

**Female Access and Participation in Tertiary Education: Do Traditional Beliefs  
and Practices Matter?**

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### **Abstract**

Society's behavior is largely influenced by traditional practices, beliefs and perceptions. It is therefore probable that the likelihood of females continuing their education to the tertiary level would be affected by these practices, beliefs and perceptions. Achieving gender equality is one of the six goals of the global Education for All campaign that UNESCO leads (David, 2016). This paper reviews the question of gender disparities in educational access to tertiary education in Ghana in relation to traditional beliefs and practices. The focus was on the Odompo and Ayeldo communities in the Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese (AAK) District of the Central Region. A qualitative research paradigm was used for the study. Using the snowball sampling technique, a total of 33 respondents were sampled. Interviews were used to elicit their perceptions in relation to female access to tertiary education. It was found out that although community members support female education, the ability to financially support girls in school determined whether the girls would further their education. The traditional belief that the female would marry and leave the home influenced parents option to invest in the male child in tertiary education. Given the opportunity the girls themselves would rather participate in tertiary education. As there are positive perceptions towards female participation in tertiary education policy makers need to create conducive and attractive mechanisms that would induce females to access to tertiary education in the country. Policy and sensitisation need to continue to further promote female education and transform the patriarchal society through conscientisation and awareness creation.

**Key Words:** Female education, Access and participation, Tertiary/higher education, Traditional beliefs and practices

## **Introduction**

Tertiary education is important for the building of human capacity of a country and in turn lead to the improvement in its socio-economic development. It is therefore expedient that both males and females are given the opportunity to access and participate in tertiary education to improve their competences and contribute to the development of the communities in which they find themselves. The general trend in most developing countries is that the higher the level of education the lower the number of females participating in education. According to Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013), in Ghana as in other African countries, access to participation in higher education has generally improved numerically over the years but gender disparity continuous to persist to the disadvantage of female students. Many reasons have been assigned to this trend. Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013); Lestrade, (2012); Johnson, (2011) and UNICEF, (2014); as cited in Munthali (2017) have noted the factors which affect girls' education to be academic, economic, environmental, socio cultural and policy related. Dube (2015) 'observed that "the gender gap in enrolment is essentially a function of socio-cultural effects deriving from attitudes and beliefs about boys and girls" (p.283). This paper focuses on perceptions of community members including girls who have completed secondary education on the influence of traditional beliefs and practices on female access and participation in tertiary education.

### Literature review

#### ***Gender Disparity in Education***

Gender disparities tend to increase at higher levels of education. At the tertiary level, gender parity exists only in five out of 148 countries with available data (UNESCO, 2006). In most developing countries, women's participation in tertiary education remains far below that of men. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 38 per cent of students in tertiary education are women (UNESCO, 2007). This disparity still exists in many developing

countries today. As noted by Munthali (2017) research reveals that there are disparities to the disadvantage of female students in gaining access to higher education.

### *Perceptions on female education*

In a study to find out the attitude of rural settlers towards female education, Mensah (2005) reported that parents with little or no education in the rural areas tend to display the attitude that favours of enrolling boys rather than girls. It was obvious that parents without any educational background had little interest in educating their female children. Parents with little or no formal education fail to appreciate the essence of schooling for their female children. On the other hand, parents who had more education place equal value on both male and female education (Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003). In rural areas the perception is often held that it is more beneficial if the male child is educated to a higher level rather than a female. Most of the socio-cultural values and practices favor boys going to school rather than girls. Influenced by such social and cultural beliefs, a woman focuses on being an ideal wife and a good mother. Mensah's (2005) study referred to earlier showed that parents without any educational background had little interest in educating their female children.

Generally, parents with much higher levels of education place emphasis on equal education for their children. However, daughters are often considered as an economic liability due to their leaving home after marriage. Once a daughter is married, she becomes physically as well as psychologically isolated from her natal home. Daughters are seldom seen as making any significant contributions to their natal family (Omoruyi & Omiunu, 2006).

