ОБЩЕЕ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ ЯЗЫКОЗНАНИЕ | GENERAL AND COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Научная статья | Original paper

Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в кенийской политике гендерного равенства

Д.Э. Абери✉
Университет Кисии, Кисии, Кения
✉ george.aberi@kisiiuniversity.ac.ke

Резюме

В данной статье рассматривается дискурс гендерной политики Кении с использованием критического дискурс-анализа для выявления тем и динамики власти, влияющих на усилия по достижению гендерного равенства. Несмотря на заметные успехи в продвижении гендерного равенства и расширении прав и возможностей женщин, остаются препятствия в достижении справедливых отношений между мужчинами и женщинами в различных сферах жизни. В данном исследовании рассматриваются три ключевых вопроса: (1) Какие темы доминируют в гендерной политике Кении на протяжении последних трех десятилетий? (2) Как скрытые идеологии и структуры власти влияют на эти темы? и (3) Как эти темы отражают и поддерживают несбалансированную динамику власти между мужчинами и женщинами в кенийском обществе? Следует отметить пробел в существующей литературе, касающийся повторяющихся тем и взаимосвязи между использованием языка и гендерной политикой в Кении. Используя трехуровневый подход Нормана Фэрклоу к критическому дискурс-анализу, в исследовании анализируются десять общедоступных политических документов, опубликованных в период с 1994 по 2024 год кенийским правительством, НПО и организациями ООН и посвященных правам женщин на гендерное равенство. Результаты показывают, что, хотя формулировки официальных политических документов отражают необходимость проведения политики гендерного равенства в Кении, по-прежнему существует множество противоречий в отношении преобладающих скрытых идеологий и динамики власти, которые влияют на политику и практику в области гендерного равенства. В свете этих выводов в заключении предлагаются направления будущих исследований, включая лонгитюдные исследования для оценки влияния изменения дискурса на фактические результаты гендерного равенства в Кении.

Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in Kenya's gender equality policies

G.E. Aberi✉
Kisii University, Kisii, Kenya
✉ george.aberi@kisiiuniversity.ac.ke

Abstract

This paper examines Kenya's gender policy discourse using Critical Discourse Analysis to unravel themes and power dynamics influencing gender equality efforts. Despite notable advancements in promoting gender equality and empowering women, obstacles remain in achieving equitable relationships between men and women across various domains of life. This study addresses three key questions: (1) what are the dominant themes within Kenya's gender policy for the last three decades? (2) How do hidden ideologies and power structures influence these themes? and (3) how do these themes reflect and sustain imbalanced power dynamics between men and women within the Kenyan society? Recognizing a research gap in the existing literature concerning the recurring themes and intersection of language use and gender policies in Kenya. Using Norman Fairclough's Three-Tier Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyzes ten publicly available policy documents published between 1994 and 2024 by the Kenyan government, NGOs, and UN organizations focused on women's rights to gender equality. The findings indicate that though official policy texts are framed in ways that support the need for gender equality policies in Kenya, contradictions still abound regarding the prevailing hidden ideologies and power dynamics that influence gender-related policies and practices. In light of these findings, the paper concludes by suggesting directions for future research, including longitudinal studies to assess the impact of changing discourses on actual gender equality outcomes in Kenya.

Keywords: gender policy, discourse analysis, Kenya, power dynamics, social justice

Introduction

This study sought to examine the discourse surrounding gender equality policies in Kenya over the past three decades. In this context, the study was guided by three primary objectives: first, to

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

identify the dominant themes within Kenya's gender policy; second, to investigate how hidden ideologies and power structures shape these themes; and third, to explore how these themes perpetuate unequal power dynamics between men and women in Kenyan society.

The movement for women's rights in Kenya has deep roots in the country's history, with various social, cultural, and political movements contributing to the evolution of gender policies and discourses. From the pre-colonial period to the modern era, Kenyan women have been actively involved in advocating for their rights and challenging patriarchal norms and structures. The struggle for equality between genders and the empowerment of women in Kenya has been driven by grassroot movements, civil society organizations, and legislative efforts to address gender-based inequalities and discrimination (Schmitz,1999; FIDA-Kenya, 2007). The evolution of women's agitation for gender equality policies in Kenya Is characterized by resilience and slow but steady progress. In this context, women's rights activism in Kenya has deep roots that predate the country's independence and have evolved significantly over the years. Key narratives in this movement have centred on political inclusion, economic empowerment, and social justice (Mutua, 2006; Schmitz, 1999). In the pre-colonial period, Kenyan women held significant roles in their communities. Still, the advent of colonial rule saw the introduction of patriarchal systems that marginalized women's roles in society (Mutua, 2006). The post-independence era signalled the start of organized efforts by women for equality, as women began to organize and lobby for improved legal status and representation.

