
THE DYNAMICS OF FEMALE EDUCATION FROM THE BASIC TO THE TERTIARY LEVELS IN GHANA: CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

Lydia Aziato

Senior Lecturer, Department of Adult Health, School of Nursing,
University of Ghana, Legon, Accra
aziatol@yahoo.com / laziato@ug.edu.gh

ABSTRACT

There continues to be inequality between the education of males and females in many countries including Ghana. Education of females contributes to improved quality of life for the individual, family, community and the nation. This article aims at identifying and discussing factors that influence female education from basic to tertiary levels. A focused integrated review approach was adopted to identify studies and reports that highlight issues of female education. The factors that impact negatively on female education included poverty and its ripple effects, for example, adolescent pregnancy, sexual and emotional harassment, menstruation and dysmenorrhoea, demands of family life and work. It was concluded that the individuals, families, communities (and the nation as a whole) should adopt context-specific measures that enhance female education. It was recommended that strategies which support female education such as, a flexible academic schedule, should be implemented.

Keywords: female education, school enrolment, Ghana, school dropout, educational disparity, academic progress

INTRODUCTION

The education of the girl child has been promoted in Ghana over the years (Rickard, Nkrumah, Brown, Artibello and Donkor, 2015). However, there continues to be low female enrolment in schools especially at the tertiary level in many countries (Lavy and Zablotsky, 2015; Lincove, 2009) including Ghana where there is 22% to 48% of female enrolment as compared to males who have an enrolment of over 50% at all levels of the educational system (Table 1) (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2015). In view of this, many interventions have been rolled-out to ensure that female education is comparable to males at all levels (Delprato, Akyeampong, Sabates and Hernandez-Fernandez, 2015; Lambert, Perrino and Barreras, 2012; Glick and Sahn, 2000). Interventions such as school feeding programmes, free school uniforms and books were undertaken by government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to achieve improvements in enrolment and decreased dropout rates of females (Greany, 2012). However, there still continues to be disparities in enrolment of female and male students.

Table 1: Male/female national enrolment for various programmes 2013/2014 Academic Year

PROGRAMME	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	% FEMALE
PRIMARY	1,665,480	1,579,517	3,244,997	48.7%
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL	649,509	590,907	1,240,416	47.6%
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	398,481	352,225	750,706	46.9%
POLYTECHNIC ENROLMENT				
TECHNICAL CERTIFICATE	1,994	1,251	3,245	38.6%
HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	33,195	17,483	50,678	34.5%
BACHELOR OF TECHNOLOGY	742	232	974	23.8%
UNIVERSITY ENROLMENT				
CERTIFICATE	1,156	1,082	2,238	48.3%
DIPLOMA	4,034	2,603	6,637	39.2%
FIRST DEGREE	90,303	53,797	144,100	37.3%
POST GRADUATE CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA	355	156	511	30.5%
MASTERS	8,114	4,178	12,292	40.0%
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY	570	160	730	21.9%

Adapted from: Ministry of Education, Ghana Website

The phenomenon of inequalities in education has attracted some levels of investigation by previous authors (Nordensvard, 2014). It is important for females to have equal educational

opportunities and the economic support to complete their education (Nordensvard, 2014). In this article, basic education refers to primary to junior high school (6 to 14 years); secondary education refers to senior high school (15 to 18 years); and tertiary education refers to post-secondary school education, for example from undergraduate degrees (and diplomas) to post graduate masters and doctoral programmes (usually above 18 years). Females, girls, adolescent girls, young girls, young ladies, young women and women are used in this article to refer to female students because of the age span addressed. An educated female in this article is a female who has undergone a formal classroom-based education up to the tertiary level.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a literature review. It adopted a focused integrated review where only studies that highlighted issues of females which influence their education were identified and included. Studies and reports from Ghana (17) and elsewhere (29) were included to enable a detailed discussion of issues. The literature included were published from 1999 to 2016 and these related to issues of education with specific focus on female education. Search engines such as ScienceDirect, Sage, CINAHL, Google Scholar, and websites of organisations such as Ministry of Education, Ghana and World Health Organization were used. Key words used during the search were: female education, girl-child education, benefits of female education, barriers of female education, determinants of female education, school drop-out, school enrolment, educational disparity, challenges of female education, Ghana, early marriage, dysmenorrhea, sexual harassment, teenage/adolescent pregnancy, basic education, tertiary education, graduate and post-graduate. These words were combined to generate relevant literature. Key findings from the review were discussed applying reflections on the issues raised and implications drawn in relation to female education in Ghana.