In another study to find out the attitude of rural dwellers towards female education, Kolawole (2007) reported that the background of many educated parents in the rural areas influence decisions and attitudes in favour of enrolling boys rather than girls. It was clear that parents without any educational background had little interest in educating their female children. They failed to appreciate the essence of schooling for

their female children. On the other hand, parents who had some form of education, placed equal value on both male and female education. Those with much higher levels of education even placed emphasis on the equal level of education their female children should have. Haldaner-Lutterrodt (2009) points out that parents who are themselves illiterates tend to see little value in education particularly for females.

### *Socio-cultural factors affecting female participation in tertiary education*

Some of the socio-cultural factors that affect female access to and participation in tertiary education are early marriage, level of parents' expectation for their female children, lack of encouragement from parents, and teenage pregnancy (Stanley & Munn, 2000). Despite the several attempts, plans, policies and programmes aimed at improving the gender disparity in education, Mensah (2005) observed that some parents still consider education for girls as a waste of resources because females would end up as wives in men's homes. Some parents also believe that the priority of a woman is to get married and raise children. This is considered an achievement and women without husbands and children are looked down upon in our society. These and such other ideas are likely the greatest contributory factors to the gender gap in our educational institutions.

Hertz and Sperling (2004) pointed out that, the attitude of the family to formal education is a strong factor that affects the education of females. Families that show indifference to formal education no matter how affluent they may be, tend to be indifferent about the schooling of their girls. It is not rare to meet rich Ghanaian fathers who refuse to send their children, especially females, to school because they think it is a waste of resources to invest in education. Society and parents particularly tend to use cultural and traditional values to perpetuate prejudices against female education. Society tends to favour and support boys' education more than girls'. This undoubtedly widens the gender gap in favour of boys as one climbs the academic ladder from the basic level

to the tertiary (Oyewumi, 2005). Omoruyi and Omiunu (2006) argued that, the primary obstacles that girls face are bigotry and negative peer interaction provided by the school.

Social scientists have found out that socio-demographic factors such as ethnicity, age at marriage, marital systems and religion, have put considerable constraints on female education. A study carried out by Tilak (1991) on the impact of religion on girls' enrolment suggested that it is too simplistic to associate low participation of girls with particular religious affiliations. This is because whilst examples can be found which appear to link, for example, the predominance of Islam with low female enrolment and wide gender gaps in education, there are also counter examples.

Marriage, particularly early marriage, may affect girls' educational achievement especially to higher education. Single women tend to have higher educational levels more than married women (Tilak, 1991). Early marriage thus, acts as a deterrent more to female education than to male education. Sri Lanka, which reports better participation of women in education, has over half of women still unmarried at age 23 (Khan, 1991; Takyi & Addai, 2002).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The promotion of female education has been a priority for the Ghana government for many years. Different measures have been put in place to increase female participation in education. For instance, with the establishment of the Girls' Education Unit in the Ghana Education Service in 1997, it was expected that the needs and concerns of the girl-child including female senior high school (SHS) graduates especially, in deprived regions, districts and communities would not only be adequately and effectively addressed but also the dropout rate for girls in high schools will be reduced drastically (GES, 2012). Due to the low numbers of female high school graduates, there are still disparities in female education with the highest being in tertiary education. Thus, the higher the level of education the lower the level of female participation. In 2016 for example the GPI was 0.67 and the GER in tertiary education for female was 12% in 2016

and 13% in 2017. This shows that it appears the interventions have not achieved their goals of improving the participation of females in education. According to OECD (2013), many factors such as gender parity, socio-cultural and socio-economic factors and school related factors affect female access to and participation in tertiary education and restrict developments in female education.

The purpose of this study therefore was to investigate the part traditional beliefs and practices play of affecting female participation in tertiary education. The key research questions that guided the study were: What are the socio-cultural beliefs related to females' participation in tertiary education? How do socio-cultural practices affect females' participation in tertiary education?

