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Equality in Programming for Girls and Boys: Adolescents' Shared Experiences From an After-School Support Program in Urban Nairobi

Nelson Muhia, MA
African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5557-5560

Benta Abuya, PhD
African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2465-0967

Contact: *nmuhia@aphrc.org*

Abstract

There has been marked progress in access to education, representation of women in leadership, sexual reproductive health, and gender-based violence as a result of gender equality initiatives. However, there is still a strong focus on interventions targeting girls only. Through the adolescents' lens, this study sought to establish if there is a preference for interventions targeting girls compared to boys in two urban informal settlements; and what benefits were realized from programming for both adolescent boys and girls enrolled in an after-school support program. We employed a thematic analysis approach to answer the research questions. Results showed that most interventions at the community and school levels tended to favor girls over boys despite both facing similar challenges. Some of the benefits of programming for both sexes included sharing academic knowledge; boys gaining knowledge and skills to enable them to be future champions of change; enhanced ability for the adolescents to keep away from social ills; better gains for the society; breaking the gender inequality cycle; and enhanced social-emotional skills. Evidence from this paper highlights that there is a need for program and policy stakeholders to consider gender-transformative approaches and interventions targeting both sexes to maximize gains in education, health, and well-being.

Recommended Citation

Introduction

The number of international and national commitments to enhance gender equality through inclusive quality education cannot be understated. For instance, the Education for All policy (EFA), which launched in 1990 and was later reaffirmed in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, committed to ensuring that by 2015 all children—with a particular focus on girls' and women's access to quality education—improve their literacy and eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary school (Madani, 2019). Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5, which build on the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), are keen on gender equality by ensuring that both girls and boys complete free primary and secondary schooling and ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls by 2030 (United Nations, n.d., 2023). At the national level, laws, such as affirmative action, promote gender equality by ensuring that no more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies are of the same gender (Kaburu, 2019). In addition, there have been deliberate steps taken to mainstream gender issues in teacher training by enhancing gender-responsive pedagogy to eliminate gender inequality in education (Abraha et al., 2021; Chapin & Warne, 2020; Dersch et al., 2022; Kollmayer et al., 2020). These gender equality progressive initiatives have resulted in a myriad of gains in education, leadership, and the world of work.

On the education front, gender parity in access to education and participation has improved globally. Aggregate girls' completion rates have exceeded that of boys at primary levels, 88% compared to 86%, respectively; lower secondary levels, 78% to 76%; and upper secondary levels, 60% to 57% (UN Women & UNDESA, 2023).

In Kenya, the policies on free primary education and subsidized secondary school, are credited with improved enrollments for both boys and girls in the two levels (Republic of Kenya Ministry of Education, 2020). For example, as of 2020, the primary school gross enrollment ratio (GER) and net enrollment rate (NER) stood at 97.5% and 79.3%, respectively. At the secondary school level, the GER increased from 66.8% to 76.5% (from 2016 to 2020), while the NER increased from 49.5% to 54.2% during the same period. There has also been marked progress in attaining and maintaining the gender parity index (GPI) in Kenya at primary and secondary school levels albeit with some regional disparities. At the primary level, the GPI has been maintained at 0.97 and 0.96 between 2018 and 2020. On the other hand, the GPI at the secondary school level stood at 1.00 and 1.01 in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

In terms of representation of women in leadership, the implementation of affirmative action policies by several African countries, including Kenya, resulted in an increase in the proportion of women participating in political activities and their consequent representation in parliament (Okedele, 2021). A recent report by the World Economic Forum (2023) on the representation of women in the workforce indicates that the number of women employed in the total workforce increased between 2016 to 2019, as did the number of jobs held by women albeit at a slow or plateauing rate. The report also highlighted that women outnumber men in some industries, such as healthcare (65%), education (54%), and consumer services (52%).

Why Involve Boys and Men in Programs Targeting Girls and Women?