A key milestone in the campaign for gender equality policies was the establishment of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization in 1952, which became a strong champion for women's rights. During the following decades, women in Kenya increasingly pushed for political space and legislative changes (Jivanjee & Tebb, 1999; Thongori, 2003). The Third World Conference on Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, marked an important milestone, providing Kenyan women with a platform to catalyse the gender equality movement on a global scale. This led to increased visibility and activism that culminated in several legislative and policy changes. A major accomplishment was the Gender and Development Policy, introduced in 2000 (The Government of Kenya, 2000; CEDAW Committee, 2003), which aimed to mainstream gender in all sectors of development. This policy acknowledged women's contributions to development and aimed to tackle the structural barriers hindering women's complete involvement in the public aspects of their lives. With continued advocacy and activism, there were more landmarks such as the passing of the new Kenyan constitution in 2010, which included a bill of rights affirming women's rights and provided for gender representation quotas in government (Mutua, 2006; Kamau, 2010). Fast forward to 2019, the Kenyan government updated the Gender and Development Policy (Republic of Kenya, 2019), to enhance the realization of the rights to equality and the empowerment of women in the national development agenda. This new policy aimed to address emerging issues and reinforce commitments to international conventions like the Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, through activism, policy-making, and legislative reforms, Kenyan women have made substantial headway in the fight for gender equality. Despite progressive legislative reforms, however, persistent inequalities and traditional societal norms continue to shape contemporary discussions on gender, which largely disfavour women (LKWV, 2005; FIDA-Kenya, 2022).

This paper, therefore, aims to scrutinize how these themes are framed and communicated, and their impact on the execution of gender parity policies by the Kenyan government. By examining

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

the language, political rhetoric, and power dynamics inherent in the gender policy documents, the study undertakes to elucidate the recurrent themes and underlying ideologies that influence gender policies in Kenya. Our analysis is driven by the premise that language both reflects and constructs social realities (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 2015; Fairclough & Scholz, 2020), and as such, provides critical insights into the state of gender politics within Kenyan society. We engage with the current discourses, dissecting how gender is 'done' and how such constructions shape, and are shaped by, policy directions aimed at gender equity and empowerment. Understanding the recurring themes in the policy discussions on women's rights to gender equality is crucial for identifying gaps, addressing challenges, and formulating effective policies that promote gender equality.

Literature review

Kenya's gender policy landscape has evolved significantly over the past three decades, characterized by a shift from emphasizing women's 'welfare to a broader advocacy in relation gender parity and the rights of women. Despite the aforementioned key milestones, and in accord with LKWV (2005; FIDA-Kenya (2022), several scholars argue that although the available policies signal progressive intent, they often contain contradictions that undermine genuine gender equity (Aberi, 2016; Berry, Bouka, & Kamuru, 2021; Murunga & Machio, 2024). In this context, for instance, Aberi (2016) and Novovic (2021) note the persistence of patriarchal values and cultural norms that subtly influence policy formulation and implementation. Similarly, past studies identify various hidden ideologies within policy discourses that perpetuate gender inequality (Atambo, 2019; Ndambuki, 2010). These ideologies manifest in language that often frames women's empowerment in need-based terms rather than as a fundamental right, reinforcing a dependency narrative rather than one of agency.

In addition, power structures entrenched in socio-political contexts continue to marginalize women's voices in policy discussions, creating a disconnect between policy intentions and actual practices (Kamau, 2010). Available literature indicates that the dominant discourses surrounding gender equality often mask the realities of unequal power relations in Kenyan society. For example, while policy documents advocate for gender parity, the actual implementation frequently reflects disparities in access to resources and decision-making power (Aberi, 2016; Kenyatta, 2023; Novovic, 2021). In this context, for instance, Amunga and Amadalo (2020) note that despite substantial strides in promoting gender equality and empowering women, the enforcement of policies for equality in Kenya has historically embraced a top-down approach that ignores a focus on the foundations upon which women depend to access and make use of the available decision making structures provided by the current Gender and Development Policy.

Furthermore, despite a growing body of research on gender and discourse in Kenya, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding longitudinal analyses that evaluate the impact of evolving discourses on gender equality outcomes over time. In this context, existing studies often focus on isolated aspects of gender policy without a comprehensive understanding of the interrelations between language, ideology, and power (Aberi, 2016; Ndambuki, 2010).

Based on this understanding, therefore, this study sought to unravel the tacit ideologies and power dynamics in Kenya's gender equality policies by answering the questions:

What are the dominant themes within Kenya's gender policy over the last three decades?

How do hidden ideologies and power structures influence these themes?

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

In what ways do these themes reflect and sustain imbalanced power dynamics between men and women within Kenyan society?

Materials and methods

The study adopts a qualitative research design and draws on Fairclough's (1995, 2020) Three-tier approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the recurring themes in the policy discourse of gender equality in Kenya. CDA enabled the researcher to uncover implicit ideologies and unequal power dynamics that characterize the policy discourse. Purposive sampling procedures were used to select relevant policy documents on gender equality in Kenya. Considering that no financial assistance/funding was provided to support this study, policy texts investigated included the official government's gender and development policies, and initiatives focused on promoting gender equality and empowering women, spanning the last 20 years.

