Informal institutions and female students' school engagement:
A case of Mvomero district ward schools

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ABSTRACT

Institutions play a crucial role in students' educational process. This study was conducted in Mvomero district to assess the effect of informal institutions on educational engagement of female students in ward secondary schools. Data were collected through survey, document review, focus group discussion and key-informant interviews. Purposive sampling was used whereby ward secondary schools were a target. Then study respondents were randomly selected. A sample of 80 respondents was interviewed. The collected data were analyzed by using statistical package for social science (SPSS) computer program for quantitative data, and content analysis for textual data. The results indicated that informal rules (socio-cultural practices and traditional norms) affected female student's educational engagement; the majority of respondents viewed the institutions as an obstacle. As such, various measures were recommended to be taken by different stakeholders such as NGOs, government agencies, teachers, parents, guardians and students themselves to ensure informal rules including social-cultural and traditional norms are regulated to make female students optimize their educational opportunities.

Keywords: Informal institutions, female students, school engagement

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In all countries around the world education is considered a necessity from many perspectives. From the economic perspective, it is a means towards increased productivity and thus towards poverty reduction (URT, 2002; Kagia, 1997). From the health perspective, education, especially for girls is the most effective investment in reducing fertility levels (Kagia, 2007). From the overall socio-economic point of view, education is an investment in creating a competitive labour force that is important in attracting foreign investment. Yet, others see education as a human right, which everybody must have access to for increasing capacities of individuals to lead to the life they value and participate in all socio-economic aspects of life (UNESCO, 2005).

In Tanzania, development of secondary education is among the priorities advocated in broader national strategies such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy (URT, 2000), the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (URT, 2005b) and Tanzania Development Vision 2025 (URT,

2000). Among the specific strategies, Tanzania initiated the 3-five years Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP) in 2004 for the aim of expanding secondary education in the country. The SEDP links primary education to tertiary education and further professional development (World Bank, 2005; ADEA, 2007 and AHDD, 2007).

Tanzania has been taking initiatives to ensure universal access to education at various levels. Among those initiatives was the establishment of ward secondary schools between 2003 and 2007 for the purpose of implementing education sector development programmes (SEDP). This followed the implementation of primary education development programme (PEDP) which has succeeded to enroll a large number of pupils in primary schools, most of whom at the completion of primary education could not be accommodated in the then existed few secondary schools (MOEVT, 2006). However, educational achievement of students depends not only on the establishment of building infrastructures but also on the existing institutional arrangements, among other factors. This study, therefore, aims at assessing effects of informal institutions on ward schools female students' educational engagement.

Institutions can have multiple definitions according to the context in which they are implied. According to North, institutions are a "set of rules, compliance procedures, and moral and ethical behavioural norms designed to constrain the behaviour of individuals" (North, 1981: pp.201-202 cited in Feeny, 1988, p.171). Ostrom (1992) defines institutions as a set of rules specifically used by a set of individuals to organise repetitive or routine activities that produce outcomes that affect these individuals and others. North (1993) also sees institutions as constraints the humans devise to structure or govern their relationships. These constraints are formal (e.g., rules, laws and constitutions) and informal (e.g., norms, conventions, and self-governing codes), and they include implementation and enforcement characteristics. Peters (1999) defines institutions as a collection of values, rules and repetitive actions that are devised to implement and enforce those values.

In this study, institutions are defined as rules, norms, conventions, beliefs, and customs governing and linking the practices and decisions of people in the society. An informal institution implies unwritten rules, customs, conventions, norms, etc. that are relevant to social relations among the community members. The focus of this study is on informal institutions that affect educational engagement of female students in ward schools. Educational engagement in this respect covers the aspects related with involvement in school activities but especially traditional classroom and academic work (Rutter et al., 1989). The main hypothesis underlining this research is that the community-based rules significantly affect female students' education engagement.

Limited studies have been done on education development of ward schools. Among those studies include an assessment of completion and progression of students under Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP) (Kihombo et al., 2011), and the limit of internal arrangement of

ward schools on the effectiveness of formal rules[1]. However, there is knowledge gap on how informal institutions affect students in rural ward schools. Female students are a focus of this study because of the anecdotal observation that this group is conventionally more vulnerable than male students in educational-based decision-making at the community level.