The article discusses the importance of female education and the factors that influence female education such as poverty, sexual and emotional harassment, juggling school and work (in the case of older students) and combining school and family life including child care. It concludes with clear implications of the factors discussed for the individual, family, community, institutions and the nation.

DISCUSSION

Is female education important?

The education of the female is important because it enhances the quality of life and promotes the independence of females in all spheres of life (Seshie-Nasser and Oduro, 2016) in the following ways:

Healthy lifestyle and disease prevention

Females in school gain knowledge on the negative effects of unhealthy lifestyle practices such as prostitution and drug abuse (Ikechebelu et al., 2008). On completion of the required educational programme, a female can be gainfully employed and is able to contribute to the education of her children and feed her family (Seshie-Nasser and Oduro, 2016; Nordensvard, 2014; Glick and Sahn, 2000). Educated females also seek early health care

and are able to maintain good health due to increased knowledge on preventive measures (Rickard et al., 2015). The educated female is well informed in many areas of life including sexual and reproductive health issues. She is able to plan her family to ensure that her children will have positive lifestyle choices and opportunities and consequently not end up living on the streets and engaging in social vices (Lavy and Zablotsky, 2015; Rickard et al., 2015). The majority of females (46.8%) who are compelled to engage in these behaviours are school drop-outs or those who are not gainfully employed (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Ikechebelu et al., 2008). Females' engagement in prostitution and use of illicit drugs may lead to many sexually transmitted diseases such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV and AIDS), gonorrhoea, syphilis and alterations in mental states such as delusions and aggression. More so, some female drug addicts may ultimately be referred to psychiatric hospitals and may not completely recover from addiction (Lambert et al., 2012). It pre-supposes that there should be adequate job opportunities for females to boost their economic status and attract other females to stay in school. The disparity between male and female education has contributed to the high poverty threshold of women; for example less than 30% females in doctoral programmes as compared to about 70% male enrolment (Ghana Ministry of Education, 2015).

Self-esteem and confidence

A well informed female is assertive and contributes effectively to any discussion she engages in with peers (Lambert et al., 2012; Garg, Sharma and Sahay, 2001). Acquisition of knowledge for a female contributes to personal management skills, which include effective time and stress management, which further promotes health. The effective financial management and investment opportunities for the educated female, is an added advantage to female education (Yeboah, 2015). It could imply that the socio-economic status of educated females would be higher than those who dropped out of school, or those who never went to school (Garg et al., 2001). It is also argued that educated females tend to marry educated men (Lavy and Zablotsky, 2015) and a good partnership between the couple could increase the family's socio-economic status.

Leadership and impact

The benefits of education to females and the immediate family enhance quality of life in the local community, the region and the country. The educated female serves as a leader in many spheres, and employs skills to motivate other females to go to school (Lambert et al., 2012). Educated females in leadership positions directly impact the community through benevolent donations and collaborations that bring development to the community. Educated females sometimes become community leaders and are part of decision-making in the community. In this regard, females use their knowledge and skills to contribute effectively to the growth of the community (Nordensvard, 2014). The educated female forms part of decision-makers at the national level in their roles as Ministers and Parliamentarians. It is noted that females form the minority in parliament and few hold ministerial positions. Educated females with the required skills also contribute at the global level in many disciplines across the world. Females lead multinational organisations and perform significant roles in global organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

In summary, the benefits of female education include living a healthy lifestyle that contributes to disease prevention. The educated female is confident and assertive and she is able to take on leadership positions that are beneficial to herself, family, community and the nation.

What factors impact on female education?