Evidence of Reversed Gender Gap in Education
Global education statistics indicate a reversed gender gap in education, where girls and women have gained an advantage in education over boys and men in almost all education levels (Erát, 2021; Saadat & Sultana, 2023). Some studies also show that the reverse gender gap is also visible in the aspirations for higher education, where adolescent girls more often have higher expectations for higher education compared to boys (Lauglo & Liu, 2019). Some of the proposed reasons behind this trend include a greater focus on female empowerment at the expense of males; engagement in social ills by male students, such as gang violence, delinquency, criminal activity, and drug use and abuse; and focus on extracurricular activities by male students (Jackman &

Morrain-Webb, 2019). It is therefore imperative that boys equally benefit from initiatives targeting improvement of education outcomes.

Overcome Negative Masculinities and Violence Against Women and Girls

Violence against girls and women results from an interaction between patriarchy, culture, and masculinity in that the embedded negative beliefs emphasize male assertiveness and domination of women (Langa & Leopeng, 2022; Mshweshwe, 2020). Evidence of the importance of engaging men and boys to prevent and end violence against women and girls is widely acknowledged in literature (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Keddie, 2022; Keddie & Bartel, 2021). Adapting a gender-transformative approach that enhances the empowerment of women and girls, as well as positive masculinities, is therefore seen as one of the effective strategies for ending violence against women and girls and also enhancing gender equity (Brush & Miller, 2019; Flood, 2020; Pérez-Martínez et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2021).

Enhance Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health

Literature on the benefits of gender-transformative approaches that enhance women's sexual reproductive health; maternal and newborn health; as well as the subsequent improvements in healthcare seeking and enhanced decision-making by couples is well articulated (Ruane-McAteer et al., 2019). Male involvement is associated with improved knowledge and uptake of family planning; accompaniment of women to health facilities by their partners; and enhanced gender norms (Lusambili et al., 2021). Father-inclusive interventions are associated with positive maternal, paternal, and couples relationship outcomes (Jeong et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Whereas girls tend to face more education and health challenges than boys in many parts of the world (Ajayi et al., 2023; Rao et al., 2019; Wetheridge, 2022), reports indicate a tipping of the scale where boys are increasingly facing poor education outcomes, such as grade repetition, lower completion rates, and poor learning outcomes compared to girls—with the disadvantages more prevalent at the secondary school level (Jere et al., 2022). One of the proposed reasons for these prevalent disadvantages is that the majority of education interventions tend to have a strong focus on improving outcomes for girls (Unterhalter, 2023). Studies show, however, that education interventions targeting "girls only" could potentially be missing out on benefits that may accrue from interventions that are not gender-specific (Evans & Yuan, 2022). This study poses two research questions:

> Research Question 1: Is there a preference for interventions targeting girls compared to boys in two urban informal settlements?

> Research Question 2: What benefits were realized from programming for both adolescent boys and girls enrolled in an after-school support program?

The Advancing Learning Outcomes and Transformational Change (A LOT-Change) Intervention

In 2013, the A LOT-Change program, which ran for 9 years until 2022, was initiated in two informal urban Nairobi settlements (Abuya, 2020; Abuya & Muhia, 2023; Abuya et al., 2021). The program was implemented by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and two community-based organizations in the two urban informal settlements—Miss Koch Kenya in Korogocho and U-Tena Youth Organization in Viwandani. During this project duration, the program reached over 2,000 adolescents and their parents. The intervention components for adolescents included homework support, mentorship in life skills, exposure

visits, motivational talks, and service learning. Additionally, parents enrolled in the program were placed in support groups of 25–30 parents and were sensitized on positive parenting.

Methods

Study Participants

The qualitative data was derived from dialogues held with 78 adolescent boys and girls living in two urban informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya—Korogocho and Viwandani. The study respondents were purposively selected by having participated in the A LOT-Change project. The dialogues were part of two evaluations of the A LOT-Change project carried out by APHRC that sought to find out the impact of the project on both adolescents and parents who had been enrolled in the project since 2016.