This paper is organized as follows. After this background information, methodology used for data collection is described. This is followed by presentation of the results wherein informal rules (taboos, traditional, cultural, etc) that surround a female student as well as drivers (forces) for the observed informal rules are identified, and then, effects of these rules on a girl student in her educational engagement are uncovered.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used an approach that entailed different methods to collect the data from two secondary schools in Mlali ward located in Mvomero District in Morogoro region. Data were collected from Luguru and Kutu tribes. The sample comprised of 80 students of which 53 were female and 27 were male. Also, data were collected from two teachers as key informants, and from focus group discussion with 10 parents. Whereas most of student respondents were girls, boys were also interviewed to get their perceptions regarding the effect of informal institutions on the school engagement of female students.

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect data from the study population. These methods included survey of a sample of students, focus group discussion with parents and interview with key informants. Qualitative and quantitative methods of data were combined to enable a better understanding, and to increase validity of the results (Richardson, 2003; Thomas, 2003). Tools used to collect the data were checklist of questions for qualitative data, and semi structured questionnaires with closed and open ended questions for quantitative data.

The collected data were analyzed by using statistical package for social science (SPSS), for quantitative data whereby statistics such as mean, frequencies and percentages were computed. Content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data; the data were organized into meaningful themes and patterns for easy comprehension and logical flow.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Background characteristics of respondents

Background characteristics, on the one hand, are important because they give the reader insights on the nature of the respondents who were involved in the study. On the other hand, these

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[1] http://dissertation.ub.nI/FILES/faculties/jur/2011/w.I.mafuru/08c8.pdf

characteristics help with study results interpretations as the observed dispersion in the responses might have been influenced by characteristics possessed by the respondents. The background characteristics studied under this study were sex, age and education.

Sex of student respondents

Because the purpose of this study was to investigate the engagement of female students in education, more female (66%) than male (34%) students were interviewed. The purpose of interviewing both male and female students was to capture potential sex based variability in responses on the research issue. However, fewer male respondents were purposively selected in the research because the focus was on female students, and therefore, it was assumed that more would be learned from female respondents as they were the ones affected by the studied issue (Table 1).

Table 1: Sex of Respondents (n=80)

Sex of respondents	Respondent's percentage
Male	34
Female	66
Total	100

Age of respondents

The maximum age of students' respondents was 19 years and minimum was 16 years. Most student respondents (45%) were aged 17 years, followed by those aged 18 years (30%), 16 years (20%), and 19 years old (5%) (Table 2). The two key informants interviewed aged 42 and 50 years old.

Table 2: Age of the student respondents (n=80)

Age (years)	Respondents Percent
16	20
17	45
18	30
19	5
Total	100

Level of education of respondents

Student respondents were drawn from form one to form four classes in order to capture the variability of responses from different students based on their levels of education (Table 3). Regarding the two key informants, one had attained college education while the other had achieved university education level.

Table 3: Level of education of respondents (n=80)

Year of study	Respondents Percent
Form I	25
Form II	25
Form III	25
Form IV	25
Total	100

Informal rules/stereotype activities surrounding a female student

Customary norms and stereotype activities were mentioned to affect fully educational engagement of female students in the study area. The main traditions uncovered were the traditional dance signifying the girl's attainment of puberty age (*kunema*), and the belief that female children mostly need informal rather than formal education. Stereotype domestic chores identified by the respondents were: food preparation, child rearing, water fetching, firewood chopping, house cleanness, washing dishes and clothes, and family caring. While, the two key informants confirmed responses given by student respondents, they additionally revealed a tendency of early marriages among girls which interferes with their educational engagement. Wellesley College Centre for Research (1992) argued that traditional gender stereotypes are the barriers that limit opportunities for girls.

Factors behind prejudice rules towards girls

Based on students' survey, various factors influence the above-mentioned informal rules and female-biased stereotype activities. Majority of students' respondents (60%) identified the parents'/guardians' lack of awareness on the importance of education to female students as one of the factors while a quarter of respondents (25%) perceived pressure from peers within the community as the cause of existence of rigid beliefs that certain chores should be exclusively left to female children. Other respondents (15%) attributed male parents' desire for money thus pushing their children to early marriages as the drive for maintaining female children marginalizing traditions (Table 4).

Similarly, key informants perceived poverty and lack of education for most parents in the community as the major causes of the existence of rules of the game that adversely affect the female. Another driver mentioned was conservatism among elders as the cause of persistence of the above-mentioned cultural norms.