Data collection and analysis

To guarantee the validity of the research findings and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, data for the study was collected through document Analysis (i.e., close reading and content analysis) of gender policy documents with a focus on the language used and the broader discursive practices within institutions and society. These enabled the researcher to obtain primary textual data from Governmental gender and development policy documents, transcripts from academic research, periodic reports by the UN Organizations responsible for the rights of women, and publications by Human Rights-based NGOs focused on the same rights in Kenya.

The aforesaid documents represent the official policy discourse on gender equality in Kenya and provide insights into the recurring themes, hidden ideologies, and power structures underlying Government policies on the rights to gender equality in Kenya. The research employed qualitative data analysis techniques to analyze the data in line with its objectives. That is, the study analyzed the textual content of the aforementioned policy documents, with a focus on the recurring themes, linguistic patterns, and underlying ideologies related to gender equality. Anchored in Fairclough's (1995/2020) Three-Tier Approach for Critical Discourse Analysis, this involved a description of the linguistic and rhetorical strategies, interpretation of the discursive interactions and power structures used, and an explanation of how these discursive interactions and power structures influence policy outcomes (Fairclough & Scholz, 2020; Mulderrig, Montessori & Farrelly, 2019). In this context, analysis of policy documents was done using Critical Discourse Analysis in the following sequence: (1) Familiarization with the data through close reading and repeated engagement with the textual materials; 2) Identification of recurring themes, linguistic features, and rhetorical tactics employed in the policy texts; (3) Examination of the embedded ideologies and power structures that shape the policy discourse; and (4) Analysis of the varied ways in which these discursive interactions and power dynamics affect the execution of policies on gender equality in Kenya. The study was conducted with integrity, ensuring that the analysis was objective and free from biases. Furthermore, ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process, particularly in the interpretation and presentation of findings, to uphold the rights and integrity of individuals and groups represented in the analyzed texts.

Results

A critical discourse analysis of the policy texts examined revealed several thematic concerns in Kenya's discourse of gender equality. One key finding was the continued normalization and legitimation of discriminatory practices around property ownership and inheritance rights, in which case, the official gender and development policy discourse was found to reflect and reinforce traditional gender roles that perpetuate gender inequality within Kenyan society (see 5.1). Along similar lines, the study confirmed the utilization of gender-based violence directed toward women to maintain power imbalances (see 5.2). The study confirmed that political leadership in Kenya has historically been viewed as a male-dominated domain, with leaders often adopting paternalistic approaches (see 5.3). The study further revealed that oppressive cultural practices and traditions were largely to blame for women's inequality (see 5.5). In this respect, the study uncovered the negative socialization practices that perpetuate the subordinate and inferior status of women, along with culturally supported patriarchal norms that support the subjugation of women by their male partners as a means of maintaining discipline at home. Regarding education, the analysis revealed significant gender disparities, which were attributed to teachers' lack of understanding of gender equality, as well as detrimental traditional practices, such as female circumcision, early marriages and childbearing, including the disproportionate burden of domestic chores on girls (see 5.6).

Discussion

The present study investigated the dominant themes within Kenya's gender policy over the past three decades, with a focus on how hidden ideologies and power structures influence these themes, as well as the way in which these themes reflect and perpetuate imbalanced power dynamics between men and women in Kenyan society. These are better demonstrated in the ensuing discussion.

Property ownership and inheritance rights

Women in Kenya continue to face discrimination based on cultural norms and traditions, particularly regarding their rights to own property and inheritances. According to Nnoko and Abdi (2020), Gaafar (2014), FIDA-Kenya (2013), and Kameri-Mbote (2006), though ownership of land is crucial for women's ability to access markets and better standards of living, a negligible proportion of women in Kenya possess land, as property ownership is regulated by a combination of legal, customary/traditional, and religious frameworks that that support the prevailing patriarchal systems that disadvantage women (Kameri-Mbote, 2006). This observation aligns with Fairclough's (1995) and Mulderrig, Montessori and & Farrelly's (2019) emphasis on how discourse can be used to reinforce power imbalances in society. Further, the argument above that a negligible proportion of women own land due to legal frameworks that privilege men reflects the ideological underpinnings (Van Dijk, 2019) embedded within these laws. However, it is essential at this point to acknowledge that some communities are beginning to challenge these traditional norms, with grassroots movements advocating for women's land rights, suggesting a potential shift in societal attitudes.

Furthermore, Kameri-Mbote (2006) notes that while some women may own movable property or chattels, they often lack legal claims over land. This distinction between movable and immovable property underscores how legal systems can further marginalize women by restricting their rights to

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

certain types of assets. This state of affairs is worsened by several other factors. First, Mbote argues that unmarried women in Kenya are viewed as being in a transition stage, in which case, they are not allowed to own property in their own right (Mbote, 2006). In other words, women are seen as persons meant for another clan (i.e. upon marriage), hence not part of their ancestral land and property. From a critical discourse analysis perspective, this can be said to reflect the normalization and legitimation (Fairclough, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2008) of discriminatory practices, as well as the reinforcement of traditional gender roles that serve to perpetuate gender inequality within society. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that legal reforms, such as the Matrimonial Property Act, have been enacted to improve women's rights regarding property ownership, indicating a legal recognition of women's rights that could be further strengthened through effective implementation.