The first evaluation was conducted from June to July of 2018 and the second from November to December of 2019; there were 46 and 32 adolescents, respectively. In each evaluation, four dialogues were held with same-sex adolescent groups to allow for homogeneity and comparison of views from both girls and boys (Hennink et al., 2020). Each group consisted of between six to eight participants from each study site.

Data Collection

Each adolescent group dialogue was facilitated by a moderator and an assistant moderator. The moderator's role was to drive the discussions with the adolescents while the assistant moderator was in charge of taking notes of the interviews (Hennink et al., 2020). Before starting an interview, rapport was established with the adolescents to ensure that they were relaxed and ready for the interviews. Basic guidelines, such as respecting each other's opinions, not mentioning names when providing examples, and raising a hand when they want to respond, were also communicated to the adolescents.

Interviews with the adolescents lasted between 1 and 2 hours with the longest taking 1 hour and 54 minutes. The moderator used an interview guide during the discussions, and, in line with ethical standards, the two studies were approved by the Amref Africa Ethics and Scientific Review Committee (ESRC) under the approval numbers P215-2016 and P678-2019, respectively. In addition, informed consent from parents and guardians, as well as assent from the adolescents, was sought (Hennink et al., 2020).

Parents were first contacted through their mobile phones and briefed about the study. Once they accepted for their children to participate, an additional assent was sought from the adolescents on the day of the interview. Permission to record the interview was also sought from the respondents. The participants were purposively selected depending on their availability and willingness to share their experiences (Hennink et al., 2020; Tracy, 2019). A central venue was selected for the interviews to ensure accessibility for the participants. The interviews were conducted using a mix of English and Swahili, the national languages.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The qualitative interviews were captured using digital recorders and physical notes taken by the assistant moderator. During transcription, the audio files were transcribed verbatim, with the detailed physical notes used as reference to enhance the accuracy of the data (Hennink et al., 2020). To answer the research questions, the research team employed the thematic analysis approach (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023), where the relevant themes, mostly derived deductively from the qualitative study guides, were identified. The themes were then collated in a coding scheme and fed into NVivo software for coding (Dhakal, 2022). A coding report summarizing the qualitative findings thematically was then generated and used to draft the key findings for this paper.

Study Results

This section highlights key qualitative results following the evaluation of the A LOT-Change project in 2018 and 2019. The results are categorized according to the research questions. Findings for the first research question indicate that both adolescent boys and girls agree about the existence of a skewed focus on interventions targeting girls in Korogocho and Viwandani. Some of the reasons behind this perceived disadvantage are also mentioned.

Research Question 1: Is there a preference for interventions targeting girls compared to boys in two urban informal settlements?

Perceptions on the Availability of Interventions by Adolescent Boys and Girls
Adolescent boys from both Korogocho and Viwandani expressed their concern that the majority of the support programs and interventions at the community and school levels tended to favor girls more than boys, yet they were facing similar challenges as the girls. For instance, boys complained about how the community was more concerned about poor academic outcomes for girls, such as school dropout, as compared to boys. Others pointed out the fact that even scholarship qualification marks were higher for boys as compared to girls.

> R1: That is true many projects support girls only and the boys are neglected and because of that some of the boys engage in very bad activities because they have been left behind and the girls are empowered, we only have a few projects that deal with the boys. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

> R1: I will say that right now the girl child is more favored than the boy child, you will find the boy child is neglected. For instance, there is a scholarship program in the community that requires different qualifications for boys and girls, that is 360 and 380 out of a possible 500 marks in their final primary school examination for girls and boys, respectively. (Male adolescent, Viwandani)

The view that the majority of the interventions in the community tended to favor girls was also shared by adolescent girls who confirmed the existence of programs targeting girls only. However, according to some of the girls, especially in Korogocho, the differential treatment was justified due to the myriad of challenges that girls face as compared to boys. The highlighted issues included teenage pregnancy, low academic achievement, and preference for boys' education by some of the community members.