### **Methodology**

A case study research design with a qualitative approach was adopted to study the traditional beliefs and practices that influence female participation in tertiary education of the Odompo and Ayeldo communities in the Central Region of Ghana. Data on the opinions of the respondents related to female access to and participation in tertiary education were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The population for the study comprised the chiefs, parents, SHS graduates, assembly men and women, district education staff and other opinion leaders in the two communities. The criteria for being selected as a respondent were to be an indigene and having stayed in the community for not less than five years. The total number of parents in the two communities who had at least one ward being a SHS graduate, the graduates themselves, chiefs, and other opinion leaders in these communities was unknown. Using the snowball sampling technique, a total of 33 respondents were selected made up of eight female SHS graduates, nine opinion leaders, five teachers, three GES staff and eight parents for the study. The sampling procedure began in each community with the help of the assembly member and the unit committee chairman in the two communities who served as informants. As informants, they were able to identify other female SHS graduates, their parents and

other opinion leaders in the two communities. These respondents who were identified in turn identified other respondents in the study area. The people who were recommended by the informants were approached to collect the data required. The consent of the SHS graduates was sought through their parents. Participants were encouraged to feel free to air their views as objectively as possible and that they had the liberty to choose whether to participate or not. Analysis was done according to the research questions with the issues categorized into themes.

## **Results and discussions**

The study sought to identify traditional beliefs and practices that had some impact on female participation in tertiary education with particular reference to females in the Odompo and Ayeldo communities in the Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese (AAK) District of the Central Region of Ghana. The results are presented according to the two research questions that guided the study.

### **Perceptions on Female Participation in Tertiary Education**

The first research question of the study focused on the perception of citizens of Odompo and Ayeldo communities with regard to female access to and participation in tertiary education. The issues considered focused on respondents' opinion on female access to and participation in tertiary education. The issues were analysed qualitatively.

#### ***Theme 1: Education effect of female life standards***

Respondents were asked to share their opinion about female access to and participation in tertiary education. Most of the respondents were of the view that *the world is now changing at a faster rate and per their own experience the only way one can catch up with such dynamism is through education*. One respondent stated that *women with higher education normally have positive outlook, perception, family life and healthy standard of living in the community*. Two of the respondents also stated that women participating in tertiary education is a good thing to the community and the nation at large because most women that they know to have received higher education are financially sound and independent



in their respective homes or communities. They added that a few of such women are serving as role models in their community. The views of the respondents indicate that female participation in tertiary education help in improving their standard of living, life chance, life style, and income levels in the community.

The findings are in line with the submission of Burkitt (1995) who posited that a literate population is a necessity for any nation wishing to take advantage of modern technological growth. Burkitt (1995) noted that there is a direct relationship between literacy among women and improved health and child care in the family. Furthermore, there is a direct relationship between female education and poverty reduction. Educated women tend to have smaller family sizes and reduced fertility which have great potential benefits for their future generation. For instance, UNDP's statistics have indicated that the high fertility rate in Tanzania and Ghana in the early 70s (1970-75) dropped drastically from 6.8 births per woman to 5.1 and 6.9 to 4.1 respectively between 2000 and 2005 due to continued and sustained efforts at ensuring the participation of girls in secondary and tertiary education in the two countries (UNDP, 2005). Four of the parents stated simultaneously that *ladies who have participated in tertiary education normally do not respect elders in the community*. One respondent added that *females who want to further their education up to the tertiary level should respect others and study hard*. This shows that in general members such as chiefs and opinion leaders of The Odompo and Ayeldo community have a positive perception towards female education although they have some reservations on its effect on the female.