Second, the majority of the communities in Kenya continue to see women as a form of property. For instance, Human Rights Watch (2003) posits that among the Maasai community of Kenya, a woman is considered as her husband's property, and cannot own land or property on her own, just as she cannot sell any property without her husband's consent. This condition though as Human Rights Watch clarifies, does not apply to the Maasai men who sell their family property without consulting their wives. This underscores the role of Maasai culture in perpetuating women's inequality, as well as the reproduction of discriminatory beliefs and practices that continue to deny of their rights to equality in property ownership. However, it is crucial to recognize that there are ongoing discussions within these communities about redefining women's roles and rights, which may lead to gradual changes in perceptions and practices.

Thirdly, Matogo (2010) and Smith, et al., (2009) posit that the right of women to own property is worsened by the ongoing practice of polygamy In this case, as these scholars posit, husbands use their hard-earned family resources to marry other wives, who later claim a share in the remaining family resources, besides increasing the couple's chances of contracting HIV/AIDS (Matogo, 2010; Smith, et al. 2009).

Finally, in case of divorce as (Kameri-Mbote states, it becomes problematic for women to claim a share of the family's property, because any property acquired subsequent to marriage is typically registered under the husband's name (Kameri Mbote, 2000; Kameri-Mbote, 2006).

From a critical feminist perspective (Tripp, Ferree & Ewig, 2013), the aforesaid sentiments can be said to manifest the "misogyny and toxic masculinity" (Feldman, 2023) of the Kenyan leadership that continues not only to tolerate prejudice and discrimination against women, but also the sexism that involves negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours towards women, which necessitate denying them their deserved rights and opportunities for political participation on equal footing with men. This is particularly evident in the framing of women through a gendered lens as persons meant for another clan. This reflects Kenya's policy discourse of gender equality as one that is responsible for perpetuating existing inequalities by limiting the accessibility of women to land ownership, despite the enactment of the Matrimonial Property Act to safeguard women's rights concerning property obtained upon marriage. Conversely, some argue that the Matrimonial Property Act has laid the groundwork for future advancements in women's property rights, suggesting that ongoing advocacy and awareness campaigns could facilitate better implementation and adherence to these laws

What is more, this state of affairs is more pronounced in rural areas of Kenya, where residents have limited access to justice, given the existing discriminatory traditional practices and beliefs that favour men at the expense of women (Nnoko &Abdi, 2020; Koech, 2020). Arguably, therefore, the

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

discursive construction of women as secondary property owners above can be said to serve to maintain patriarchal structures that disempower them economically and socially.

Violence against women and girls

A central concern within Kenyan policy discourse on the rights of women is the pervasive issue of violence based on gender, including its disproportionate impact on women. This involves a wide range of abuses, including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, female circumcision, underage marriage, and human smuggling. Despite the Kenyan Constitution's explicit guarantee of protection from inhumane and degrading treatment, Kopiyo (1994), Ondicho (2000), Matogo (2010), and the Republic of Kenya (2015;2019) reveal a concerning rise in domestic violence cases against women. This encompasses occurrences of domestic violence, coerced premature marriages for adolescent females, female circumcision, and sexual exploitation, intimate partner rape and virginity testing among other cultural practices that continue to impact Kenyan women today. In this context, for instance, Kopiyo reiterates the July 1991 St. Kizito's tragedy, whereby more than seventy school girls were raped, nineteen killed and several others injured. The same applies to Hasci's story From the Frying Pan into the Fire, which explains the inhuman treatment, mass rape, and killing of several Somali refugee women in Kenya from 1991-1997, more so, by bandits, policemen, and other law-enforcing officers (Hasci, 1999, cited in Fox 1998, p.11-13). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are increasing efforts from civil society organizations and women's groups advocating for the rights of survivors and pushing for stronger legal protections against gender-based violence.

In this context as Hasci notes, despite acceding to international human rights treaties like CEDAW which prohibits gender-based violence directed towards women, and the United Nations' bodies responsible for safeguarding the rights of refugee women, Kenya failed in its mandate to safeguard the rights of Somali refugee women in Kenya (Hasci, 1999, cited in Fox 1998, p.11-13). This appalling state of affairs aligns with Bunch and Frost's (2000) view that many countries of the world (and in this context Kenya in particular), tend to overlook the majority of the transgressions against women's rights by men and male family members, regardless of the existing legislative measures to protect women against abuse.

Taking into account the role of CDA in unveiling the hidden power structures, ideologies, and social inequalities embedded within language and discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2021; Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 2015), the arguments above can be said to be tailored to help raise public awareness about the pervasive nature of gender-based violence in Kenya. This is crucial for mobilizing public opinion, and influencing policy decisions, thereby emphasizing the need for more effective policy interventions that go beyond the mere enactment of the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (2015), to include its implementation to ensure women and girl's protection from gender based violence. It is in this sense that Fairclough and Wodak (2010) emphasize that CDA goes beyond mere textual analysis and seeks to empower marginalized groups by challenging the status quo.