> R4: Most of the opportunities go to girls. Most organizations come for girls and say that girls are the most sensitive. They mostly take girls. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

> R2: I think that girls have more programs because in a family most fathers prefer the boys because the boy is the one who will remain with him there. They usually don't want girls to study because they say it wastes their money because you will go to another family. (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

Perceptions of Unfair Treatment of Boys in the Community and at Home
In addition to the adolescents feeling that there were more programs targeting girls in the two communities, adolescent boys also echoed that the unfair treatment was also generally visible both in community and home environments. For instance, some of the adolescent boys felt that one of the reasons why child abuse cases, where boys were victims were not dealt with effectively was the community notion that boys would "survive" the incident or in some cases, the community would simply not believe that the incident happened.

> R7: It's true girls are more favored than boys. ... In our village, when a girl encounters a problem like rape or robbery, most people would want to take action and find the culprit, but if a man is robbed and screams, people will say he has taken cannabis or he has gone out of his mind. (Male adolescent, Viwandani)

> R4: You know, when you hear girls are raped people are concerned, but if a boy is sodomized, people will not look at it as a very big problem. (Male adolescent, Viwandani)

The adolescent boys also reiterated that the unfair treatment continued at home. One of the commonly alluded examples that exemplified this view was that boys felt that they were usually the first suspects for wrongdoings or even punished for things they had not done, even in cases where a girl was the actual wrongdoer. Another example of the unfair treatment by parents was the view that they tended to prioritize girls' education as compared to boys by, for instance, paying their school fees and leaving boys to bear the brunt of being chased out of school for fee arrears.

> R1: When my parents get money, they pay my school fees last after all the girls have theirs paid and so I am chased from school, and I miss the opportunity to read … that is not good. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

> R5: Let's say there is a case of lost money at home, the first suspect will be the boy, why not the girl? Even if the boy is innocent, you will find that he will be punished for a crime he hasn't committed. (Male adolescent, Viwandani)

In this regard, parents were thus mentioned to be key players in eradicating inequality by promoting fair practices for both girls and boys at home.

> R2: To me, I think the parents should encourage the boys too … parents buy girls uniform and the boys are not bought for … when the girls do not perform well in exams, they are just left like that because they will get married, but you are told as a boy you have to work hard because you will be the one to marry so you have to work hard. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

Research Question 2: What benefits were realized from programming for both adolescent boys and girls enrolled in an after-school support program?

This section highlights the perceived advantages by both adolescent boys and girls of including boys in the A LOT-Change project. The mentioned benefits include sharing academic knowledge between girls and boys; boys as future champions of change; enhanced ability to keep away from social ills; better gains for society; breaking the gender inequality cycle; and enhanced social-emotional skills.

Sharing Academic Knowledge

The qualitative results highlighted that female adolescents appreciated having boys enrolled in the A LOT-Change project for enhanced diversity and the consequent sharing of knowledge among themselves. Girls were happy that they were able to improve in mathematics as a result of gaining knowledge from the boys who they felt performed better. In exchange, girls shared their literacy skills with the boys.

> R2: I think that it was the best thing to put boys together with us because it is not good to look like a (single gender) boarding school. In this project (A LOT-Change), they taught us that boys are as important as we are. When (coughing) they put us together, there are things that boys know that we do not understand like in mathematics, they are the best in those subjects, and we are best in English. So we shared our knowledge and that made us pass. (Female adolescent, Viwandani).

This perspective was also shared by adolescent boys who not only felt appreciated by virtue of being enrolled in the A LOT-Change program, but they also valued the sharing and learning experiences in mathematics and English with girls. A male student attending the dialogues explained that:

> R4: I was okay because when they put girls only, that was gender inequality. So when they included us, it was equality. … Because when we were put this way, we were not alone. They helped us. … It

promotes doing work together. You can solve some questions with girls because maybe they are good at English and we are good at Maths, so we help each other. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

One emerging result that emanated from dialogues with adolescent girls was that some of them felt that the sharing of knowledge with boys was easier because girls tended to keep to themselves. In their view, boys were more willing to share their thoughts and knowledge.