### ***Theme 2: Female perceptions towards education***

The study further elicited data on the views of respondents regarding the opportunity to access tertiary education as a female SHS graduate. Most of the female SHS graduates stated *that when they had the opportunity to access tertiary education as a female SHS graduate they would accept the offer*. However, two of the female SHS graduates from Ayeldo community stated that *they would not accept the offer because they could not afford the*

*cost of living on campus.* The results may mean that given the chance and making tertiary education accessible to these female SHS graduates, one could be sure that they would participate in it fully.

One of the SHS graduates in Odompo explained that she would not accept the offer and was of the view that education is not just access but retention too. This is because *her parents cannot afford her feeding and accommodation fees, not to mention the cost of hand-outs, books and other stationaries* and would therefore not be able to stay on to complete. However, majority of the respondents who admitted that when they got the opportunity to access tertiary education as female SHS graduates they would accept the offer also gave multiple reasons for their response. Two of them stated that there are many benefits or gains when a woman accesses tertiary education. Some of the gains or benefits they mentioned were a fair representation of the sexes, equal chance to participate in national affairs and equal chance for job opportunities.

Three of the SHS graduates, one from Odompo and two from Ayeldo stated that they would accept the offer because one would get a profession after completion. They added that it would make them not to depend on anybody for survival, since they were likely to secure better job after graduation which would make them financially sound enough to help other people in the family, especially the young ones.

One of the three SHS graduates further stated that *“accessing tertiary education will give me the room to learn more either formally or informally which can increase my ability to manage my future home effectively”*. The views of the SHS graduates show that females are positive about tertiary education and thus are positive towards female participation in education generally.

The findings corroborate the comments of Akakpa (1996) who stressed that restricting women’s access to services such as education, health, or transportation, and their economic opportunity was unfair, and that life chances should not be preordained at birth. In economic terms, restricting women reduces their well-being and the welfare

of families. Thus, it limits economic growth and slows down progress in poverty reduction.

One of the main determinants of inequity is family income, but, depending on the country, other factors may contribute to unequal access and outcomes. According to the World Bank (2002), education is one of the major variables that could be used to improve the income levels of people. Therefore, with equal access and participation in tertiary education, women are likely to compete favourably with their male counterparts as expected. In Ghana, policy makers have made a number of efforts to ensure that there is equity in the educational system, where more room is provided for females in tertiary education with regard to access.

### ***Theme 3: Perceptions of female students relating to Staying to Complete Tertiary Education***

The female SHS graduates were asked to indicate whether they would stay on till they completed their studies at the tertiary level assuming they were in a tertiary institution pursuing their studies. Interestingly, all of them admitted that after getting access to participate in tertiary education, they would stay on until they completed their programme. When asked further to give reasons for their answer, they were of the view that they would stay on in order to acquire the certificates, testimonials, transcripts and all other documents or credentials that would prove that they participated in tertiary education. The findings may mean that female SHS graduates who drop out from tertiary education, do so not because they want it but because of economic and other factors.

In a study it was found out that female access to tertiary education may suffer or that dropout rates may be higher due to parental bias towards investing more in boys (Hertz, Subbaro, Habib, & Raney, 1991). The study of Hertz et al. (1991) further showed that families rely more on older girls than on older boys to care for younger siblings and that girls were much more likely than boys to drop out of school to look after sick siblings. Also, female employment and increased female wages may increase the likelihood of

dropout or non-attendance of females in tertiary education, due to substitution of labour. According to one study in India, a 10 % increase in female wages was said to cause a five percent drop in girls' school attendance in tertiary education (Khan, 1991). This shows that when the cost benefits are weighed and there is a higher benefit in educating females more females would participate in tertiary education. The overall impact of mothers' occupation depends on the relative strength of substitution and income effects (Hertz et al., 1991).

