increased incidences of psycho-social trauma and health challenges. The purpose of this paper was to document stories and experiences of randomly and purposively selected young men and women at university level regarding harmful traditional practices and value systems. The stories from the young men and women provided evidence that despite gains in formal education, there are differences between the socialization processes and experiences from earlier years that make it difficult for them to fit in and enjoy their time at the university. They also intimated that they were aware of the existence of harmful cultural practices that are still propagated at the family/community level which are at variance with the behaviour expected at the university level.

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INTRODUCTION

As the basic root of a community, culture defines a way of life, value systems, beliefs, attitudes, structures and systems of education. Each society has clear expectations and outcomes of the education process. Learning is through observation, imitation, participation and instruction particularly during ceremonies associated with rites of passage. Within culture are social, economic and political systems of educating the young to uphold the value systems of the community. Culture also provides mechanisms of moulding the behaviour of the youth to conform to societal expectations as they transit from childhood to adulthood. Within the culture, the young are assigned socio-economic roles that prepare them for adult life. However, some of the values inculcated are at variance with the realities in modern society causing feelings of inadequacy and pressure to conform.

There is evidence that as dynamics of the world change, culture also evolves such that some practices become unnecessary, harmful and repugnant. Despite increased access to formal education and new knowledge, harmful traditional processes and practices continue unabated resulting in increased incidences of psycho-social trauma and health challenges. It also has a bearing on achievement of gender equity and equality, a concept that is a prerequisite for sustainable development. In Kenya, gender equity and equality is critical in the achievement of Vision 2030 as well as individual and societal growth and development. While significant gains and strides have been made in mainstreaming gender in many institutions, gender disparities, harmful traditional practices have continued unabated. This could be explained by the pressure to adhere and conform to cultural processes and practices despite years of formal education. Despite being harmful and in violation of international human rights laws, some cultural practices are passed on from one generation to another. Such practices persist because they are not questioned and take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practicing them. With global trends in all aspects of life, formal education

becomes the single most important strategy for mitigating harmful cultural and religious practices and processes.

Research problem

Culture provides a structured pathway of growing up from childhood to adulthood and continues to educate the young on behaviour, ways of life and values expected as they go through various rites of passage. The introduction of formal schooling by missionaries tended to disregard and at times be at variance with cultural education. As a result, different cultures embraced formal schooling differently. There are cases where the variance between cultural practices and formal schooling is so large that some families have almost abandoned their culture. In other cases, the variance is not so large such that despite formal schooling, some families are still deeply entrenched in cultural practices. In Kenya, in some pastoral communities, schooling has had very little impact while some sedentary communities have almost abandoned their cultural practices. As a result of formal schooling, education and exposure to other cultures, dynamics of the world have changed. Culture has evolved as a result of interactions such that some practices have become unnecessary, harmful and repugnant. Despite new knowledge, harmful traditional practices continue unabated resulting in increased incidences of psycho-social trauma and health challenges e.g. early marriages, early pregnancies and female genital mutilation (FGM) and 'cleansing'. It is important to note that not all traditional practices are harmful e.g. circumcision for men which is recommended as a preventive measure for HIV. (Chumo, 2017). Negative effects of harmful cultural practices on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and women are well documented in Kenya. Such practices include: early marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), cleansing of widows, sex after circumcision for boys and sexual and gender-based violence. There is, therefore, a need to examine the cultural practices and modern education with a view towards transforming education as a strategy for mitigating such harmful practices.

Research Objectives

- To document stories of young men and women and find out how they were socialized as they were ushered from childhood to adulthood;
- To establish the difference between the value systems inculcated and what they know now while at university;
- To investigate the harmful cultural practices still being practised;
- To highlight students' views on conforming to cultural stereotypes; and
- To make recommendations on ways in which education can be transformed to eliminate harmful cultural practices and value systems.

Research Questions

- How were the young men and women socialized as they were ushered from childhood to adulthood?
- What differences exist between the value systems inculcated and what the students know now while at the university?
- What are the harmful cultural practices that are still being practised?
- What are the students' views on conforming to cultural stereotypes?

- In what ways can education be transformed to eliminate harmful cultural practices and value systems?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used qualitative research approach and descriptive survey design. Descriptive design enabled capturing of information from students in their own setting. Participants of the study were purposively and randomly selected from among 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year male and female students of Kenyatta University. They came from different Counties that included: Baringo, Bomet, Busia, Embu, Homabay, Kakamega, Kiambu, Kitui, Kisii, Kisumu, Lamu, Machakos, Murang'a, Mumias, Nairobi, Nandi, Nyeri and one student from Moshi, Tanzania.