R6: So when different genders (boys and girls) come together, we learn things together … girls like keeping things to themselves, but for boys if you go ask them, "Did you understand this question?" they will share with you the ideas or how to pass. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

R8: It was good to involve boys in the A LOT-Change because when there are girls only, girls can explain something to you, but you won't understand. They just explain as if they don't want but when boys were enrolled and you go and ask a boy a question, he will explain to you well and you will understand. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

Boys as Future Agents of Change
The narratives from the adolescent girls accentuated that they were appreciative of the long-term benefits of empowering boys in the A LOT-Change project. To them, empowered boys had a better chance of becoming future supportive fathers—especially for their daughters' well-being. One of the most alluded to examples by the adolescent girls was where the empowered boys would have the requisite skills and confidence to support their future daughters through puberty, such as, through providing sanitary pads during their monthly periods.

R9: I think they are supposed to know and also there are times they don't need to know. For example, if a boy matures (becomes a father) and has a daughter and she reaches the menstruation period, it will not be a problem to talk to the girl because he would be knowing. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

R1: They are supposed to know because once they grow and marry, and then the girl asks him to give her money to buy pads then it won't be a problem because they were taught what it is when they were young. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

R4: Because when the girl reaches that stage (monthly period) the boy should know. Maybe if the girl doesn't have money to buy whatever she needs, she can ask the boy and he [will] understand and help her. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

The adolescent girls also reiterated that empowering girls only and leaving out the boys would be detrimental to them as girls in the future. For instance, the adolescent girls did not envision themselves getting married to disempowered boys in the future since the positive gains they would have made would be easily diluted. To them, empowering both boys and girls together ensures the complementarity of the roles in the future.

R2: I think that it is important to bring boys into these programs because you can educate the girl to get a degree and then the boy doesn't have one. When they go there and meet, they will marry, and it is the girl who will suffer very much because the lady will be providing everything. There will be no unity and working together. (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

This notion was also shared by adolescent boys who echoed that programming for both boys and girls was vital in eliminating the stereotype threat about gender-specific jobs. To them, enrolling in a project like A LOT-Change had given them the courage to appreciate and engage in traditionally perceived female roles like engaging in house chores.

R1: And also when people are together it will kill the idea that there are jobs for the boys and those for the girls. … Like yesterday I was washing our house, and some boys were laughing … so that will

destroy that myth if the men can also do work at the salon and the community will accept it so that there are no people who say that this is for the boys or the girls. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

Enhanced Ability to Keep Away From Social Ills

Enrolling boys in the A LOT-Change project was also credited with keeping them away from social ills in the community, such as drug abuse, robberies, and the resulting mortality, which are rampant. The adolescent girls were keen to also have the boys gain skills that could help them in mitigating these social ills, as it had also worked for them. For instance, one adolescent girl from Korogocho reiterated how the knowledge gained from the project had not only kept girls away from adolescent pregnancies but also helped the boys avoid engaging in vices, such as theft, and consequently staying alive.

> R7: When we are not taught (mentoring in life skills), we will become pregnant, and that's how boys will also engage in theft and end up being killed, and their life ends up being forgotten. So including them was a nice thing because they would not engage in theft and not be killed, and they would continue with their life. (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

According to the adolescent girls, engaging boys in their program had a resultant advantage in that they would also not be pressured into engaging in those social ills. Also, there was imminent fear that boys who are not empowered could become perpetrators of gender-based violence and sexual abuse in retaliation.

> R5: I think that involving the boys was so good because if the boys had not been in the project, let's say the girls have learned and the boys have not, the boys will also start influencing (the girls) to do bad things because almost all of them ... or all of them have not learned. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

> R8: That is also wise because we, as girls, we could be taught and rise to the top, and that boy child who has not been taught [in the after-school support program] deep down they are feeling bad ... and if, for example, they see us passing somewhere going to be taught we can be caught up on the road, and since they don't know what we have been taught, they can even rape us there by the roadside. (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

These sentiments were corroborated by adolescent boys who felt that sometimes boys were forced to engage in social ills as a result of being disempowered. For instance, feeling insignificant, being idle, and lacking academic support were pointed out as push factors for boys to engage in crime. This is perhaps why one of the adolescent boys attributed their involvement in the A LOT-Change project to a reduction in crime engagement by boys.