Women and political representation

The limited political representation of women in Kenya has been a longstanding issue in Kenyan politics. Efforts to enhance the involvement of women in political and problem-solving arenas

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

remain a key focus within Kenya's policy discourse. However, FIDA-Kenya (2022) asserts that though the 2010 Kenya Constitution endorses the need to encourage women's involvement in both elected and appointed roles within government in line with the principle of affirmative action that seeks to enhance gender equality by actively increasing women's presence in decision-making roles, the "political landscape in Kenya has remained predominantly male and the implementation of parity is patchy," thereby suggesting that the enforcement of initiatives to promote the representation of females in decision-making roles within Kenya has been inconsistent and incomplete. On the other hand, some argue that the increasing visibility of women in local governance positions indicates a gradual shift towards greater political representation, signaling potential for future advancements. This view coheres with the Kenyan government's assertion that though women make up over fifty percent of the population in Kenya, they still "lag behind in governance, power, decision-making and elective politics" and that the historical dominance of men in the Kenyan Parliament "adversely affects women involvement in decision-making processes" (Republic of Kenya, 2019). In this respect, FIDA's argument above seems to challenge the dominant policy discourse in Kenya that has historically normalized the perception of men as the exclusive guardians of social, economic, and political systems, while women have been relegated to the role of recipients of choices made by men. From Fairclough's (1995) concept of historicity, it is arguable that issues of political leadership in Kenya have historically been regarded as a preserve for men, who have also continued to view leadership in a paternal way. This means that the dominant discourse of leadership in Kenya continues to treat women as outsiders in the field of political leadership. This paternal thinking as Kamau (2010) reiterates, continues to engender the prevalent patriarchal feeling that women can only access leadership through co-optation into a male-centric system. This understanding is better captured by Matogo's text below:

Patriarchy has made women to shy away from influential positions in parliament even though the current constitution allows women to vie for political seats. Systematically, men have thought their role as the sole custodians of socio-economic and political institutions was the norm, whereas women have gotten used to being the recipients of decisions made by men even when these decisions were not shared or inclusive of their needs (Matogo, 2010, p.18).

The text above draws on the concept of "patriarchy" to suggest that deeply ingrained societal norms and power structures have systematically prevented women from accessing positions of power and influence within Kenyan society, despite the constitutional provisions that aim to promote gender parity in political representation. From a Faircloughian perspective, the excerpt above can be said to constitute a critique of the communicative practices that continue to sustain gender inequality in the political sphere (Fairclough, 1995). In this regard, Kamau regrets that the above said continues to compromise the rights of women to equal participation in the political arena, even though Kenya acceded to International human rights frameworks like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action that Called for equal involvement of women in political leadership roles, and CEDAW, whose article seven obligates all the United Nations member states to strive diligently to eradicate all types of discrimination against women in political and public engagements (Kamau, 2010). It is in this sense that Fairclough (2013), Wodak (2015), and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2021) emphasise the need to understand how discourse is used to establish and maintain power and social inequalities. As such, this understanding calls for the need for more comprehensive and transformative approaches to address the underlying structural and sociocultural impediments to women's progress in the political arena.

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that the challenge of political representation is multifaceted, requiring not only policy changes but also shifts in societal attitudes towards women's leadership.

Women's health and reproductive rights

Concerning women's right to health, thousands of Kenyan women and girls lose their lives every year in childbirth and pregnancy, due to inadequate medical attention and/or healthcare system failures (Human Rights Watch, 2011); in this respect, one in every thirty-nine women in Kenya die during childbirth, and this state of affairs is precipitated by women's inconsistent access to contraceptives, and the government's stringent laws that criminalize abortion thus limiting women's access to safe abortion (Human Rights watch, 2011; FIDA-Kenya, 2007; Alm & Wiklund, 2005; Matogo, 2010), thus enhancing maternal deaths, unwanted pregnancies and disabilities among women and girls. Similarly, Kenyan women remain unable to exercise their reproductive and sexual rights, a situation blamed for the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS infections among women compared to men (FIDA-Kenya, 2007; Matogo, 2010), and the prevalence of gender-based sexual violence toward women, along with the cultural practice of polygamy and other related issues that persist in obstructing women's ability to fully exercise their reproductive and sexual rights (FIDA-Kenya, 2007; Matogo, 2010). However, it is crucial to highlight that there are ongoing advocacy efforts aimed at reforming restrictive laws and improving access to healthcare services for women, indicating a growing awareness of women's health rights.

In line with Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (2021) framework for discourse analysis, the aforementioned can be said to situate the issue of maternal mortality and women's reproductive rights within the larger social and cultural context of Kenya, thereby uncovering the deep-rooted societal structures and underlying power dynamics and structural inequalities that contribute to the lack of reproductive and sexual rights for Kenyan women. This state of affairs is further reiterated by FIDA-Kenya (2007), Matogo (2010), and Human Rights Watch (2011), who blame the lack of political will, inconsistent access to contraceptives and restrictive abortion laws, dominant patriarchal structures, and customary and religious cultures/ practices as part of the complex interplay of factors contributing to maternal deaths, unwanted pregnancies, high cases of HIV/AIDS infections, and disabilities due to lack of access to their reproductive and sexual health rights.