Data collection

Primary and secondary data was collected for this study. Secondary data was collected through desk review of relevant articles in journals and scholarly work. Primary data was collected through individual documentation of personal stories and focus group discussions (FGDs) on selected themes.

Data analysis

The interview guide used for the focus group discussions (FGDs) had two parts. Part 1 requested participants to write short briefs of their personal story and the values inculcated as they grew up. A few striking personal stories were selected for documentation. Part 2 of the primary data comprised responses to questions regarding instances of inadequacy, pressure to conform, decision making, men/women as providers, husband and wife relationships in campus and recommendations from the students. The data was cleaned, coded and categorized into themes relating to the questions. Secondary data was used to strengthen and validate definitions of concepts of culture, culture and formal education and the nexus between culture, formal schooling and modern way of life. Further, secondary data was used to triangulate information derived from the analysis of primary data.

RESULTS

Personal stories: At the beginning of each interview, participants were requested to reflect and write a short brief on their early socialization and ways in which it has shaped transition from childhood to adulthood. Out of the 26 students interviewed, the researchers selected nine (9) personal statements for review which are presented below.

Female, 22 years, Embu County

"Growing up in Embu County, where my dad worked as a Bishop and my Mum as a teacher; I did not quite manage or be allowed to socialize with various people. I grew up knowing much about church, religious values and most of my holiday time was spent studying. I was ushered into adulthood through my sibling, an older brother who I socialized with after high school when I first came to Nairobi. This was quite a culture shock since my parents were not there to monitor and guide me through. This has made socializing and making friends on campus an issue for me. I am an introvert and stick to just one

friend throughout. Sometimes, classmates might think I am being proud or something—I am also soft-spoken and speaking loud is an issue.”

Female, 22 years, Nairobi County

“Growing up in the family (both nuclear and extended), school as well as the society at our area of residence were the main socializing agents. At family level, growing up as a girl, I was socialized to be “a girl”, for instance, between age 3 and 9, I was always within my mum’s eyes—spending much time with her as compared to my elder brother whose *adventurousness* was not an issue—e.g., leaving home in the morning and coming back in the evening. In school also, I was socialized in nursery that as a girl, I had to be neat and not make myself dirty (not play) in contrast to what boys were socialized to be, playful. Also within the society and institutions, such as church, I was socialized to have values such as obedience and honesty. At age 7, I witnessed my cousin being condemned for becoming pregnant after completing primary school at age of 14. It was a state of confusion and I’d blame this on lack of proper sexual education in socialization process while growing up.”

Female, 21 years, Busia County

“Growing up I alternated between living with my mother and maternal grandmother. My maternal grandmother had the most impact in my socialization as she would tell me how I should behave as a girl and as a woman in future. She taught me how to do household chores. She is a strict disciplinarian and she would warn me from associating with the opposite sex. She encouraged me to be of good behaviour as it is a valuable quality in the future as a wife. My mother taught me the value of hard work as she was a single mother and struggling to take care of me. She insisted on patience that I still value to date. She would also insist on discipline, self-control and even after high school she would strongly disagree on my socialization with boys. She would tell me to work hard and not to depend on a man for material and emotional well-being.”

Female, 22 years, Nyeri County

“I grew up in the watch of most of my family members, i.e. my parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. I was taught to be a woman in the sense that I was supposed to be humble, submissive, polite and hard working. I often heard my grandmother saying men are supposed to be respected. So, as a woman, you were supposed to please men and always acknowledge them as heads. In case of violence, e.g. beatings you were not to go back to your parents. You were supposed to stay at your place not only because of children but also as a way of submission. I learnt that you are to dress like a woman. Putting on trousers meant you want to be like your husband. This was a taboo. I was taught that women sleep late and wake up early and such women are respected in the community.”

Female, 22 years, Homabay County

“I personally grew up in a humble background where I was taught how to behave as a girl. For example, I was taught to have respect for those who are older than me and even those younger than me irrespective of gender. I was taught to dress smart in order to show respect. I was taught to sit upright and to greet the elders with respect by at least bending down a bit and shaking with two hands. I was also taught to have high

self-esteem, be proud of who I am and also where I have come from so that I would be able to overcome the challenges I come across. My parents usually encouraged me to be a courageous lady and not have fear because of the challenges that one may come across and above all, to be a prayerful girl and before doing anything God should come first.”