> R5: It was good because you know mostly boys are the ones I hear nowadays, especially the young ones are dying early. This is because, maybe, you have seen you have nothing you can do, the girls are the ones who are being educated, and you feel there is nothing you can do, there is peer pressure, so you decide to go steal and you get shot. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

> R6: You know in the past, the boys in Korogocho used to be idle, they used to be killed, they used to engage in crimes, so when they came into the program [A LOT-Change], cases of crime reduced. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

Breaking the Gender Inequality Cycle

While appreciating that historically girls have often been marginalized, the adolescent girls in the A LOT-Change project had a strong conviction to break the inequality cycle. They felt that empowering girls only would result in the perpetual cycle of inequality, where the boys would now become marginalized. To them, both boys and girls should be given the same opportunities.

R3: It was wise to include boys because even if most of the time girls were being discriminated against (historically), we should be fair since what you are doing for the girl child should be done for the boy child, and you shouldn't discriminate (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

R5: I think that even boys should be involved because if (we) just involve girls their programs will become so many. Now you will just hear after a few years that the boy child has been neglected. Now, because they have become many, they should be handled on the right hand so that none goes down. We should all be on the same level. (Female adolescent, Korogocho)

The adolescent girls appreciated the fact that when both boys and girls are empowered, there are better gains for themselves and society. According to them, there was little advantage in empowering the girls while the boys were left to undergo challenges.

R7: I think it is helpful because if the girl child was only empowered, the boy child [would] face difficult circumstances because, first of all, his peers will influence him badly. When the girl child is empowered, she will help society, and the boy child will be helpful to society. (Female adolescent, Viwandani)

Enhanced Social-Emotional Skills

One of the greatest gains for the boys enrolled in the A LOT-Change project was enhanced social-emotional skills, such as negotiation, coping with emotions, coping with stress, and impulse control. To the adolescent boys, these skills were not only important in their day-to-day interactions but also in avoiding negative masculinity gender stereotypes, such as men expressing their emotions and solving issues through violence.

R7: I think it was a very wise decision because it helped me a lot emotionally. I was someone who would resolve my issues with violence. You know most men in this country are not taught some of these skills. It is said men do not cry. You stay strong. You find a boy who is stressed but can't express himself, he can't express his anger. So when I came here, I came to know it is not only violence. I can negotiate with someone who has different ideas than mine. (Male adolescent, Korogocho)

Discussion

The objective of this paper was to highlight the views of adolescent girls and boys on the benefits of involving boys in interventions targeting adolescents in Korogocho and Viwandani. This study sought to answer the following two questions: (1) Is there a preference for interventions targeting girls compared to boys in two urban informal settlements; and (2) What benefits were realized from programming for both adolescent boys and girls enrolled in an after-school support program?

On Research Question 1, there was a consensus from both adolescent girls and boys that the majority of the academic and well-being interventions in Korogocho and Viwandani tend to target girls. One of the reasons that could explain the heavy focus on education and well-being interventions is the notion that girls face more challenges than boys, particularly in the urban informal settlements. This notion is supported by extant literature that, on average, girls and women tend to face a myriad of academic and sexual reproductive health challenges compared to boys and men, such as poor access to education, low secondary school transition rates, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, high levels of HIV incidence, and gender-based violence (George et al., 2020; McGavock, 2021; Millanzi et al., 2023; Muluneh et al., 2020; Phongluxa et al., 2020; Yah et al., 2020; Zaman & Koski, 2020), majorly propagated by harmful social norms (Cislaghi et al., 2019).

A key resultant effect of the limited focus on boys was that they not only continued to encounter challenges with little help to solve them but also felt isolated and at times in conflict with girls. For instance, the

adolescent boys felt that there was a tendency to favor girls even when they had committed a mistake. Previous studies show that social isolation can result in an increased risk of mental health problems among children and adolescents, such as depression and anxiety (Loades et al., 2020). This is perhaps why the adolescent boys in the study community who were not enrolled in the A LOT-Change project are said to hold negative feelings towards girls who they feel are more empowered than them.