Previous studies have examined a number of factors that hinder female education. Some patriarchal cultures are of the view that the place of a woman is in the kitchen and there is no need to educate her (Adusah-Karikari, 2015; Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Lincove, 2009; Ainsworth and Filmer, 2006; Glick and Sahn, 2000). The free compulsory primary education introduced in 1961 in Ghana, curbed this discrimination against the girl child (Lambert et al., 2012). It would be expected that every Ghanaian female of at least 50 years would have at least primary education. It is, therefore, concerning that national surveys continue reporting a significant percentage of females who never went to school (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013). Although the Education Act of 1961 specifies free compulsory primary education for all, a number of factors could interfere with this expectation, for example, the unavailability of schools especially in rural communities (Ravi, Shah, Palani, Edward and Sathiyasekaran, 2015).

Poverty and its ripple effects

Poverty refers to low socio-economic status where the individual is not able to fulfil the basic needs for self and family (Greany, 2012). Poverty is a major determinant of low female education, as families are unable to buy the necessary school supplies for the child to attend school, or provide money for food, school uniforms, footwear, books and other materials for school (Yeboah, 2015; Lambert et al., 2012). All these factors contribute to girls' failure to start school or continue with their education. Free school uniforms and books were provided to some schools over the years, however, these have not yielded the desired results. This means that the provision of food and other items should not be a one-off event, as this does not achieve the goal of all children having free compulsory education (Lincove, 2009; Sinha and Shankar Nayak, 2008).

Poverty also drives girls as young as 10 years to engage in sexual promiscuity to fund their education. The unfortunate consequence is that these young girls become pregnant and some may attempt unsafe abortion resulting in complications and untimely death (Sedgh, Filippi, Owolabi, Singh, Askew, Bankole, Benson, Rossier, Pembe, Adewole, Ganatra, B. and MacDonagh, 2016; Jaldesa, 2014). Some unintended pregnancies result in direct discontinuation of schooling (Lambert et al., 2012). However, the Ghana Education Service (GES) has a policy that allows pregnant students to continue schooling (Yeboah, 2015). It is anticipated that children born from unintended pregnancies perpetuate the problems of poor schooling because the young parents are unable to cater for their children (Cook and Cameron, 2015). Some pregnant young girls become victims of early marriage which compounds their plight causing a curtailment in their dreams (Delprato et al., 2015; Greany, 2012). In some cultures, young girls are forced into marriage though they have not completed their education (Yeboah, 2015; Lambert et al., 2012). Such early marriages are detrimental to the wellbeing of the female student especially when they start marriage/family life (Delprato et al., 2015).

Poverty also contributes to child labour which hinders female students' education. The female student may be required to sell various items before or after school to supplement the family's income or acquire money for school (Yeboah, 2015; Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013;). The energy exerted during street hawking results in tiredness and they are not able to learn effectively in school or at home. In the long run, their performance would be affected (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014). Some of these students miss school because of their trading activities. The hawking also predisposes the girls to injury and abuse which may have damaging complications. When these girls sell on the street, they may engage in other behaviours associated with streetism (a phenomenon where the individual spends many hours on the street), such as drug abuse and sexual promiscuity (Yeboah, 2015; Ikechebelu et al., 2008). Again, when the female student is exposed to generating money at an early stage, some may lose interest in schooling and rather take to petty trading (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013). It is common to see pregnant adolescent females on the streets hawking one item or the other.