Male, 22 years, Nairobi County

“I was raised up by a single mother who was very tough on matters concerning discipline as well as good behaviour. This greatly influenced the kind of friends I had. This also included the great involvement in religion and religious activities. I went to a catholic sponsored boarding primary school as well as high school. Personally, I am a social person; open hearted to anyone that I come across and discipline is my motto in life. From the religious perspective (which was part of my life), morality was a strong aspect of life and as I grew up, boy-girl or boy-boy interactions were normal part of life in the society. Sometimes, I felt superior because of my education background and other times I felt inferior because some girls and boys were either more educated or older and wild and their words were final. I personally remember being bullied by girls.”

Male, 21 years, Kakamega County

“I was brought up in a society where men are seen as the heads of their houses and by that I mean the home security needs to be from boys and men of the home. For one to provide security, one needs to be energetic, courageous, wise and a risk-taker. Men at my place are providers and of course, I grew up knowing that I am the one to stand in for my family and gather, prepare and bring it to our home. Mostly men are seen as role models and therefore, whatever I do hits back that someone somewhere is watching and doing whatever I do. Not to forget about leadership qualities that are portrayed by men around my home area such as courage and strong will that are obtained through the circumcision of boys. Only men and boys attend the cultural ceremonies e.g. the bull fighting and the after-burial ceremonies.”

Male, 21 years, Busia County

“As a male child, I was taught more about being responsible. My parents taught me to take care of myself and be hard working. For instance, I was supposed to wake up early, go to the farm especially during weekends. Also I was taught how male children should behave. Because they believed in future I was going to be a father and be the head of my home, I was trained to be wise and be able to think before acting. As a male child, it was also good to respect the elders and greet them. When you meet ladies, you are expected to help them in case they are unable to perform a duty.”

Male, 21 years, Machakos County

“I grew up at an all-round environment with both positive and negative experiences of life. As a toddler, my parents had to limit my interaction by inculcating social norms of respect to the elders, hard work, and honesty. My neighbourhood was a zone for drugs and substance abuse and hence I was cautioned at a very early age so that as I grew up into adulthood I would become fully aware of my environment and make the right choice. Peer pressure was the other challenge which gets a

good portion of the youth into social ills like theft, disrespect and promiscuity leading to contracting of diseases such as HIV. Generally, as a youth, being socialized into adulthood has been very challenging in terms of influence and this takes a lot of courage to evade. I was able to overcome these challenges through indulging in church since childhood as well as giving priority to what is essential.”

Value systems

The information below shows some of the values that were significantly different for male and female students.

Female students	Male students
Boys are superior	Girls are weak
Men are the only decision makers	Women can't make good decisions 'wanaumendiokusema'
Men are liars, cannot be trusted	Irresponsibility especially at home 'Cooking and cleaning is for girls'
Men should provide, "my money is mine, his money is ours"	
Cannot get married to a poor man	

Students' views on conforming to cultural stereotypes

During the interviews, students reported a number of stereotypes about boys and girls to which that they were expected to conform. The information below highlights the stereotypes as reported.

Female students	Male students
High expectations from the society	Traditional circumcision-superior 'Wasenge'-Lamu Ihii-Kikuyu
Dreamland mentality-getting a 'princess kind of life'	Dreamland mentality-fulfilling expectations from girls
Academically-a child is expected to perform exemplary while they are talented differently forcing them to cheat in exams	Academically-a child is expected to perform exemplary while they are talented differently forcing them to cheat in exams
Father's absence making one relate poorly with opposite sex	Father's absence making them hard headed and 'grow up' prematurely
Being too thin or fat especially in as an adolescent	Voice breaking later than for other boys in high school
Frustration after working hard in school and then getting married off to an older man chosen for you by others	
Seeing well educated girls stop working when they get married	Fear of having a wife earning better while expectation is that man is the provider