 Coomaraswamy and Kois (1999) argue that discriminatory rules impair gender equality thus depriving women's right in terms of, for example, equitable access to education. Other studies indicate that homes and of course parents are the first important agents for socialization of all human beings; children learn values, traditions and customs as well as styles of the society through

their homes; homes thus can be seen as informal schools wherein parents and other adults are like teachers and counselors who impart various virtues to children (WHO, 2007; Adenike and Toiwo, 2013). As such, when the attitudes of the parents are of negative stereotypic nature towards a certain social group (e.g. female children) the society may end up marginalizing such a social group.

Table 4: Factors influencing prejudice rules towards girls (n=80)

Factors	Respondents Percent
Lack of adequate education	60
Wealth and prestige	15
Gender stereotype pressure	35

Note: Summation of responses exceeds 100 percent because of multiple responses

Effects of informal rules on female students' engagement in education

Customs, norms and traditions exercised in the community were viewed as a threat to female students' full involvement in academic activities. The survey results showed effects on female students' engagement in the education process including attendance to school. Most student respondents (51%) reported early marriages to be the main effect, followed by pregnancies while at school (33%), poor academic performance (25%), promoting prostitution (25%), and school dropout (22%) (Table 5). According to WLC (undated) female students especially from poor families in Tanzania face gender stereotypes which manifest through long distance walk to school, sexual abuse, limited access to school, excessive household duties, early marriages, early pregnancies, and lack of priorities for higher education resulting into higher rates of school dropouts. These authors view it important for government's intervention to curb traditional cultural and community norms that discriminate female students in education.

Table 5: Effects of the norms and customs on girls students (n=80)

Adverse effects of rules of the game	Respondents Percent
school dropout	22.2
Pregnancy	33.3
poor performance	25
early marriage	51.1
Prostitution	25.6

Note: summation of responses exceeds 100 percent because of multiple responses

A difference was observed between girls' and boys' attendance to school in a week whereby most girls attended school for one to three days vis-à-vis normal five school days attendance by boys. Out of the 53 interviewed female students, majority (80%) attended school for one to three days per week while only few of them (20%) participated for four to five days per week (Table 7). Students'

respondents gave different reasons for not attending to school regularly in a week. Most of respondents (65%) blamed parents for not well participating in ensuring that their children get education; they did not pay school fees for the female children, nor did they buy other necessary needs for their children's education especially for female students as well as being assigned excessive chores and taking care of sick people (Table 6) during school days. These aspects lowered students' morale to studies.

As reported by Alberto Abouchaar (2003) and Catsambis (2001) parental involvement in children's education has a powerful impact on their attainment and adjustments. Heidari et al (2013) argue that the emotional attitudes of the parents towards their children has significant effect on educational progress of the children at school either positively or negatively depending on the nature of the emotion. This makes Reed et al (2009) emphasize that parents should not be ignored in strategies to improve educational outcomes of their children as evidences indicate that parents are a significant impacting factors and helping opportunities towards their children's intellectual, educational and social development domains.

The respondents also viewed community's traditional norms such as viewing girls as an instrument to be prepared for marriage as the cause of the reported difference in school attendance between girls and boys. They thus regarded the traditions and customs as obstacle on the side of female students' attendance to school. Furthermore, about half of the respondents (45%) perceived informal rules of the game as not having any benefits rather than causing merely negative impacts.

Table 6: Reasons for less than normal five week days attendance to school (n=80)

Reasons	Percent
Domestic chores	45
Care for sick people	40
Farm work	15
Lack of school fees	40

Note: summation of responses exceeds 100 percent because of multiple responses

Table 7: Days girl students attended school (n=53)

Days	Respondents Percent
1-3 days	80
4-5	20
Total	100

Student respondents revealed more adverse than positive effects due to influence from informal institutions. They argued that traditions and customs are a threat to female students because they

bring many obstacles, for example, loss of time that could be invested in schooling, loss of money because some traditional functions (e.g. *kunema*) are expensive, accelerate bad behaviors among youth such as prostitution, early pregnancy while in school, early marriage, poor performance in school and school dropout (Table 5). As such, girl respondents viewed informal institutions as an obstacle for effective female students' engagement in school. Likewise, the key informant interviewed had the similar views as those of student respondents.