Adolescent pregnancy

Adolescent pregnancy refers to any pregnancy among girls aged 10 to 19 years (WHO, 2016). Recent reports indicate that adolescent pregnancy is on the increase (Cook and Cameron, 2015) and modern contraceptive use among adolescents is low (Osaikhuwomwan and Osemwenkha, 2013). It is confirmed that adolescents are sexually active and modern contraceptive use is important to prevent unintended pregnancies. A number of reasons for low use of contraceptives include the fear of side-effects, negative attitudes of health professionals, parental displeasure and peer influence (Childs, Knight and White, 2015; Whitworth and Cockerill, 2010). There is the need to intensify school-based adolescent reproductive health services and upscale female youth centres (community based facilities where females could socialise and engage in recreational activities and other healthy activities). The establishment of female-specific centres could enhance patronage since some males can monopolise or harass girls who share youth centres with them (Cook and Cameron, 2015; Baird and Porter, 2011). Education on contraceptives should be enhanced in schools and female adolescent centres. Parents of adolescents should support and encourage adolescents to use contraceptives rather than get pregnant and face the challenges of adolescent pregnancy (Childs et al., 2015). Female teachers and peer educators should have access to modern contraceptive methods such as the pill and condom, so that other female students can have easy access to the products if necessary. In Ghana, adolescents' use of contraceptives is not a taboo; but it is not openly encouraged and adolescents who use contraceptives experience negative attitudes from health professionals and other members of the society (Morhe, Tagbor, Ankobea and Danso, 2012).

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in this article refers to sexual intimidation tactics that make a female student feel personally uncomfortable and compromised, which may result in poor performance in school and absenteeism. Although sexual harassment is not a major cause of school drop-out, it is reported that female students are sexually harassed (Ohene, Johnson, Atunah-Jay, Owusu and Borowsky, 2015) by their teachers and other men/boys in the school (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Lambert et al., 2012). In an attempt to avoid this harassment, the girl stays out of school. In some situations, the harassment

involves teasing and other derogatory comments that makes the girl shy or feel awkward. For example, harassment of girls in the dining hall could prevent them from going to eat and if they cannot afford to buy their own food, it can lead to higher dropout rate, especially at the senior high school level (Mahdavian, Yousefi, Mohammadi, Nejatiasafa, Arbabi, Izadi and Berzins, 2007). Most schools have policies on sexual harassment that the student may use to seek redress when exposed to such situations. However, within the socio-cultural context of Ghana, most females are unable to report the culprits due to fear of victimisation or ill-treatment; which is the reality for many girls in many countries (Santhya, Zavier and Jejeebhoy, 2015). This suggests that female students being sexually harassed should be assured of maximum protection and support when they are brave enough to report any such incident.

Menstruation and menstrual pain

Another phenomenon that prevents female students from attending school regularly is menstruation. Schools with poor washroom facilities and those without separate washrooms for females, cause some females to stay home during their menstrual period (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014; Lambert et al., 2012). Sometimes the inability of females to purchase sanitary pads, could lead to soiling their uniforms in school, so to prevent this, they stay at home. The girls may be teased when they soil themselves in school and the shame associated with this contributes to the inability to go to school (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014).

Some females with painful menstruation or dysmenorrhoea do not attend classes or go to school during such moments of discomfort (Nooh, Abdul-Hady and El-Attar, 2016; Van Iersel, Kiesner, Pastore and Scholte, 2016; Aziato, Dedey and Clegg-Lampsey, 2014a). Absenteeism associated with monthly dysmenorrhoea results in poor academic performance. This calls for the need for school clinics to have adequate analgesics so that girls who suffer can be helped (Aziato, Dedey and Clegg-Lampsey, 2014b; Sommer, 2010). It is important that extra classes are organised to educate females with very severe dysmenorrhoea who are hospitalised during their menstrual period. Thus, female students with severe dysmenorrhoea should learn and work on their assignments before their pain starts so that their academic performance will not be hindered (Van Iersel et al., 2016; Aziato et al., 2014b). It is important for the school authorities, school principals and teachers, to be aware of those with debilitating menstrual pain and to provide assistance as needed (Ravi et al., 2015).

Demands of family life

At the tertiary level, female education is hindered by child care and family responsibilities. In some situations, girl children undertake parenting responsibilities in the absence of parents or parents who cannot fulfil their responsibilities (called parentification) (Schmitz and Tyler, 2016). In addition, some female students who are married or those who have children, combine schooling with family life. Some are unable to cope with the demands of combining child care with school and they defer the course or are unable to perform creditably. The contemporary Ghanaian family is more oriented towards the nuclear family (family units of couples and their children) and couples find it difficult to get family support for child care that could allow females to cope with their education. In some instances, the female discontinues the academic programme altogether.

