It's a Man's World: Overcoming Barriers to Female Education in Ghana

LaSandra Houston

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“It’s a Man’s World” Overcoming Barriers to Female Education in Ghana

Independent Study Project
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By:
LaSandra Houston

Advisor: Ekua O. Britwum
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Abstract

My paper is study that seeks to explain the ways barriers to girl child education in Ghana are overcome by Ghanaian women. Specifically, it explains the experiences of different Ghanaian women who have obtained formal education beyond Senior Secondary Schools and compares their explanations for success. It provides an analysis of the factors that contributed to their educational success, such as, financial support, psychological/emotional support, gender ideologies, and role models. It also gives a review of the different policies or programs that these women have expressed contributed in some way to their educational advancement. Finally it provides more policy and program recommendations, suggestions for further study, and reflection of my personal experience.
Introduction

Introduce the General Topic (Gender Gap in Ghana)

During my very first stay with the SIT group in Komenda, I visited a Junior Secondary School (JSS). While I was there I had a chance to speak to the headmaster and to one of the JSS classes. One observation I made while in the class was that there seemed to be about forty students in the class and of those forty, I noticed that girls seemed to make up about thirty percent, while boys seemed to make up about seventy percent. Nevertheless, I didn’t give this much thought until after I talked to a former JSS schoolteacher. In my conversation with him I found out that overall in Komenda, it was common for boys to outnumber girls considerably in formal education as boys and girls moved up the education as boys and girls moved up the educational ladder. As time passed, I discovered that his fact not only held true for Komenda, but for Ghana as a whole.

Female make up more than fifty percent of Ghana’s entire population; however, there is a gender disparity in favor of boys at all educational levels with the gap widening at higher levels (Amua-Sekyi, 3). In fact, statistics show that at the primary level boys make up 52% of the population, while girls make up 48%. By JSS boys make up 55% while girls only make up 45%. In Senior Secondary School boys make up 57% and girls make up 43% (Ministry of Education of Ghana, 1). Finally, males make up 63% of university students in Ghana, while females only comprise 27% at this level (SIT Lecture, 10/3/03). The existence of a gender gap is obvious based on this data. Thus, when beginning my Independent Research Study. I became curious and wanted to find out more about what caused this educational gender gap.

In my pursuit to find out the causes of the formal education gap between males and females in Ghana, I was able to answer my basic questions through, literature, conversations, and interviews. There turned out be many ideas and much research on this very topic. During my visit to the Regional Education Office in Cape Coast, I met with the Regional Girls Education officer, Barbara Abban. Ms. Abban was very helpful in my research because she had a lot of information about the topic in her office and provided me with articles, as well as charts and statistics. I took the information that I got from my visit and interaction with her and put it together with the information I obtained through informal conversations with my home stay family, other education administrators, and teachers. Through this I found that there was a trend in what was thought by Ghanaians to be the cause of the gender gap between males and females in Ghana.

First of all, in not one of my sources did I ever hear or read that the cause of the gender gap was the result of a likely phenomenon: discrimination. In her 1998 article entitled, “Ghana: Education For Girls” author and 1998 Faculty of Education member at the University of Cape Coast, Ekua T. Amua-Sekyi found in her study on this topic that “Education policies and laws have not
discriminated against females” (Amua-Sekyi. 1). On the contrary she writes that the policies of successive Ghanaian governments have, since independence in 1957, have purposed. This claim that the cause of the gender gap is not discriminatory policies was also supported by the fact no one in all of my interview and conversations named it as a contributor and I have not found it listed in any other literature as a factor. However, there are some factors that were found in by Ekua Amua-Sekyi in her study and were consistent in all of my research on the cause of the gender gap. These factors included, Financial Factors and Societal/Parental Attitudes to Girl’s Education. In addition to these two, I also found the Absence of Female Role Models to be named often as a cause.