Girls

The research findings on girls' views on conforming to cultural stereotypes indicated that there were very high expectations from the society in many areas for example, when a girl gets pregnant, the society blames her and not the boy/man who made her pregnant. The girls are expected to always portray high moral standards, to be obedient, to help mothers at home and take responsibility when the mother is not there, be kind, go to church, dress well serve others without complaining. The girls are also not expected to participate in late night parties, get drunk or get home late at night. With regard to "dreamland mentality-getting a princess kind of life" the female students

informed that girls, particularly those brought up in urban areas were pampered and made to believe that everyone should treat them like princesses. They were made to feel fragile and expected everybody to treat them with 'care.' They, therefore, should not agree to get into a relationship or get married to a poor man who may not afford to provide the "dreamland lifestyle." On academic performance, the girls narrated how their families expected them to record exemplary performance in school. This is despite the fact that they may not be academically gifted and this tends to lead them to cheat in examinations. The practice of cheating in examinations extends to the university affirming that the girls are still under pressure to conform to the family expectations. The girls from single mother's households indicated that they were not sufficiently socialized on how to relate with opposite sex. This is especially true where they were brought up with only sisters and went to a single sex school. They indicated that father's absence made them relate poorly with opposite sex. On the issue of body size and general appearance, the girls indicated that there is a general expectation that they should not be too thin or fat especially as an adolescent. Either of these situations made girls to become a laughing stalk. Some girls responded to this pressure by eating little or eating normally and thereafter forcing the food out (forced vomiting). This happens when they are in a party or where parents force them to eat. In cases of girls who are fat, they look for different ways of slimming such as taking drugs. The girls also reported to experience frustration getting boyfriends. The other type of frustration reported was situations when girls were married off to older men chosen for them by parents or relatives despite having worked hard in school and performing well.

Boys

The young men reported that those who were circumcised through the traditional circumcision process were considered superior to those circumcised in hospital. The worst scenario was when the boys were not circumcised, but were of age. In Lamu, they are referred to as 'Wasenge' and in Central region they are called Ihii. Such young men are not expected to date any girls in the community. In circumstances where the girls are suspected to have dated such young men, they are ostracized. Another issue that affects boys as they grow up is when the voice breaks later than for other boys in high school. Such boys are not considered "full men" and this frustrates their relationships with girls. With regard to life style and association with girls, the boys reported that their dreamland mentality was to provide for their girl-friends or wives. This brings frustration and pressure to fulfill the expectations from girlfriends and wives. The boys reported feeling pressurized to have a lot of money and expensive items to impress and win girl friends and felt threatened when girls and women have more money. The boys reported high parental and community expectations for them to select hard science subjects and to perform well so as to become engineers, architects, technicians, electricians among others in spite of ability and talent. The expectations tend to lead to cheating in examinations. The boys reported that growing up with an absent father where absence meant that the boy had a father but interaction between him and the father was minimal or growing up in a female headed household, made them hardened and 'grow up' prematurely. They also reported that there were cases where such boys displayed deviant behavior and played truant in their early years.

Men/women as providers

The findings on who should provide for the family indicated that in the students' view, both men and women should provide. However, there was a feeling that when a woman provides, some men tend to become lazy and spend their resources on alcohol and other drugs. This was said to result in distorting the image of men as they begin to feel embarrassed or seen by others as less of men. Below is a quote from one of the students.

"Who are you in that house if she is the one providing...*mwanauendiokusema*" opined one of the young men. He indicated that those women who provide become disrespectful, hence when he will be marrying, he will ensure that the wife will not be earning more than him... "a girl-friend can provide but not my wife" he added. It is likely that the perception that men should not marry wives who are better educated or earn more than their husbands may have contributed to increasing levels of violence meted to both men and women.

DISCUSSION

Personal stories: The personal stories affirm that each culture has its way of educating and socializing youth in preparation for adulthood. Across cultures, emphasis for the girls was neatness, humility and politeness; self-control, no interactions with boys and to focus on marriage in the future. Girls were socialized to tolerate abusive relationships and submit to male authority for the sake of children. When they reach university, relationships become challenging leading to early pregnancy, single motherhood and violation by male friends. On the other hand, male students were socialized to be providers, security keepers and heads of households, with freedom to socialize liberally and be in and out of their homes as they please. Little attention was paid on how to relate positively with females as fellow students. At university level, some of them find it difficult to relate with empowered girls who refuse to allow themselves to be violated.

