Access and Barriers to Education for Ghanaian Women and Girls

MARY TANYE
University of Alberta

ABSTRACT: As has been aptly stated in the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (UN, 1995) in Beijing, the girl-child today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas, and energy of the girl-child are vital for full attainment of the goals of equality, development, and peace. For the girl-child to develop her full potential, she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment, where her spiritual, intellectual, and material needs for survival, protection, and development are met and equal rights safeguarded. In the Ghanaian case, especially the limited education women receive could be detrimental to social development needs of women and girls, hence the focus of this paper, which add some important perspectives to the literature in the area.

KEYWORDS: Women/girls’ education, Ghana, human rights, marriage, development, social-cultural, traditional.

Introduction

The ability to read and write a simple sentence is essential in today’s everyday life. Anyone unable to do so effectively is grossly handicapped. In spite of this reality, recent United Nations (UN, 1998) statistics state that there are one billion illiterate adults in the world, with two thirds being women. As well, of those females who do go to school approximately 500 million start primary school but more than 100 million children, two thirds of them girls, drop out before completing four years of primary school (Adadevoh, 1999). Government officials claim that Sub-Saharan Africa has made excellent gains in females’ education. Yet, an estimated 23 million girls were not in school in the year 2000, and there has been an overall widening of the gap in the region (Ohene-Konadu, 2001). Ghana’s former first lady Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings stated at the 1998 International Conference on Girls’ education in Washington, D.C., that the male literacy rate in Ghana was 71 percent and the female literacy 46 percent, with male illiteracy increasing by 6 million while female illiteracy increased by 14
These alarming statistics constitute a clear violation of women’s basic human rights, which ensure that “every woman and girl is entitled to the realization of all rights – civil, political, economic, social, and cultural – on equal terms with men, free from discrimination. Women should also enjoy human rights specifically linked to their status as women” (The People's Movement for Human Rights Education, n.d.).

There is considerable evidence that the education of women has a direct impact on various aspects of the social, economic, and political well being of a country. For instance, (Swainson, as cited in Tanye, 2003) suggests that the mother’s educational level has a direct influence on economic productivity and on the level of her daughter’s education. Research findings show that investing in females’ education may be the most cost-effective measure a developing country can take to improve its standard of living (Donkor, 2002). Furthermore, Kofi Annan, Ghanaian UN Secretary General, at the World Education Forum, 2000, also stated:

No development strategy is better than one that involves women as central players. It has immediate benefits for nutrition, health, savings, and reinvestment at the family, community, and ultimately, country level. In other words, educating girls is a social development policy that works. It is a long-term investment that yields exceptionally high returns. We need those with power to change things to come together in an alliance for girls’ education: governments, voluntary progressive groups, and above all, local communities, schools and families.

Similarly, the Preston Education Fund for Girls (1995), a sub-group of the Global Fund for Women, reports, “failing to invest in the education of women and girls has long-term consequences for health, population growth, and environmental security.” While it is undeniable that educating females is one of the surest ways of empowering them and enhancing national development, gross gender gaps continue to impede women’s participation in higher education. Well-intentioned initiatives such as the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) have not been successful in overcoming the numerous constraints impeding most women from participating in higher education. These constraints include socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, and institutional obstacles, as well as political and personal factors. This article examines how these barriers serve to deny Ghanaian women their legal right to education, and more specifically, their participation in higher educational programmes.