As a result of finding the various trends through my sources and the ideas held by people in terms of what could be done to close the gender gap, I became more interested in the ways in which women who make it past Senior Secondary school made it that far in found education, when the research shows that there are many obstacles to females continuing their education as they go up the educational ladder. If so many females, have to drop out of school before obtaining higher levels of education, then how do females who achieve high levels of education achieve it? Do they face the obstacles that are trends in my research? If so, how do they overcome? If not, why did they escape them? I thought that finding the answers to these questions would not only be an interesting study, but could also shed some light on the experiences of some Ghanaian women and find out their educational experiences. In turn, the study could be helpful for people in gaining a better understanding of the obstacles that females face in obtaining their formal education and what kinds of things can help them achieve higher levels of formal education. I thought although there are studies on this subject already, my paper would offer an interesting “spin” because it would tell the stories, experiences, and ideas of real women who have obtained or are obtaining a higher level of formal education, such as any post secondary education. This formal post secondary education includes university, polytechnic, vocational, and teacher training colleges. Thus, not only could the study be one who other Ghanaian or non-Ghanaian males and females connect with, but it would have the potential to better different societies as a whole because when you identify the root of an issues, you best able to terminate the problem. This can be the same for the educational gender gap in Ghana and/or other places perhaps. Also, I believe it is important research for those who are wondering more about this subject, perhaps some girl child or female whether it be a student, mother, sister, or wife, who needs some examples and inspiration in terms of their pursuit of formal education.
METHODOLOGY

Interviews:

Once I decided to write about this subject, I set out to find women who had achieved a formal education past Senior Secondary School. I used the contacts that were made through the SIT program to start. I made appointments with the different homestay mothers in the program who I knew through my friends. The people who I conducted interviews with are the following: Barbara Abban (Regional Girls Education Officer at the Regional Education office in Cape Coast), Alberta Rachel Croffie Quayson (Tutor at Wesley Girls High School), Patricia Assoummoni (Primary and J.S.S. teacher at Pedu M/A School), Naana Opoku-Agyemang (Professor and Head of the English Department at Cape Coast University), Teresa Ennin (Student in Master’s Program at University of Cape Coast), and Rebecca Yebua (Teacher at Methodist Primary B in Cape Coast, Ghana).

In general, the following questions are the ones I asked the women: Name, Age, Where do you work/go to school? Where did you go to school growing up? What is the highest level of formal education you have obtained? Why did you go to that level in education versus other options you may have had? Did you face any obstacles in achieving your formal education? What were those obstacles? If not, why don’t you think you faced any? What things motivated you to go achieve that level? Who supported your education financially? What type of things did your parents and others family members tell you about formal education? What were their feelings about you going to school? Did you have female education? What were their feelings about it? Did you have female role models growing up? Who were they and how did they influence you? Can you remember any policy or programs that have been helpful for you in obtaining your formal education? Are there any programs you feel help females in obtaining for education or one that could be implemented that would help? Do you have any ideas or remarks?

Visits/ Informal Conversation:

The next methodologies I used were visits informal conversations. For example, I visited the Ministry of Education in Accra and talked to the director of girl-child education and asked her some questions about what they do there and we talked about her own educational experiences. In addition, this also happened when I visited the Regional Education office in Cape Coast. I talked to the woman who was the regional officer for girl child education and we had some informal conversation about what she does there, facts and her views on girl child education. I was also able to see a lot of charts and information in her office that provided more information on the matter. This really helped me gain a better understanding of what the common barriers were, what people’s thoughts were about them, and what things are currently being done about them. Also, I engaged in
informal conversation with home stay mother who is currently a teacher and graduated from the University of Cape Coast about her experiences and ideas about female achievement in pursuit of formal education in Ghana. This too allowed me to understand the issue better and be able to draw on the new knowledge I had so I could come up with my own analysis of the situation. I also drew from informal conversations with other people in the SIT program and some people who are affiliated with it as well.

Observation:

The observation that I did was at a J.S.S. school in Komenda. I observed on class to look for what they did and I observe the number of boys versus the number of girls. I observed at the university of Cape Coast to see how men that I normally see versus females. I also observed behavior in my homestay family because my homestay mother is teacher and both of her daughters are currently pursuing formal education. In fact, one of her daughters has already completed Senior Secondary school and the process of applying to a university.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze my data I first collected all the information I needed in terms of interviews and observations and informal conversations. Next, I took at the trends that I saw in the data and I tries to draw conclusions about those trends. I tried to find answers to the question that I proposed in the beginning of my research. In addition, used the other literature that I received through various sources in order to see how the information that I found compared to the ideas in other research. I looked for common themes once, again. such as the financial support that was provided to the women I talked to and did they have role models because the research shows argues that these are two of the major factors that cause the gender gap in formal education between men and women in Ghana. Finally, I took what the women identified as “hardships” and problems and tried to pinpoint any policies or programs that I knew of that addressed that specific issue. Therefore in the end I was able to address the issues and present my analysis as well as the recommendations and area for further research that I thought could be done.
Limitations of my Study

