

Women's education in rural africa: the case of ghana



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Women's Education in Rural Africa: The Case of Ghana

A woman's right to formal education is defended absolutely in international law, however in developing parts of the world, many women still lack access to even the most basic of education. In rural Africa, women disproportionately hold responsibility for household tasks and, as a result, it is young women in this part of the world whose opportunities to learn are often most limited. Another cause for concern is that - for reasons which I will discuss - these domestic responsibilities are constantly increasing as a result of climate change. In this essay, I will attempt to explain why there is such disparity between the status of women's education in international law and the status of women's education on the ground in rural Africa, using the specific case of Ghana. First, I will explore exactly how a woman's right to education is viewed according to international law; second, I will present the current situation in Ghana; third, I will assess the impact of climate change on education; and, finally, I will discuss some possible measures which might allow more women to access education in developing countries.

A Woman's Right to Education in Law

International law resoundingly protects and advances the right to education, irrespective of gender. The ' Universal Declaration of Human Rights', for instance, asserts that education should ' be equally accessible to all' (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article 26). To the same effect, the ' Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women' states that nations must ' take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field

of education' (United Nations General Assembly, 1981, Article 10). More recently, still, the ' World Declaration on Education for All' insists that, at the very least, ' Every person . . . shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities to meet their basic learning needs' (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990, Article 1). Meanwhile Ghana, which incidentally ratified the aforementioned ' Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women' in 1986, guarantees in its constitution that, regardless of gender, ' Every person . . . shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms' (Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, Article 12). However, despite this seemingly unequivocal legal support for the universal right to education, it appears that education systems in rural Africa are still falling short.

The Current State of Education in Ghana

Despite the commitment of international law to eradicate gender discrimination and inequality, there is still a disparity between men and women in many areas globally. Education, by promoting development amongst even the most impoverished of people, has the potential to redress some of these inequalities. It is regrettable, then, that the international legal commitment to a woman's right to education is so often not being translated into tangible results. There have been many theories put forward attempting to explain this phenomenon. Sur (2014), for instance, broadly cites ' social constraints that deter the translation of this right into a lived experience' (p. 255). With direct reference to the case of Ghana, Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu and Hunt (2007) argue that the country's ' colonial past' has had a lasting impact on its ' current basic education structure and

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curriculum' (p. 4). Akyeampong et al. note that much of Ghana's approach to education during colonial rule was 'characterized by attempts to create incentives for all children to attend school' (ibid.). Even though this approach was continued after the country gained independence, Akyeampong et al. suggest that 'poor managerial capacity and the weak financial resource base of the local councils' appear to have thwarted the government's attempts to maintain levels of enrolment (ibid., p. 12). Now, in the 21st century, Ghana continues to struggle with educational standards and ranks 119th out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's (2017) study of 'Educational Attainment' (p. 12).

It has also been suggested that issues of educational attainment can be explained by Ghana's culture, namely established gender norms and the traditional expectations of women. For instance, Baden, Green, Otoo-Oyortey and Peasgood (1994) claim that family dynamics are often male-dominated as 'the autonomy of the majority of Ghanaian women is highly circumscribed by the limited range of their economic opportunities and lack of upward mobility' (p. 3). Further compounding this trend is the fact that 'Pooling of resources' is rare, thus men and women usually 'have separate income and expenditure streams' (ibid., p. 4). Women whose duties extend beyond the household, therefore, are left in a dependent and potentially uncertain financial position. Another phenomenon which can lead to precarious living situations for Ghanaian women, according to Wrigley-Asante and Agandin (2015), is 'Male Out-Migration', or 'The practise of adult males moving from rural areas into urban centres' (p. 184). Male out-migration can leave women - and any remaining members of the family,

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including children – with the potentially burdening responsibility of maintaining the family financially whilst also carry out household tasks.

