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Gender and Education in Guinea: Increasing Accessibility and Maintaining Girls in School

By Rebecca Coleman¹

Abstract

In West Africa, girls' enrollment in primary and secondary schools has significantly increased since the 1980's; however, there is still a great disparity between male and female enrollment and participation. This paper will cover the lasting influences of the gap between male and female education accessibility in the country of Guinea. Issues such as teen marriage, gender based violence, funding, and infrastructure will be discussed. Alternatives to address these issues will be compared, focusing heavily on what the Guinean population can accomplish themselves, without generous help from the outside. Solutions to this problem include addressing the cultural bias against putting girls in school, eradicating gender based violence, bettering infrastructure deficiencies, and increasing female role models. This paper combines personal experience as well as empirical research to provide the solutions to this problem. Recommended solutions are: addressing the cultural bias against girls in school, eradicating gender based violence, improving infrastructure, and increasing the presence of female role models.

Keywords: Guinea, Education, School Girls

Introduction

The Guinean education system (heavily influenced by culture) is more accessible to boys than it is to girls. Solutions must be found to increase the accessibility of education to primary and secondary aged schoolgirls. For the sake of this study, the word accessibility will be used to measure the availability and ease of access to which girls have to education. Issues that impede the accessibility of education for girls include, culture, infrastructure, rule of law, and lack of female teachers.

The purpose of this paper is to address issues that inhibit the accessibility of primary and secondary education for girls in Guinea. Providing girls with an education is a catalyst in breaking the cycle of poverty nationwide. Guinea is one of the poorest countries in the world and is listed as one of the top 10 countries with the lowest literacy rates. The availability and quality of Guinean education leaves much to be desired. Girls are the ones who suffer the most from this educational dilemma. There is a huge gap between the retention of males in school and the retention of females. Equitable access to education is an important pillar to the advancement of a country. In 2012, the female completion rate for primary education was 61.5%. The secondary school participation net enrollment for males was 40.5% while for females it dropped to a disappointing 25.9% (UNdata, 2016). In the 1990 World Summit for Children, UNICEF came up with a plan of action to address basic education and literacy. The goal was to place a heavy focus on girls and women who made up two thirds of illiterate people at that time. While many efforts have been made to decrease the

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number of illiterate individuals in the world, there is still a lack of equality when it comes to the availability of education for women and girls.

In Guinea, in particular, while the majority of individuals recognize this as an issue, many view this issue as solely a gender problem. From personal conversations with Guineans, I understood that while the Guinean men recognize that girls are not receiving as good an education as boys, they are apathetic in promoting changes. Women who recognize this issue can only get so far without support from the government and the men in power. Studies, as exemplified in the report by Farzaneh Roudi-Fahemi and Valentine M. Moghadam (2003) in Northern Africa and the Middle East, show that when women are educated, society as a whole benefits in a positive way.

In addition, the benefits of female education for women's empowerment and gender equality are broadly recognized:

- As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves.
- Increases in girls' secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women's participation in the labor force and their contributions to household and national income.
- Women's increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition.
- Children—especially daughters—of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment (Roudi-Fahemi, Moghadam, 2003).

Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

The movement for equal education rights in Guinea is very young, dating back to the late 1980's after Sekou Toure's rule. During Toure's time in office, education was not available to everyone, and where it was available, it was conducted in the national dialects. French was taught in schools as a foreign language. When *The Structural Adjustment Program* was initiated in 1989, it sought to reform the Guinean economy. With the government changes, came educational reforms. It was during this time that the *Education for All* programs began. USAID and UNICEF have been very instrumental in supporting the Guinean government in providing better basic education for girls. In 2005 UNICEF ran the *Accelerated Girls Education Initiative* in Guinea and later on, the *African Girls Education Initiative* (AGEI). Through these initiatives UNICEF worked hand-in-hand with the Guinean government to increase the school enrollment and retention rate for girls in Guinea. In 2003, *Education For All* (EFA) was able to make significant increases in the country's general education rate for girls and it rose from 40% to 56%. AGEI also sought to increase the quality of education given to girls. USAID ran projects such as *Fundamental Quality and Equity Levels* from 1997 to 2005. The goals of these projects were to improve planning and instruction in the Guinean school system. According to the analysis of findings for this initiative, USAID determined that there was a fairly high level of effectiveness for the major projects involved. They saw improvement in teachers treating boys and girls equitably in the classroom and also saw an improvement in the education sector in general (USAID, 2016).