Oppressive cultural practices and traditions

According to Mutua (2006) and the Republic of Kenya (2019), some communities in Kenya strive to uphold their varied cultural beliefs, religious practices, and traditions, which often reflect gender hierarchies that legitimize the subordination of women to men, thus complicating their pursuit of gender equality. The same observation is given by the Kenya League of Women Voters (2005), which blames women's inequality on the negative socialization practices that stress the subordinate and lesser status of women, along with culturally supported patriarchal norms that permit men to beat their wives as a way of maintaining discipline at home. From Fairclough's (2013), Wodak's (2015) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (2021) perspective of critical discourse analysis, the Kenya League of Women Voters argument above can be said to suggest that the oppressive cultural practices are not only deeply rooted in the social fabric, but are also actively

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

perpetuated through various socialisation mechanisms, such as gender-based violence. Moreover, Mutua's and the Kenya League of Women Voters' sentiments above highlight not only the persistent challenge of maintaining cultural beliefs and religious practices that uphold gender hierarchies and the continued subjugation of women, but also reflect a deeply ingrained patriarchal ideology that "normalizes and legitimizes" (Fairclough, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2008) the refusal to acknowledge women's basic rights and freedoms. Yet, some argue that the engagement of men as allies in the fight for gender equality can be pivotal in challenging and changing these oppressive cultural norms.

According to Nasong'o and Ayot (2007), and FIDA-Kenys (2022), though the Kenyan constitution stipulates equality between men and women, this remains theoretical, considering that the prevalent patriarchal structures subordinate women to men. As a consequence, FIDA-Kenya insists that women's ability to access justice and equality in many areas of their lives remains difficult FIDA-Kenya, 2007). The impact of cultural practices and traditions affecting women's ability to achieve their rights are discussed under the following headings.

Education and gender disparities

Despite the existence of policies aimed at promoting gender-responsive education (Matogo, 2010; Soeda, 2008; Unterhalter & North, 2011), glaring gender inequalities in schooling are still visible (Soeda, 2008; Matogo, 2010; Unterhalter & North, 2011). In this regard, a host of constraints like teachers' lack of understanding of gender equality, early pregnancies, inadequate funding, detrimental Cultural customs such as child marriage and female circumcision, inadequate funding, domestic chores, discrimination against the girl-child, socioeconomic and cultural influences of colonialism that ensured the marginalization and exclusion of women from pursuing education and economic activities, are identified as part of the hinderances to girls' access to, retention and completion of school (Soeda, 2008; FIDA-Kenya, 2007; Matogo, 2010; Unterhalter & North, 2011; Republic of Kenya, 2019). Notice also that the inability of women to exercise their right to education is rooted in a lack of cultural endorsement, where some cultures, such as the Maasai ethnic group, see little relevance in schooling, especially for girls (Education International, 2005, cited in Matogo, 2010). This lack of cultural support leads to the majority of girls being married off at a young age, often at the expense of their education. From Fairclough's (1995) concept of Social Practice Analysis that seeks to situate discursive practices within the wider social and cultural context, the aforementioned reflects a broader societal issue where the undervaluation of women's education perpetuates their marginalization and limits their agency.

In a similar vein, drawing on their study on gender equality and education in Kenya, Unterhalter and North (2011) observe that Kenya's language of rights does not take into account challenges related to rights, abilities, and international obligations (Unterhalter & North, 2011, p. p.508). The study further notes Kenya's misinterpretation of gender equality (i.e., as gender equity), hence its current gender-blind approach to substantive gender equality. This narrow understanding of the concept of gender equality is evident in the insufficient seriousness and dedication to addressing gender issues in education by the Kenyan government.

...only one official in the National Department of Education had responsibility for the gender policy and provincial and district officials were instructed to implement centrally directed policy,

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

often with virtually no additional staff, training or strategic direction (Unterhalter & North, 2011, p.497).

A critical view of the arguments above confirms the complex and multifaceted nature of gender inequalities in education, in Kenya, which are deeply embedded within cultural, social, and institutional structures. This underscores the necessity of sustained and comprehensive measures to address these challenges and create an education system that provides equal access and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of gender.

This section analyses, interprets, and evaluates the study's results. Begin the Discussion section with a clear statement regarding whether the data support the primary and additional hypotheses or not. Similarities and differences between this study's findings and those of other researchers should be used to conceptualise, validate, and refine the conclusions.

Conclusions

This research sought to investigate the key themes within Kenya's gender policy discourse through a critical discourse analysis approach. In this respect, the study found that though the Kenyan government has implemented affirmative action policies to enhance women's political participation, there is persistent underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions (see 4.3). This state of affairs was found to be precipitated by the existing socio-political structural barriers, traditional gender roles, and limited access to financial resources that continue to hinder many women from achieving economic and political independence necessary for their full participation. Likewise, gender-based violence against women, gender disparities in education, oppressive cultural practices, traditions and norms that emphasize women's subordinate and inferior position were found to be responsible for women's inequality (see 4.1-4.6).