Yes, time was a limitation to my study. For one, it took me quite a determine and finalize what I wanted to research and do my ISP on. Therefore, I did the time was running out and that influenced who I interviewed for the study. I had to simple stick to all people that I already knew because I knew how to find them and already hap a repour built with them. So, in that way it was a good thing. Nevertheless, my data could have had more diverse sources if time allowed.

Another methodology problem was included being a foreigner and trying to conduct interviews. This was somewhat a limitation because of words and phrases or structures or events that sometimes where names by my interviewees in which I knew nothing about or was unfamiliar with. And once again time prevented me from being able to research more in depth every comment or event that I didn’t understand or know much about. This presented itself as a limitation in my research and paper.

Finally, the last limitation was simply that when I went to different offices to accumulate information, sometimes the people I came to see weren’t there or did not have the information I needed, so I would have to make multiple trips to the same places when I had only allotted enough time for one visit. Nevertheless, I learned how to make more time for those issues.
Financial Factors

As I mentioned during the introduction of the paper, I looked for trends in the research about the causes of the gender gap or obstacles that girls faced which resulted in them not being able to continue to go to school. The first one that I will discuss is Financial Factors.

I found the naming of Financial Factors in almost all of my research about the factors that contribute to the lack of educational attainment for women. The research that I talked about earlier done by Ekua T. Amua-Sekyi explains the issue of financial strain on parents and how it becomes a obstacle for their girl child to advance in formal education. “Parents in rural are unable to meet the financial, material, and equipment demands, of their children in school Household expenses for school most commonly include school registration fees, contribution to Parent-Teacher Association, school uniform, sportswear, books, school supplies and transportation to and from school. In fact, Amua-Sekyi writes, that the cost for formal education for girls is higher than for boys because their uniform cost more and parents tend to spend more money on transportation to and from school for girls due to safety precautions. But, even more so than these reasons, the research I did suggested that in case of a financial constraint on the family, the girls would be more likely to be pulled out of school than their brothers.

I first heard about this issue during my first visit to Komenda. I interviewed Ebo Sam, the SIT’s program assistant who is also a former Junior Secondary schoolteacher. In my interview with him, he elaborated on the issue of parents who have financial constraints and are more likely to keep girls home and send boys to school for that reason. When I asked him why was that so, he told me that one reason was because in many instances, the mother in the household depend on their daughters for to help out around the house with domestic chores and/or the daughter may be the one who goes to sell in the market with her mother etc (9/17/03). Like, Amua-Sekyi argued, this issues it very prominent in rural areas. For example, Komenda is a fishing community and most of the men are fisherman there. This means that they are away during various times and are not around the family. In turn, the mother takes care of her children and may need even more help for extra work and domestic activities. Meanwhile, the boys fish with their father or go to schools.

Another reason that Ebo Sam expounded upon in terms of the reasons that parents would send their boys to school over their girls in case of a financial constraint was because parents figured that girls would eventually get married and have a husband that would take care of them economically. However, this is not the case for their sons. Because of the common role of men as provider in Ghana, the men would have to someway to support not only himself, but also his wife and any children they had (9/17/03). Therefore, the importance of educating the boys supercedes the importance of educating girls. In the end, the gender gap among males and females remains.
With existence of this issue of financial constraints in which girls are likely be pulled out of their formal education, how do females overcome this or get over having to deal with this issue? In order to find out the answer to that question, I asked the women whom I interviewed and found very interesting responses.

When asking the women whom I interviewed about any obstacles that they face in obtaining their education none of them identified financial factors as an obstacle. I found this very interesting because most of my research outside of the interviews, named financial obstacles as a strain does not mean that it is not a very important facto. In fact, it seems to me that this lack of financial strain on the women I interviewed was one of the most important contributors to them completing their education. For, example, without the financial pressure or worry, the ladies was able to not only attend school, but focus their efforts on school and achieving academically.