Difference between the value systems: In every culture, there are ways in which children are socialized to learn values firstly through the family and later through the community. Some of the ways in which the values are inculcated include observation, imitation, story-telling, listening and participation. From the findings, it was revealed that both male and female students learnt similar values with regard to self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth, economic independence, hard-work, respect for elders and being responsible. However, reports from the male and female students showed differences with regard to values related to decision-making, provision and care-giving roles. While male students felt strongly that decision-making and providing for all the needs of the family was their role, the female students reported that they had been socialized to take up care-giving roles such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and taking care of children. The findings from interviews indicated that the statements that "*boys are superior*" and "*girls are weak*" have influenced the way female and male students behave at the university. Female students tend to look for male partners to protect them while the male students feel pressurized to be superior. This '*weakness*' makes female students look for '*sponsors*' to take care of their financial needs. Such sponsors are usually older men with money and influence. For the male students, the pressure to be "*superior*"

drives them to be violent towards their girlfriends. This was reported to have contributed to increased cases of alcoholism and drug abuse and sexual and gender-based violence. With regard to decision-making, the students reported that they were taught that '*men are the only decision-makers; women can't make good decisions wanaumendiokusema*'. This Kiswahili statement translates to "*men are the ones who make decisions.*" From the discussions, it appeared that the male and female students still hold these views while at the university. Both female and male students reported that they were socialized to believe '*Men are liars, cannot be trusted*'. For the male students this appears to play out in their relationships with female students such that some male students make it an excuse to have multiple partners at the same time. On the other hand, female students who take relationships seriously get very hurt when they realize their boyfriends have other relationships. With regard to household chores, the male students reported that they had learned that it was not their responsibility to undertake household chores and that '*cooking and cleaning is for girls*'. This may play out at the university where the female students make it their duty to cook, clean and wash for their boyfriends. On the other hand the boyfriend may pay for the food, rent and do assignments for their girlfriends in return. On the issue of money at the household level, the female students reported to have been socialized that "men should provide, '*my money is mine, his money is ours*'. They also believe that a woman should not get married to a poor man.

Harmful cultural practices that are still being practised

From the interviews, students enumerated a number of harmful cultural practices that they knew about and are still practised today. These were; early marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), cleansing of widows, sex before and after circumcision for boys and sexual and gender-based violence. Girls in early marriages are denied opportunities for education, their growth and development is stunted and tends to develop health complications particularly during pregnancy and delivery. With regard to female genital mutilation (FGM), the girls are subjected to unhygienic processes during the cutting and healing and these may result to loss to life. FGM has also been said to be a problem especially during delivery and is a high risk for occurrence of obstetric fistula. On the issue of sex before and after circumcision for boys, students reported that in some communities the boys were made to have sex with older relatives the night before circumcision. In other communities, boys were taken to an older female relative to experience sex with them soon after healing to usher them into manhood. With regard to sexual and gender-based violence, students reported them as the most common harmful practices that continue unabated. In some communities, a myth is propagated that beating a wife or a girlfriend is one of the ways of showing love and in other communities is a way of disciplining the women.

Conclusion

Stories from the male and female students provide evidence that despite gains in formal education, there are differences between the cultural socialization process and the experiences at the university level that make it difficult to fit in and enjoy their time at the university. They also intimated that they are aware of the existence of harmful cultural practices that are propagated at the family/community level. The harmful cultural values are at variance with what is expected of them

while at the university. There is, therefore, a need to educate the society on the need to change the traditional mindset that men are the main providers in their families. It should be possible, through educating the society, to change the perception that only men can provide so that either men or women, depending on the circumstances, can provide for the family. For achievement of Kenya's Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030 and African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, there is a need to synchronize, harmonize and resonate cultural education with formal education as a strategy for mitigating harmful cultural practices and value systems. This will lead to the creation of a harmonious society in which both men and women have opportunities to develop and contribute positively to individual and national sustainable development.

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Annex: Focus Group Guide

A: Short personal statement

Short personal statement- when born, where, how they were socialized into adulthood, what values were inculcated into them as they grew up

Social values-respect for older people, service to other people, communal responsibility, generosity, putting others first, dignity, self-respect, self-esteem, self-discipline, hard-work

Economic-the need for self-reliance, hard-work, survival skills, identify a trade, practical skills.

B: Questions for Focus Group Discussion

- Give examples of incidences when you have felt inadequate and challenged in the interactions with the opposite sex, same sex.
- Is there anything significant that you were taught during the socialization from childhood to adulthood that is still useful to you today or at variance with what you know today?
- What would you suggest should be done differently?
- As a girl/boy, how were you taught to behave towards; elders, peers, boys/girls?
- What have you been socialized about sexuality and what is the reality, what are the pressures to conform?
- How do you deal with pressure to conform socially and economically?
- What have you been taught about economic self-reliance and what to do to support yourself?
- What is your view about a man as a provider?
- What is your view about a woman as a provider?
- What is your view about a girlfriend/boyfriend being a provider?
- What do you think about "husband/wife" relationships among University students?
- In your view, who makes decisions? What have you been socialized on this? How does it differ from what you know now?