Another aspect of family life that hinders female education is pregnancy. Some pregnancies are normal and others are associated with complications. A female student cannot predict the trajectory of a particular pregnancy at the onset (Adu-Yeboah and Forde, 2011). In the African context including Ghana, married couples are expected to have children and when there is a delay in childbirth, there is pressure on the female from many sectors of the society including in-laws and peers (Sommer, 2010). In view of this, married females get pregnant while attending school and the stress of academic life may predispose her to complications. Sometimes the pregnancy may be associated with excessive vomiting and bleeding. As a result, some students do not attend classes while others defer the course (Yilmaz, Yilmaz, Cakmak, Karsli, Gultekin, Gununeri, Kara and Kucukozkan, 2016). The stressful pregnancy of a student could also result in complications that put the lives of the baby and mother at risk (Cook and Cameron, 2015). The potential for pregnancy-related complications demand a change in orientation where females are pressured to have babies even when in school. It is necessary for couples to plan child birth to suit their educational plan through the use of desired family planning methods.

Additionally, females who get pregnant at school and experience one problem or another, may have problems with regular school attendance and meeting their academic targets. Some academic programmes are associated with stress and female students are not permitted to be pregnant during the course (Yeboah, 2015; Nordensvard, 2014). This could be an infringement on the reproductive rights of the female student. Therefore, pregnant students should be given the option to make an informed decision at the time of pregnancy. The cultural orientation of the Ghanaian family includes the role of the female as the one who cooks, washes and maintains the home (Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Fentiman, Hall and Bundy, 1999). Thus, when the female is also a student, she may not be able to perform these traditional roles adequately in addition to her academic work. This domestic situation may result in conflict in the marriage which could lead to divorce. Engaging in all the household chores compromises the energy and motivation of the female student. She is unable to learn as desired and her academic performance can be reduced (Glick and Sahn, 2000).

Managing work and school

Within the contemporary tertiary educational environment, there is an increasing number of students who work and school simultaneously. Some female students run different shifts to ensure that they keep their jobs while they attend classes. Some miss classes and this could contribute to poor academic performance (Lasode and Awote, 2014). Work output may also be affected if they concentrate more on their learning, leading to queries or dismissal from work. The loss of employment may also result in an inability to pay fees and this can contribute to discontinuation of the programme. Juggling work and schooling may also lead to heightened stress, leading to diseases such as hypertension (Lasode and Awote, 2014). A sick female student cannot concentrate on her studies and may be hospitalised. Furthermore, this condition frustrates her education and subsequent achievement of her academic dreams. It is important to engage females in group discussions and tutorials to catch up with academic progress.

The factors that hinder the education of female students include poverty, which leads to inability to pay school fees and other school items. This leads some females to engage in early sex resulting in teenage pregnancy. Some female students are sexually harassed at

school and some are absent from school due to menstruation and menstrual pain. Mature females who combine work, family life and education may find it difficult to cope with their academic demands.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS IN SOCIETY

Females are confronted with numerous challenges during their academic life. Within the African context, the traditional roles of women continue to perpetuate the belief that females in school firstly, are an anomaly and secondly, those who are married should perform their domestic roles. There is pressure on females who are single to marry and have children and married women without children are subjected to intense pressure from in-laws and peers. In addition, the pressure on the health of female students, without adequate supportive structure, continues to hamper the female student's school attendance. It is important for individuals, parents, families, communities, groups, organisations/institutions and nations, to adopt measures and institute interventions that can enhance female education.

The *individual* female students may have self-nurturing tasks which could increase their belief in themselves that they can excel in whatever academic programme they enrol in. These tasks could include identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as specific factors that hinder her academic work, so that she can find ways to tackle it effectively. Another means is to identify mentors and support systems in her school and community that she can employ to mitigate the challenges she faces. Furthermore, by seeking knowledge or information on specific problems, she would be arming herself with appropriate information and solution-focused strategies. These would all serve to reduce the allure of activities and behaviours that would negatively hinder her academic progression. In terms of cultural prescripts, effective time management may well be crucial, together with perseverance and good relationships, she would be in a better position to successfully complete all academic programmes (Aziato, 2015). Socio-cultural prescripts also make the open use of modern contraceptive methods taboo to avoid unintended pregnancy that can hinder her education (Grönqvist and Hall, 2013). Consequently, the individual or personal situation or context should be the frame to guide intra-personal decision making regarding contraception in particular, and other general measures to promote education, growth and development.