Concerning the prevailing hidden ideologies and power dynamics that influence gender-related policies and practices in Kenya, the study uncovered the discursive strategies employed to marginalize and disempower women, thereby perpetuating and reinforcing gender-based disparities and patriarchal norms that that remain significant obstacles to the advancement of gender equality policies in Kenya (see 4.1-4.6). More significantly, by illuminating the recurring themes and discursive constructions of gender, power, and rights within the Kenyan context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities for advancing gender equality and women's rights in Kenya.

One of the primary contributions of this study is its identification of recurring themes such as property ownership rights, gender-based violence, political representation, and educational disparities. These findings demonstrate that despite legislative advancements, such as the 2010 Constitution and the 2019 Gender and Development Policy, the practical implementation of these policies remains fraught with contradictions and cultural resistance.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the role of language in constructing social realities. By utilizing Fairclough's (1995/2020) Three-Tier Framework for Discourse Analysis, the research demonstrates that policy discourse is a powerful tool for maintaining power dynamics. In this context, the analysis reveals how policy language can obscure underlying inequalities, making it imperative for policymakers to critically evaluate the language used in gender policy formulation. This finding is crucial for future policy development, as it suggests that a mere change in policy text is insufficient without a corresponding shift in the ideological underpinnings that perpetuate gender inequality.

Importantly, the implications of this study extend beyond academic discourse; they are vital for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates working towards gender equality in Kenya. In this respect, by highlighting the entrenched cultural norms that hinder progress, the research calls for a more nuanced approach to policy implementation that includes grassroots advocacy and community engagement. It suggests that effective gender policies must not only address legislative gaps but also challenge the cultural narratives that sustain gender-based discrimination.

Furthermore, the study underscores the need for longitudinal research to evaluate the impact of shifting discourses on gender equality outcomes. Understanding how changing narratives influence societal attitudes and behaviors is essential for assessing the effectiveness of gender policies over time. This highlights the need for ongoing dialogue and reflection within the feminist movement in Kenya, ensuring that the voices of marginalized women are included in policy discussions.

More significantly, this study adds to the expanding corpus of knowledge concerning gender policies in Kenya – by providing a critical perspective from which to analyze the interplay between language, power, and gender. This explains the need for a transformative approach to policy-making in Kenya that recognizes and addresses the complexities of gender inequality. By doing so, this study aims to foster a more equitable society where the fundamental rights and freedoms of women are not only enshrined in legislative structures but also implemented in everyday life.

Список источников / References

1. Aberi, G. (2016). Intertextuality in Kenyan policy discourse on the rights of women: Diss. Dr. Sci. (Applied Linguistics). Victoria University. Wellington.

2. Alm, A.C., Wiklund, H. (2005). A case study of proactive work with gender equality in the country council of Kronoberg, Sweden. Work, 24 (4), 391-397. https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-2005-244-391

3. Amunga, J., Amadalo, M.M. (2020). The gender STEM gap and its impact on sustainable development goals and the big four agenda in Kenya: a synthesis of literature. International Journal of Contemporary Education, 4 (1), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.11114/ijce.v4il.4867

4. Atambo, N. (2019). Language, gender and power: the discursive construction of the Kenya national assembly politicians (2013-2017): Diss. Dr. Sci. (Humanities and Social Science). Kenyatta University. Kenya.

5. Berry, M.E., Bouka, Y., Kamuru, M.M. (2021). Implementing inclusion: gender quotas, inequality, and backlash in Kenya. Politics & Gender, 17 (4), 640-664. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000433

6. CEDAW Committee (2003). Consideration of reports submitted by State Parties under Article 18 of the Convention: combined 3rd and 4th periodic report of Kenya.

7. Chouliaraki, L., Fairclough, N. (2021). Discourse in late modernity: rethinking critical discourse analysis. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474458850.001.0001

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

8. Fairclough, N., Scholz, R. (2020). Critical discourse analysis as "dialectical reasoning": from normative critique towards action, by way of explanation. Mots. Les Langages du Politique, 113, 113-123. https://doi.org/10.4000/mots.2728

9. Fairclough, N. (2018). CDA as dialectical reasoning. The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies. J. Flowerdew, J.E. Richardson (eds.), 13-25. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315690928-3

10. Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical Discourse Analysis: the critical study of language. New York: Routledge.

11. Fairclough, N., Wodak, R. (2010). Critical Discourse Analysis in action. Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis. S. Titscher, M. (eds.), 121-138. Sage.