So, how did these women escape the financial obstacle? I found through my research that parent’s occupation and family business were the two reasons why interviewees were free from financial issues hindering their formal schooling. For example, when this question came up in my interview with Alberta Coffie Quayson, one of the first reasons that she named for not experiencing any obstacles to achieving her education, was the fact that both her mother and father worked as regional directors of education (11/03). She explained to me that they never lacked “school fees, uniforms, books, toys or shoes”, not only because her parents had the money to buy these items, but also because she was the youngest of three siblings. Therefore, she was received all of these thins needed for school were available to her when they were finished with it (11/03).

Societal/Parental Attitudes to Girls’ Education

In Amua-Sekyi’s study on the obstacles to female formal educational attainment in Ghana, she lists Societal/Parental Attitudes to Girls’ Education. She writes, “The value of reproductive and traditional roles of females are generally placed higher than the achievements like education and career. Unless education is accorded increased value, one would not expect females to aspire to careers that require advanced qualifications” (pg, 2). In other words, because societal and parental ideas of females roles are more domestic or in terms of marriage and raising children, then they expect less from their girls in formal education and female students tend to lean toward more towards female dominated areas of work and specialization such as, nursing, catering, home economics, hairdressing, teaching etc (pg. 2). Seeing this idea and claim presented in more than one form of research. I wondered what experiences the women I was interviewing had in this area and did it present itself as a issue or hindrance. And if not, what factors determined to its absence.

Once again, when this question about their parents and families support and views toward their formal education, all of them expressed that this was not at all any problem for them while pursuing their education. In fact, they had opposite experiences. They said that their parents and
family supported them not only financially, but psychologically. After analyzing the data I have found that much of that support can be attributed to the level of formal education obtained by other women in the family and the occupations of the parents and/or some other family member.

Once again, in my interview with Alberta Croffie Quayson, her first reason for not facing any obstacles to her formal was the profession of her parents. This is not only the reason that financial issues did not present itself as an obstacle, but also the reason why Societal/Parental Attitudes to her education did not hinder her. For example, she said that her parents always tired to teach her at home and take her and her siblings traveling all over Ghana, because she said they felt that it was very important that she knows about the country she lives in. In addition, she said they would ask her questions about what she saw while they traveled and told her encouraging phrases such as, “You have never tried it, so how do you know you can’t do it?” or simply say, “You can do it!” in terms of going to school. Also, Alberta was going to initially pursue catering as a career, but her mother suggested teaching to her because she said that she could see her doing that more than being a caterer because of her talents and ways of persuading people. Thus, Alberta’s parents had a very positive perception and attitude towards education because they were educated and obviously found it important because they worked in the regional education office.

Also, not only were Alberta’s parents occupation and academic background a reason why she didn’t face any obstacles in the area of Societal/Parental Attitudes towards girls’ education, but also she received a lot of support and a positive attitude from other women in their family because they too were not only formally educated, but studied at Wesley Girls School, in which some of the brightest of Ghana’s young women attend, but also had professional formal sector occupations such as author and a scientist.

This support of parents and family and their occupations was also named by mostly all of the women I interviewed. In fact, Naana Opoku-Agyemang talked to me the ways that people in her community would sometimes have negative things to say about her not having a husband or children during the time she was at the University, however, it was her grandmother who encouraged after they left the people and told her to go ahead and don’t pay any attention to what those other people thought, because it was good for her to go to school and be educated enough to take care of herself and children with or without a husband. Another interviewee, Patricia Assoumoni informed me that her mothers always told her, “Learn for yourself and not for me, so you can take care of yourself.” Finally, Rebecca Yeboah father was her main support in going to the Teacher Training College when she wasn’t even interested in going. Also, she says that all the women in her family went to formal education training, she said one reason that it was valued so much was that her uncle who raised her father was a priest for some time and back then, priest where also teachers. So, because he raised her father and valued education so much, her father did too and made sure he sent all his children to school.
Therefore, parental attitudes toward Girl’s education are influenced by the history of education for their female family members and parents or other families’ occupations. When parents or female family members are formally educated and/or have occupations that have to do with education, then they have very supportive views towards girl child education and are supportive psychologically toward the girls formal education attainment.