Mensah (2005) also asserted that, an increasing number of females are upgrading themselves as compared to previous years and attributed the drop-out of females from tertiary education to premature pregnancy. He was of the view that unequal access to education and lack of education continuity puts a premium on repeated child bearing. Mensah also noted that in spite of the benefits in female education participation, the rural areas of most developing countries are characterised by lower enrolments especially for females in tertiary education. Studies conducted in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have shown that females are more likely than males to drop out before completing their tertiary education, especially in rural areas (UNESCO (2006).

### *Socio-Cultural Factors that Affect Females' Participation to Tertiary Education*

With regard to socio-cultural factors that impede females' access to and participation in education at the tertiary levels, respondents were first asked to describe how traditional practices and beliefs in the community influence female access to and participation in education at the tertiary level.

#### **Theme 1: Preference for Males Over Females in Education**

Respondents admitted that some traditional practices and beliefs in their community negatively influenced female access to and participation in education at the tertiary level. One particular belief is the fact that most people see females as properties that do not belong to them in the long run and that the amount they would use in

developing them would end up benefiting another family. Therefore, they preferred laying much emphasis on their male children to their female.

Indeed, most of the respondents shared the notion that when you educate a girl-child, she will send all the investments made on her to the husband's house which the parents may not benefit from as compared to the family of the husband. This thinking of people in these two study communities is a common phenomenon in patriarchal societies in most developing countries such as Ghana.

The finding is consistent with the view of Mazumdar (1989) who asserted that social and cultural beliefs, practices and attitudes often do not favour girls in their pursuit of education to the same extent as boys. Discriminatory values and norms including the tradition of early marriage, preferential treatment of the male child, perceived dubious benefits of educating girls, the traditional view of the girl as someone else's property, all conspire to limit girls' enrolment and school attendance, especially at the tertiary level (Mazumdar, 1989). Similarly, Opong and Abu (2008) noted that female participation in public life is restricted due to a number of deep-seated socio-cultural structures, systems and practices such as traditional notions which advocate a preference for the education of male children.

### **Theme 2: Females' Traditional Role in the Home and Marriage**

Two of the respondents who admitted that the traditional practices and beliefs in their communities served as an impediment to females' participation in tertiary education went further to highlight some of the practices and beliefs that result in this impediment. One of these respondents said *"in my community, it is believed that a woman's place is the kitchen. Therefore, they do not see why female SHS graduates should not abandon their education and go through the family traditional right since this will help them get a husband quickly."* She added that *"even if these females participate in tertiary education, men find it difficult to marry them"*. One respondent also said *"in my community most men in the*

*community are of the view that such females don't respect their husbands as expected in these communities."*

Three of the respondents concurrently stated that *teenage pregnancy is a prestige and part of the life style of the young ladies in the community*. According to them *such people are perceived to be fruitful and fertile*. One of the teachers captured for the study also stated that *"pregnancy is the order of the day in the community"*. She further stated that *"in the community people believe in farming, early birth and learning of trade as the foundation of hard working girls in the community."*

The findings are consistent with the view of Omoruyi (2001) who commented that the cultural beliefs that perceive the role of a woman to be nothing other than a wife and mother has a consequence for reducing parents' incentives to invest in the human capital of their daughters (Omoruyi, 2001). In rural areas, from the very early age, a girl learns to expect endurance and modesty, which are determined as the socio-cultural values and practices that are favoured for good marriage. For such social beliefs, a woman always tries to make up an ideal wife and a good mother. A girl is taught to sacrifice her individual identity to be a good wife and a mother (Mensah, 2005). Acheampong (2005) also commented that in some Ghanaian societies, cultural attributes have reinforced the belief that childbearing is the most important role of women with its obvious implications for population growth.

### **Theme 3: Poverty and Parental Illiteracy**

One of the GES staff also said that *"poverty and illiteracy on the part of the parents are factors that affect female SHS graduates not to access or participate in tertiary education"*. Poverty and illiteracy are non-traditional factors which have some relationship with the traditional beliefs and practices that affect female SHS graduates access to and participation in tertiary education.