Studies suggest a negative correlation between the level of a child's domestic responsibilities and their educational attainment. In fact, according to Johnson, Agbényiga and Bahemuka (2013), even 'safe forms of work can be disruptive to educational attainment for boys and especially for girls' (p. 2). In rural parts of the world, including rural Ghana, families often depend on children to carry out a variety of tasks. 'In the absence of public utilities', Laird (2005) observes, rural households in Ghana rely on 'children to perform time-consuming menial tasks, ranging from the collection of firewood and water, often in distance measured in kilometres, to the laborious preparation of food from raw ingredients' (p. 462). These tasks are not being distributed on an ad-hoc basis either: children are consistently being relied upon to contribute their labour. Indeed, in his study on children's education in Ghana, Stephens (2000) estimates that 'something like 17 to 18 hours per week are spent by children on work within the home' (p. 34). In other words, boys and girls, on average, have a substantial role to play in the everyday functioning of rural Ghanaian households and there is a cultural expectation for children to fulfil certain domestic obligations. Indeed, the traditional nature of a child's role in the family structure is such that Stephens (2000) notes that there is a perceived 'tension between home and school values'; with one of his interviewees even remarking that 'A taste of schooling makes [children] rebels' (pp. 36-37). The concern, therefore, is that attending school might discourage children from fulfilling their obligations at home.

The Impact of Climate Change

It is expected that children's household obligations will grow as climate change continues to accelerate. According to recent calculations, Ghana is forecast to experience an 'Increase in average annual temperatures between 1.4-5.8°C by 2080' and a 'Decrease in overall rainfall of 4.4 percent by 2040' (United States Agency for International Development, 2017). If water becomes less abundant, it follows that people will inevitably have to walk further to find sources that they can collect from. A study based on Uganda, another rural African country, suggests that a significant decrease in rainfall will likely affect school enrolment amongst females - but not males. Björkman-Nyqvist (2013) found that 'A decrease in rainfall . . . by 15 percent results in 118 fewer female students in grade 7, which corresponds to a decrease of 5 percentage points in female enrolment' and proceeds to report that 'I do not find any relationship between rainfall shocks and male enrolment' (p. 238). It appears, then, that females in Ghana will also be disproportionately impacted if the volume of labour in the household increases.

If, as expected, climate change continues to create a greater need for labour in the household, it is likely that more females will choose - or be made to choose - to neglect educational attainment, in favour of fulfilling their family obligations. However, to automatically assume that this is a damaging outcome - and, therefore, that formal education is necessary desirable for all females - is premature and may be at odds with the reality. Clearly education can and does benefit women - namely 'on areas such as family health and infant mortality . . . economic productivity, attitudes, women's

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status, and power . . . in the community and the society at large' (Floro and Wolf, 1990, p. 5) – however, it is also true that this view of education is not held by all families. For some families in rural Africa, where poverty rates are very high, life is a daily struggle for survival (Blackden, Canagarajah, Klasen, and Lawson, 2007, p. 349). For these families, decisions are more likely to be taken based on urgent necessity and not a considered preference for desirable long-term outcomes. Therefore, any possible solution to the problem of female educational attainment should focus not just on cultural and traditional factors, but also on alleviating poverty and improving the living conditions of the most vulnerable.

Possible Solutions

The pursuit of vocational education is a possible measure that could make rural African communities more productive in the short-term. As an alternative to – and not a replacement for – formal education, investment in vocational pathways for children could help to develop skills, such as farming, which are relevant to the local community. Vocational training, according to Atchoarena and Delluc (2002), besides being economically beneficial, can also be socially advantageous, ' including the fight against poverty and the integration of young people into the working world' (p. 38). Furthermore, this type of informal education can allow children to continue to fulfil their family obligations, whilst also benefitting from some form of education.

One potential problem with the increased provision of vocational training, would be if it were to divert excessive funds away from the already

established formal education systems. However, so long as those who wish to enrol in formal education are still able to do so, I believe it would be possible to increase vocational pathways without it be detrimental to existing systems and institutions. In other words, a short-term drive for vocational training in rural areas should not negatively impact the long-term goal of increasing enrolment in formal education.

Additionally, efforts to combat climate change and its effects should be intensified. If the effects of climate change on rural areas can be limited, then the need for children to take on household tasks should also fall. The cost of climate change mitigation can be substantial, but with innovative practices and the support of the international community it can be achievable. As a result, in the long-term, females will be required to contribute less of their time to household maintenance and, instead will be free to pursue an education.

Concluding Thoughts

To conclude, it is crucial that international law and domestic policy continues to support the primacy of universal education, irrespective of gender.

However, it is apparent that in rural Ghana, and rural communities more generally, there is a need for a unique approach; one which more closely considers the role of tradition and culture in family structures. Policy going forward should also consider short-term educational alternatives, such as vocational training, for those women who are not presently able to enrol in long-term formal education. Finally, as climate change continues to accelerate, it is extremely important that any approach to education in rural

Africa seriously considers the impact it is having on women and their family obligations.

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