

# An analysis of gender bias in Kenyan History textbooks and its implication for the youth

**Abigael M. Malelu-Gitau**

Head of Subject: History and Government

Precious Blood Secondary School-Riruta

**Email:** [abigaelmalelu2017@gmail.com](mailto:abigaelmalelu2017@gmail.com)

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2023/n30a15>

## Introduction

Over the past decade as a history teacher, my attention has been drawn to my students having little or no information about female leaders in world politics. Girls in my classes in particular have consistently stated that politics is a dirty game not to be ventured by women. Arguably, such views negatively impact girls' aspirations to be politicians, or to vie for elective seats. This undermines Kenya's Constitution which calls for gender parity in all elective positions.

The above sentiments by my students motivated me to critically examine the role of the curriculum and textbooks in influencing Kenya's youth, and its implications on gender relations. The curriculum is a central component of the education system since it provides children with role models, aspirations, and moral values (Dawar et al., 2017). Consequently, this shapes students' self-image, behaviour, aspirations, and expectations. At the same time, schools also serve as agents of socialisation.

Curriculum and textbook studies have consistently underscored a significant, nearly ubiquitous gender bias. According to Shaffer and Shevitz (2001), both the formal and hidden curriculum can contain gender bias, potentially hindering the learning and educational opportunities of all students. Women have achieved considerable milestones in various fields, but history books are biased toward them (Lisanza, 2021). Bloomberg (2008) suggests that teachers and students spend an average of 70%–90% of their classroom time interacting with textbooks. Textbooks as educational tools significantly influence teachers' teaching methods and shape students' ideologies (Rong et al 2021). History textbooks, in particular, play a pivotal role in shaping and legitimising historical contexts and defining societal roles (Pamuk, 2021).

Osler (1994) identifies several areas of gender bias within the curriculum, including exclusion/invisibility, imbalance/selection, linguistic bias, stereotypes, unreality, and

fragmentation/isolation. He recommends a multifaceted approach to teaching history, encompassing political, economic, technological, scientific, social, religious, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives. This is at the expense of a disproportionate focus on political history, such as wars, which may contribute to bias against women's historical contributions (Osler, 1994).

## The Case of Kenya

In order to understand how women and girls are portrayed in the Kenyan history curriculum, I examined one history textbook that is widely used in secondary schools—namely, *The Evolving World*, Book 3 and Book 4. The book contains the following forms of gender biases:

**Linguistic Bias:** While there has been some progress in adopting gender-neutral terms and avoiding overtly sexist language, there is a need for improvement for a more balanced historical record. The textbook incorporates neutral terms such as 'chairperson' in descriptions. However, this represents only partial progress towards a deeper understanding of women's lives in the past.

**Quantitative Discrimination:** The textbook displays quantitative discrimination against women since they are few compared to their male counterparts. For example, in the topic 'Lives and contributions of Kenyan leaders', the book highlights the role of five males as compared to one female leader. In the topic 'Formation, structure and functions of the government of Kenya', no single woman is mentioned compared to 18 men whose names are given as examples. The trend is repeated in other topics.

**Gender Stereotypes:** Topics related to politics, governance, and leadership predominantly focus on men, depicting them as leaders within communities and political associations, and as warriors who fought against colonial domination. Women are portrayed as wives, mothers, and sisters to male leaders. This portrayal perpetuates the notion of leadership as a masculine attribute, emphasising traits like competition and violence in the political arena. The textbook narrows down on Wangari Maathai as a female Kenyan leader, but the focus is on her conservation activities rather than on politics. The topic 'Social, economic and political developments in Kenya since independence' gives elaborate examples of men in the political arena (33 men versus three women). In contrast, women are widely discussed in making contribution in the field of athletics, music, and in the film industry, with 22 women acknowledged as excelling in the social spheres of life.