The incidence of poverty is acute in rural areas, where the majority of the Ghanaian population live. The findings support the view of Omoruyi (2001) who posits that poverty

discourages families from sending their children to school, particularly at the tertiary level. Tertiary education requires a substantial commitment of time and resources, as well as sacrifices related to household production. Child labour is important for the economic survival of families. Girls contribute a substantial proportion of labour more than boys, and this contribution increases with age (Omoruyi, 2001). Female SHS graduates are therefore less likely to participate in tertiary education because of their economic contribution at that age through labour.

#### **Theme 4: Awareness of the Importance of Female Education**

In relation to awareness of the importance of tertiary education for females, the majority of the respondents, in the two communities indicated that they are aware of such importance. Generally, the views of most of the respondents show that the importance of female education is not only a means to an end but an end in itself. One of the GES staff said that *“education is a key to human resource development as well as a prerequisite to the advancement of women”*. She further posited that formal education is a powerful agent of progress. One teacher at Ayeldo community also commented that *“formal educational system is a major institutional mechanism for developing critical human skills and knowledge and that all citizens in this community acknowledge its importance.”*

The views of the respondents show that citizens in the two communities are aware of the importance of girl-child education. Therefore, females’ participation in tertiary education is considered relevant and important to most of the respondents. This significance is evident in Boro’s (2005) study that showed that investing in female education is probably the most cost-effective measure a developing country could take to improve its standard of living.

#### **Theme 5: Peer Influence on Education**

The views of the respondents indicate that peer associations have a significant influence on female SHS graduates with regard to their access, participation and awareness of tertiary education. A teacher in one of the schools said that *“peer group*

members who have participated in tertiary education normally bring honour to themselves and the community when they come home or visit the school." A female SHS graduate from Ayeldo community also stated that "such people's life style is attractive to all other youth in the community, and they become the eye of the community. She added that those people "normally encourage their peers to go to school." A teacher in Odompo community also stated that "peer members who have participated in tertiary education sometimes organise community sensitisation programmes in the community and also encourage the youth to further their education." In some cases, according to one of the GES staff, "such people serve as mentors for the youth." Generally, the results show that peers to some extent contribute significantly to influence female SHS graduates' perceptions related to access, participation and awareness in tertiary education.

#### **Theme 6: Influence of Religion on Education**

In relation to the extent to which religious ideas of female SHS graduates influence their access and participation in tertiary education, all (100%) the respondents agreed to it, to varying extents. Three of the parents asserted that *some of the old churches in the communities encourage parents and the youth on girl child education*. One of the parents stated further that "the churches help in eradicating superstitious belief among the parents and youth with regard to female access and participation in tertiary education." Meaning, the church and other NGOs in the communities are doing everything possible to narrow or eliminate the negative traditional beliefs that do not support girl-child education, not to mention educating the female student up to the tertiary level.

#### **Conclusions**

Generally, the study shows positive perceptions towards female education among the respondents. However, some socio-cultural issues coupled with economic factors are prevalent that serve as barriers to female participation in tertiary education. For instance, there are some perceptions that girls do not need to pursue tertiary education because of their domestic roles. However, these perceptions are changing due to increased



awareness arising in part from the mentoring role of the few females who are able to progress to such levels in addition to other structures and institutions in the country that are promoting the participation of females in tertiary education. All in all, traditional beliefs and practices matter when the standard of living is low but when there is the opportunity, females will participate in tertiary education in spite of the traditional beliefs. The participation in tertiary education is more influenced by the assumed domestic roles of females and cost benefit issues of who to educate in a family. As there are positive perceptions towards female participation in tertiary education, policy makers should create conducive and attractive mechanisms that will induce females to have more access to tertiary education in the country. This will help in breaching the gap between males and females with regard to access to tertiary education. Policy and sensitisation therefore needs to continue to further promote female education, transform the patriarchal society through conscientisation and awareness creation as well as structures put in place to reduce poverty.

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