Female Role Models

Lack of female role models is also a factor that I found to be named in many different resources during my research. For example, during my visit to Barbara Abban’s, the regional educational officer for girls child education, she informed me that lack of female role models was a problem and presented itself as an obstacle at times for girls staying in school. As a result, she said that there are many programs that try to bring formally educated women into villages where many of the women do not have much formal education. This is to act as a role model for the girls and to show them examples of formally educated women. In my interview with Naana Opoku-Agyemang, she too told me that she too was asked at times to come in and sit on panels in villages as a role model for the girls and an example, of a woman who has much formal education. Nevertheless, in my interview with her, she told me that she doesn’t like to do it unless there are going to be women role models from the community itself, such as Queen Mothers, or other important women in the village even if they don’t have formal education. She said she feels that they are the real role models because they have spent time with the raised the girls and they are also the women the girls are better able to connect with. She said she feels that is does the women in the village a disservice and is insulting for them to only have outside women who have been formally educated as the “role models.” Interesting enough, Naana Opoku-Agyemang’s feelings and ideas about this are in agreement with my research for this paper. Female Role Models tend to be family members or people from the girls school versus outside visitors or mentors who are formally educated.

When I asked Teresa Ennin, master’s program student at the University of Cape Coast about role models and motivations to finish formal education to the point she is she named her mother and her teacher. Then, when talking to Naana Opoku-Agyemang about her role model, she named her grandmother because the worked so hard at everything she did. Rebecca Yeboah named one of her friends who encouraged her to go to school an Alberta named her aunts. She said they taught her a lot and supported her also. Therefore, none of the women I interviewed named any outside educated women they knew or any famous people or visitors and examples of women outside their family or community.
CONCLUSIONS /RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the answers to the questions that I posed in the beginning were able to be answered from my research. How do these women obtain high levels of formal education? Do they face the obstacles that are trends in my research? If so, how do they overcome? If not, why did they escape them? Were all answered in various ways. To sum it all up, the main factors that are identified by research to be main causes of the gender gap and obstacles to female did not fit the lives of those women I interviewed. This is much of the reason for there success. And in my analysis I concluded that financial factors were not a problem for them majority because of their parents occupation. Next, Societal/Parental Attitudes to Girls’ Education did not hold them back either and in my analysis I concluded that the families and parental view is shaped by their own educational backgrounds, and their occupations are occupations that usually would be held by those who value education. Therefore, the women are supported not only financially because of parents and other family educational backgrounds and occupations, but also supported psychologically, which attributed to the women’ success. Finally, I found that the ideas usually held about female role models being “outside” the community or family who are very educated was not supported by my research, instead, most of the women named were either family members or apart of the women’s communities and some did not have formal education, but where simply role models because they were hard working and supportive of the women and their educational endeavours.

As a result of my findings, the policy and program recommendations I have come up with are derived out of the idea and interviews of the women. For example, many of the women whom I interviewed are currently doing distance education at a university. This distance education enables them to learn from home and study on their own most of the time. As a result, the women can keep their jobs and make money to support their family and themselves at the same time. Barbara and Rebecca are both doing this: however, Barbara expressed that she doesn’t get any financial support from the government, which she thinks is unfair. She said that women who take off four years to go to school are able to finish and get support from the government. But, she cannot and she is working, so, one of my proposals is to have more government or non government funding for women who are mid career and pursuing a degree through distance education. This would close the gender gap some and make ways for more women to become educated while working and keeping the economy running at the same time.

Next, the distance education offered by colleges and universities seem to be benefiting women abundantly, especially mid career mothers and wives. However, universities such as the University of Cape Coast do not show much commitment in the area of bringing in more women students even though women benefit the most. For example, in the University of Cape Coast Corporate Strategy that came out in January 2003, distance education being targeted at women and
women being the major beneficiaries is not once mentioned in the strategy (UCC Corporate Strategy). Therefore, perhaps if the University Acknowledged that fact more openly and tried to have publicity programs to attract even more women, the population of women at one of Ghana’s best universities could get more women enrolled.
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