**Exclusion and Invisibility:** The textbook often renders women invisible, thus

undervaluing women's contributions and experiences. This despite scholarly documentation of the lives and contribution of women in Kenya throughout the country's history. The sub-topics on settler agriculture, land policies, education and health, urbanisation and railway building, for instance, ignore women's experiences during the colonial period. Colonial policies such as heavy taxation and forced labour negatively affected women's positions and roles in the society. Rather, the book focuses on men's experiences and impacts on men's positions and roles. Chelagat Mutai, Micere Mugo, and Charity Ngilu are stated as examples in the struggle for multiparty democracy but with great exclusion of their contributions. Women are totally invisible in the topics such as 'National philosophies', 'Devolved government', and 'Public revenue and expenditure'.

**Fragmentation/Isolation and Tokenism:** The text evaluates 'Political developments and the struggle for independence in Kenya through movements such as the Mau Mau'. The sub-topic 'Women's role in Mau Mau' segregates females rather than integrating them into the main historical narrative. The textbook states "*as we shall see later, women supported the movement so generously*" (p. 114). This fragmentation diminishes the significance of women's contributions to history. Wangari Maathai's sub-topic is an example of tokenism, whereby an author includes one popular woman in the text in an attempt of achieving gender equity. There are several noteworthy women in Kenyan history, such as Charity Ngilu, Martha Karua, Chelagat Mutai, Wambui Otieno, among many more.

**Imbalance/Selectivity:** While men's struggles for independence, democracy, and good governance receive substantial attention in the textbook, women's efforts toward equality in all spheres of life are overlooked. Gender inequality, a prominent issue in Kenya, is rarely discussed, even though it could be integrated into various topics. Change in gender roles, female genital mutilation, and gender inequality are mentioned as impacts with no further discussions. These factors act as barriers to the achievement of gender equality in the modern world. The book is silent on gender-based violence more so in the political arena, undermining the concept of free and just elections.

**Unreality:** Controversial topics such as gender discrimination and prejudice are either dismissed or avoided in the textbook. The absence of discussions on gender-based violence and the 2/3 gender rule means that students are deprived of critical knowledge about societal beliefs and discrimination, hindering their understanding of complex problems in society. Female genital mutilation is stated as a major grievance during the colonial period, however, the book does not delve further into the topic as a serious human rights violation against women and its effects. For example, the book states that: "*The female circumcision controversy in Central Kenya was one of the factors that aroused deep hostility. Africans were*

*ready to uphold their cultural values at any cost. To demonstrate their seriousness, the Africans at the Kijabe AIM stronghold forcefully circumcised an elderly white missionary woman. She later died due to heavy bleeding.”* (p. 111)

**Visual Representation:** The textbook features few pictures of women, and when they are depicted visually, it is either in stereotypical traditional roles or negatively portrayed as barbaric and lacking any modern career aspirations. Out of the nine pictures of women in the textbook, only one bears a name. The majority are random pictures of women as advocates of female circumcision, while others are performing traditional roles. In addition, four pictures present women wearing traditional attires while brandishing knives for FGM, or dancing, whereas male visual images depict modernity in terms of dressing, diverse professions and with each picture bearing a name and title. This is clearly demonstrated in the following figures.



Fig. 5.15 A woman being circumcised



Fig. 5.16 Marshal Mathon (centre) with other Mau Mau activists



## References

- Blumberg, RL 2007. Gender bias in textbooks: a hidden obstacle on the road to gender equality in education. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008 Education for All by 2015: will we make it?*, Paris: UNESCO.
- Dawar, T. 2017. Gender bias in textbooks across the world. *International Journal of Applied Home Science.*, 4(3&4):224–235.
- Lisanza, E. 2021. *Gender and education in Kenya*. Place of publication. Maryland: Lexington Books.
- Osler, A. 1994. Still hidden from history? The representation of women in recently history textbooks. *An Oxford Review of Education, Vol 20*. Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Pamuk, A & Muc, K 2021. Women's gender roles in history textbooks in Turkey. *International Journal of Psychology*, 8(2): 133–147.