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Why talk of boy child neglect doesn't hold water

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Kenyan social media users keenly noticed an intense war of words over the status of the boy child and feminism in the public space this week. All members of our society deserve respect and compassion.

However, when alarmists look at outliers, such as who scores the highest in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exams for example, instead of averages, then a worrying narrative unfolds.

Let us confront counterfactual thinking. We do not subsist in a zero-sum game whereby if someone advances then by default others must fall. We can all rise together. Some anti-girl child and anti-women in management arguments use similar logic as racist segregationists in the United States in the 1960s or apartheid South Africa throughout most of the 1900s.

Unfortunately, around the world women still have not achieved equality with men despite what pundits may declare, confirming the common adage that those who speak do not always know and those who know do not always speak. While making great strides towards legal and societal uniformity with women comprising 47 per cent of the Kenyan workforce over the past 27 years, World Bank research shows that female unemployment in Kenya is still higher than male unemployment.

While female participation in tertiary education seems at gender parity, women at the bottom of the economic pyramid in Kenya make up a higher proportion than men. Then worryingly within schools, a recent study by Andrei Cimpian and team shows that schooling systems perpetuate gender biases and demoralise girls whereas girl child self-efficacy equals boys until they enter formal education when it drops precipitously.

Again, we must look at averages, not outliers. Furthermore, annually a staggering 26 per cent of Kenyan women reported violence by their husbands or boyfriends according UN Women.

However, we do fare far better than many other countries. In Egypt, 99 per cent of women suffered from sexual harassment. The World Health Organisation also reports that more than 50 per cent of Tanzanian and 71 per cent of Ethiopian women reported spousal violence.

ActionAid found that 75 per cent of South African women reported violence from spouses and men in their communities in the last year. So, our Kenyan efforts are working and protect our sisters, mothers, daughters, and wives against harm more and more with each passing generation. Let us continue the cause.

Corporately, Kenya prides itself as having the highest proportion of female board members in Africa, according to the Kenya Institute of Management. However, only 21 per cent of board seat holders in publicly listed companies are women. Kenya stands roughly at par with the United States on female board representation among publicly traded firms.

Yet we should not become complacent and give up equality efforts until all our daughters have the same chances of success as our sons just because we compare favourably to other nations with worse problems than our own.

The International Finance Corporation states that women receive 10 to 30 per cent less pay than men doing similar jobs globally. Women additionally still get passed over for managerial promotions at a staggering rate. Unconscious bias rooted since childhood lead people to respect women's professionalism and leadership ability less than men's.

However, hiring women can boost profits. Researcher Carmen Nobel finds that when multinational corporations hire and promote women, even in countries with strong anti-women

bias, the female workers perform strongly exceeding expectations and boost firms' return on assets.

What those who erringly proclaim that boys and men are abandoned might not realise is that focus on girl children and women attaining leadership posts is still necessary with unconscious and outright bias still hindering females in society.

While Kenya holds a brilliant progressive and thoroughly African mix in our constitution, let us live up to the spirit of the Constitution even as we strive to exceed the letter of the law by bringing equality to all our citizens.

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