12. FIDA-Kenya (2007). Gender discrimination in education: the violation of the rights of women and girls.

13. FIDA-Kenya (2007). The status of women's reproductive health rights in Kenya. Nairobi: FIDA-Kenya.

14. FIDA-Kenya (2013). Women's land and property rights in Kenya. Nairobi: FIDA-Kenya.

15. Gaafar, R. (2014). Women's land and property rights in Kenya. Center for Women's Land Rights.

16. Human Rights Watch (2003). Women's Property Rights in Kenya: A Shadow Report.

17. Human Rights Watch (2011). Human Rights Watch World Report 2011: Events of 2010. New York: Human Rights Watch.

18. Jivanjee, P., Tebb, S. (1999). Visions of community women and children in the developing and developed worlds. International Social Work, 42 (1), 27-38. https://doi.org/10.1177/002087289904200103

19. Kamau, N. (2010). Women and political leadership in Kenya. Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Stiftung.

20. Kameri-Mbote, P. (2006). Gender discrimination in property ownership laws in Kenya. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.

21. Kenya League of Women Voters (LKWV) (2005). Report on the Status of Women in Kenya.

22. Kenyatta, G.N. (2023). Toward inclusive advancement: an analysis of gender equity in Kenya. Journal of International Women's Studies, 25 (2), 9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jiw.2023.01.001

23. Koech, M.C. (2020). An examination of gender gaps in systems of land ownership in relation to food security in Kenya. Diss. Dr. Sci. (Master of Arts). University of Nairobi.

24. Matogo, N. (2010). Gender equality in education in Kenya: challenges and prospects. International Journal of Educational Development, 30 (1), 11-16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2009.03.002

25. Mulderrig, J., Montessori, N.M., Farrelly, M. (2019). Introducing critical policy discourse analysis. Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, 1-22. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788115549.00006

Абери Д.Э. (2025)
Расшифровка динамики власти и скрытых идеологий в
кенийской политике гендерного равенства
Язык и текст, 12(2), 6—21.

Aberi G.E. (2025)
Decoding power dynamics and hidden ideologies in
Kenya's gender equality policies
Language and Text, 12(2), 6—21.

26. Mutua, D.A. (2006). Gender equality and women's solidarity across religious, ethnic, and class differences in the Kenyan constitutional review process. William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law, 13, 1-20.

27. Murunga, P., Machio, P. (2024). Towards attainment of gender equality in Kenya's education sector. KIPPRA.

28. Ngure, W. (2020). Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights of underage girls in sex work in Kenya. Diss. Dr. Sci. (Master of Arts in Human Rights). University of Nairobi.

29. Ndambuki, J. (2010). Discursive representation of women's interests and needs in Makueni District. Diss. Dr. Sci. University of Witwatersrand.

30. Nnoko, J., Abdi, N. (2020). Securing women's property rights in Kenya. The Daily Nation/Human Rights Watch, March 7.

31. Novovic, G. (2021). Contextualizing gender equality: gender mainstreaming between global governance frameworks and national and institutional policy agendas in Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda. Diss. Dr. Sci. (Political Sciences). University of Guelph.

32. Republic of Kenya (2000). National Gender and Development Policy. Nairobi: Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services.

33. Republic of Kenya (2010). The Constitution of Kenya. Nairobi: Government Printer.

34. Republic of Kenya (2019). Gender Policy 2019: Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development.

35. Republic of Kenya (2015). The Protection Against Domestic Violence Act. Nairobi: National Council for Law Reporting.

36. Schmitz, W. (1999). Transitional activism and political change in Kenya and Uganda. The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change. T. Risse, S. Ropp (eds.), 1-30. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511802544.002

37. Smith, J., et al. (2009). Polygamy and women's property rights in Kenya. Journal of Gender Studies, 7 (2), 3-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230902802584

38. Soeda, Y. (2008). Gender issues in education in Sub-Saharan Africa. International Journal of Educational Development, 28 (6), 673-686. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2008.03.002

39. Thongori, J. (2003). Incorporating women's rights into the new constitution in Kenya. Report of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission, 5 (10), 184-187.

40. Tripp, A.M., Ferree, M.M., and Ewig, C. (2013). Gender, violence, and human security: critical feminist perspectives. New York: NYU Press.

41. Unterhalter, E., North, A. (2011). Responding to the gender and education millennium development goals in South Africa and Kenya: reflections on education rights, gender equality, capabilities, and global justice. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 41 (4), 495-511. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2011.588766

42. van Dijk, T.A. (2019). Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: debates on immigration and ethnic issues. Comparative Perspectives on Racism, 91-115. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429273774-6

43. Wodak, R. (2015). Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach. The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118611463.wbielsi104

44. Wash, I. (2020). Interpreting public policy dilemmas: discourse analytical insights. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 7 (129), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00574-9

Информация об авторе

Джордж Эзекиль Абери, специалист в области прикладной лингвистики, междисциплинарный исследователь, кафедра языков, лингвистики и литературы, Университет Кисии, Кисии, Кения, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1355-5983, e-mail: george.aberi@kisiiuniversity.ac.ke

Information about the author

George E. Aberi, Applied Linguist, Interdisciplinary Researcher, Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Kisii University, Kisii, Kenya, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1355-5983, e-mail: george.aberi@kisiiuniversity.ac.ke