Findings on Research Question 2 showed that both adolescent girls and boys, who were enrolled in the A LOT-Change project, felt that there were clear benefits of both sexes being empowered, as compared to the majority of interventions in their communities that focused on girls only. The main benefits mentioned included sharing academic knowledge between girls and boys; boys as future champions of change; enhanced ability to keep away from social ills; better gains for society; breaking the gender inequality cycle; and enhanced social-emotional skills.

A recent evaluation of the A LOT-Change project indicated that both adolescent boys and girls improved their numeracy and literacy skills as a result the integrated support from the project (Abuya et al., 2019). The evaluation also indicated that the girls enrolled in the A LOT-Change intervention phase, which included boys in the project, performed significantly better in numeracy and literacy assessments compared to girls who were enrolled in an earlier phase of the intervention that only targeted girls. These results suggested that enrolling boys had an added advantage.

Results from the evaluation highlighted that although adolescent boys tended to perform better, especially in numeracy, the girls' gender gap was reducing (Abuya et al., 2019). This explains why the adolescent girls were ecstatic to have boys on board the A LOT-Change project to assist them in improving their numeracy skills. In the long run, the improved attitudes and skills will be beneficial in eradicating the negative stereotype threat towards STEM subjects and career paths and improving achievement (Berger et al., 2020).

Studies also show that students who socially connected with their peers tended to perform better in their academics (Bradley et al., 2021). Further, some studies found that general interventions targeting both boys and girls tend to either have similar or better outcomes for girls' education compared to interventions targeting girls only (Evans & Yuan, 2022).

The study findings further showed that skills learned from the A LOT-Change project enabled adolescent boys to overcome some of the negative masculine norms and stereotypes that discourage them from engaging in traditionally perceived female roles and expressing their emotions. Overcoming these norms is vital considering that cultural norms, such as masculine defaults where negative attitudes and behaviors on gender roles are encouraged, are key contributors to the underrepresentation of men and women in various sectors (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Xu, 2020).

Internalization of gender stereotypes has also been found to be higher in male adolescents and youth compared to their female peers (Villanueva-Blasco & Grau-Alberola, 2019). Studies therefore call for strategies to encourage male engagement in traditional perceived female roles to enhance gender equality (Meeussen et al., 2020; Rohrmann, 2019). The need to eliminate gender stereotypes that present boys and men as less capable of articulating and managing their emotions is also cited in the literature (Martínez-Morato et al., 2021).

Study respondents appreciated that considering boys in interventions targeting adolescents not only helps the boys stay away from social ills but is also a protective factor for both sexes. This is in line with studies that show that intimate partner violence and sexual violence are prevalent, especially among adolescent girls (Adhia et al., 2019). Therefore, addressing risk factors (such as substance abuse, gendered motivations for aggression, and negative social norms) among their male partners is cited as an effective mitigation strategy (Clare et al., 2021). In addition, gender-transformative interventions on gender-based violence that address hegemonic masculinity among boys and young men have also been shown to be effective (Pérez-Martínez et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of interventions like A LOT-Change, which targets both girls and boys in contributing to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 by providing equal opportunities in terms of education and well-being interventions to both sexes. Evidence from this paper also shows that there are more benefits than disadvantages in programming for both girls and boys and thus a need for program and policy stakeholders to consider approaches and interventions targeting both sexes to maximize gains in education, health, and well-being.

Interventions and support for boys and girls should be done in such a way that neither is disadvantaged. The benefits of equal opportunities not only accrue to them but also to the wider society (Jere et al., 2022). The study also underscores the importance of involving adolescents in contributing to decisions that affect them. In our case, capturing the adolescent views not only ensured their experiences and perspectives were captured firsthand but also that they were at the forefront of actively contributing to both the evidence and decision-making process regarding gender equality and consequently to social change (Biggeri et al., 2019).

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