Table 8: Nature of obstacle informal institutions impose on female students (n=80)

Obstacle	Respondents percent
Loss of concentration in studies	65
Wastage of educational time while practicing the traditions	15
More funds allocated to traditional celebrations than education	10
Pushing girls to early marriage due to *kunema* practice	40
Teaching non academic issues (how to live with husband)	10

Note: summation of responses exceeds 100 percent because of multiple responses

However, during focus group discussion with a group of ten parents some participants had different view from others. These viewed education to girls as the wastage of money and family resources because according to them: once girls are educated they demand more power from their husbands and they like to control the family; educated girls have no respect to their husbands and are not obedient, therefore it is better to educate boys because these are more strong to handle the family and the life in all circumstances; it is not necessary for women to acquire formal education, informal education is much better for them, it benefits them a lot; traditional function held to mark girl's attainment to the puberty age (*kunema)* teaches girls how to live with a husband and makes them more competent in the society therefore informal institutions have no any negative impact.

Community's perception on rationale for education for girls

Parent participants of focus group discussion had an overall view that the community in the study area generally has negative attitude towards fully engagement of female students to education because it believes that educating girls is the wastage of resources as most girls end up with pregnancies before completing school. Also, the FGD participants uncovered, the community regards higher education to female as rendering them unmarried, and therefore hold that standard-seven education is enough for girls. As such, girls in the study area attend schools simply because parents fear the government laws; they are in this regard forced to send girls to school. As a solution to this negative attitude some FGD participants viewed the emergence of successful well educated female from their community could reversed such attitudes; the society could sense benefits of education to females.

It appeared generally that there was a little emphasis on educating girls from parents themselves. This finding is similar with that reported by Hari (2005) who observed poor school-going behaviour

of the girl-child as a reflection of the negative perception and attitude towards girls held by parents and community in general. According to Mushi (2002) among the important variables for the development of children educationally include parental attitude, interest and interactivity with what the child engages with as well as constant communication between a teacher and a parent. However, the key informants attributed school girls' poor schooling behavior to low educational awareness of the community. These perceived the lack of education of the community as resulting into the absence of successful/educated people who can raise awareness against negative attitude towards female students' engagement in education.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to determine the effects of informal institution on female students' engagement in education in ward secondary schools in Mlali ward Mvomero district. Traditional functions termed as *kunema* in the local Luguru language, marking the attainment of a girl to puberty age/stage, were one of the barriers uncovered in this study. Another constraint was lack of awareness on the importance of education to female children and therefore the hesitance of parents to pay school fees for girls holding that educating girls implies the wastage of resources, leads to disrespect of their husbands if married, and makes them not get married. Also, stereotype roles existed that reduced time of academic engagement for female students. The effects of the informal institutions to female students included early marriages, getting pregnancies while yet schooling, poor academic performance, promotion of prostitution, and increased school dropout. These affected school attendance and educational engagement of female students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational stakeholders including non-governmental organizations, public and private educational agencies, and other development agencies should direct more efforts in rural areas to raise the awareness of the communities about the implications of negative social cultural rules to the development of female children and on the importance of educating female children. The awareness programmes should holistically be directed to the parents and guardians, young girls and boys, and the community at large.

Also, teachers in the ward schools (usually closer to the community) should build a tendency of holding meetings with parents and guardians of students for the aim of building awareness on education of their children as well as reversing their attitude/perception toward negative cultural norms and practices which affect the engagement of female students to education. Experience has shown elsewhere that involvement of parents in school governance acted as a catalyst of improved students educational performance and enhanced school-community relations and ownership of decision making for the development of the school by the parents (Shatkin and Gershberg, 2007). On the other hand, teachers should guide and counsel students on the value of education in their lives. This will create incentives for female students to engage full in education and ultimately transform social and economic status in their communities.

Furthermore, educational stakeholders should mobilize resources for construction of boarding facilities for accommodating students in rural ward schools so that to enhance their engagement into education by reducing their contact with homestead environments and hence engagement in stereotype domestic chores and practices. On the other hand, parents should be provided with entrepreneurship skills to enable them improve their income and consequently stop viewing female children as a commodity for earning dowry price through early marriages at the expense of education. Through increased income and awareness raising on the importance of education to female children the parents will be able to participate fully in their daughters' education by paying school fees, and other school requirements, and ensuring deep engagement of female students into education.

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