Female students juggling work, family and student responsibilities should employ strategies such as effective planning, time management and seeking support from colleagues and class mates to cope with the demands of academic life (Aziato, 2015). Employers should be encouraged to develop or review existing policies on study leave that clearly delineate the criteria for study leave and, where necessary, women should receive preferential treatment to promote female education. The use of home help or domestic assistance should be used more in order for the female student to gain sufficient time for her studies. Partners of female students should assist in maintaining the home. Ghanaians should not look down or stigmatise men who help their wives to cook, wash and clean the house (Fentiman et al., 1999).

Parents and families should ensure that equal opportunities are given to boys and girls regarding their education. Parents should make every effort to provide for their daughters to

meet their basic needs to reduce the need to engage in child labour and transactional sex. Families should be enabled to support the mature female student who requires support for child care and other domestic activities, so that she can have enough time for her studies. Families of female students should not be a source of stress for them on issues such as childbearing, house chores and excessive demands for family social events. Parents and families should socialise and nurture their children equally so that they will not engage only the girl child in domestic activities. Alternatively, paid home care services for child care should be available and affordable for couples so that the female student can get adequate time to engage in her education. In such instances of paid care, either at home or in an institution, there should be measures of monitoring the care provided to avoid child abuse (Peter, Spalding, Kenny, Conrad, McKeever and MacFarlane, 2007; Wang, 2002).

Communities and groups play a vital role where the norms of the community or the group could demand academic access, completion and throughput for females. The community leaders could develop and implement specific policies and rules that mandate parents to send their girl child to school and sanction those who fail. Communities and groups can institute academic awards for female students to motivate those who are not doing well or those considering dropping out. Groups in the community can also organise various educational and motivational programmes for girls so that they will be more informed and motivated in the quest to succeed in academia (Engström, 2015).

Organisations/institutions should offer flexible schedules to suit mature female students such as evening, weekend and online programmes that females with children can undertake as they manage their time to support themselves. Specific programmes should be included in the curriculum to address the needs of students. For example, child care facilities should be available in educational institutions with mature female students so that they can access child care during lectures. These facilities should operate such that the service would be available according to the lecture periods such as evenings and weekends. The cost for the child care should be subsidised for students to make it affordable to them.

It remains the institution's responsibility to ensure the safety and protection of all their students, but specifically female students. Institutions should also provide supportive environments and implement policies that protect and promote the interests and needs of females. To further these aims, institutions should partner with organisations with interest in promoting education of females such as the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to implement innovative interventions that will keep the girls at the school. At the *national* level, there is a need for governmental commitment to ensure that laws and policies, which enhance female education, are promoted. Government should provide the needed resources in schools and communities necessary for effective teaching and learning. Employment opportunities should be created for parents to secure jobs that can take care of their female children in school. The Ministry of Education and the Ghana Health Service should review their policies and interventions of female education so that the inequalities especially at the tertiary level could be addressed. Perhaps the introduction of School feeding programme could be a solution to instances where a child would have dropped out of school because of hunger. Culprits of acts of sexual harassment should be severely punished to serve as deterrents to those who have the intention of engaging in such acts. Furthermore, the provision of sanitary pads for girls who cannot afford it might also be solution for girls to attend school regularly throughout the month.

CONCLUSION

Female education although important is interconnected with various socio-political factors that interfere with its successful outcome. Females who are formally educated have a better quality of life and make significant contributions at the local, national and even the international level. The challenges females face in school can be surmounted if they adopt different measures depending on their individual situations. Parents should give equal opportunities to their children and the family should support females who combine schooling with child care. It is important that governments implement policies and regulations that promote female education from the basic to the tertiary level.

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