Through programs and initiatives such as EFA and AGEI, significant strides have been made to increase the availability and quality of education for girls. There remains, however, much improvement to be made. A study on gender discrimination and education in West Africa carried

out by Theresa Tuwor and Marie-Antoinette Soussou in 2008 shows that there still exists several constraints on girls' education such as cultural beliefs, religious misinterpretation, illiterate parents, and costs of uniforms and schoolbooks. In Sub-Saharan Africa, a common mentality among individuals is that the woman's place is at home. Deeply rooted values of girls' roles as brides, mothers, and household laborers greatly outweigh the value placed on educating them.

The Guinean constitution states that there can be no discrimination against anyone based on gender. However, traditionally, culture places women at a lesser value than men. As a result of traditional influences, girls are disproportionately disadvantaged, facing issues such as early marriage. According to data gathered by UNICEF between 2008-2012, the percentage of female teenagers that were married was 35.6% (Unicef, n.d.). These cultural issues create significant boundaries that cause most girls to either skip school, or drop out at a young age. Gender roles such as household chores, watching over younger siblings, and cooking all impede girls from staying in school (Tuwor, T., & Soussou, M., 2008).

Overall there is a great sense of apathy concerning the idea of girls' education. During a conversation with several elders of a Guinean village, I learned that it is commonly believed that if girls are educated, they will leave the home and lose their traditional values making it harder for them to marry and reproduce. Guinean families that live in rural areas and have less resources place a higher value on boys' education than on girls. If parents were presented with a choice of one child going to school and the other staying home, they would rule in favor of the boys. Not only are boys regarded by society as a "better investment," but also when they go to school they experience less challenges than girls do. Sexual harassment and even rape is a very large concern for parents when sending their children to school. (Tuwor, T., & Soussou, M., 2008).

Teachers often demand sexual favors for a passing grade, even if the grade has already been merited by the student's academic work. During my time as a volunteer English teacher in Guinea, I learned of the following story. Maria*² was the older sister of a student of mine, I was able to speak with both students and teachers who knew her and I compiled the facts of the story.

Maria and Sexual Violence in Guinean Schools

Maria was a fifth grader at her private Guinean school. She was 14 years of age; she had been held back several times and was still struggling to maintain a passing grade in her class. Her teacher, Mr. H* was male and seemed highly qualified and caring. However, soon, complaints from other students began to be brought to the school administration. Students complained that Maria was getting better treatment from Mr. H. The administration investigated the issue and found out that Mr. H was using his position of authority to demand sexual favors from Maria in turn for better grades.

From later conversations with Maria it was gathered that she felt that Mr. H had given her the best option to improve her grades. She was too scared to ask for academic help from other teachers, as she explained how girls were often verbally abused and demeaned by teachers if they didn't understand the "easy" concepts.

The school administration fired Mr. H but there were no legal ramifications for what he had done and he was soon hired at another school.

Economic issues also affect girls' education in Guinea. Factors such as low resources, few teachers and job availability for college graduates are additional reasons that both boys and girls do not finish their education (The Africa-America Institute, 2015).

² Persons have been given a pseudonym to protect identity

Policy Recommendations for the Guinean Government

To take steps towards solving this problem, Guinea needs to analyze a number of alternatives including: addressing cultural biases towards girls and education; eradicating GBV (Gender Based Violence) in schools; improve several infrastructure issues, mainly, proper bathrooms, and increasing the number of female teachers in classrooms.

Address the Cultural Bias

As mentioned in the introductory portion, culture norms influence parents to keep their female children home from school. From personal experience, I have seen Guinean parents choose to keep their girls at home to take care of younger siblings. It is also common for girls to sell produce in the local market to help support the family. Girls will sometimes start out in school at the beginning of the year, but then drop out due to a mother giving birth, or the harvest.

i. Partner with Local Leaders to Advocate for Girls Education.

This solution goes with the community based-approach of development. This approach is one of partnership with the local people in all stages of the project (A Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations). This gives credibility to the issue of change in the community and also keeps the local community involved in the change. The Guinean public, as a whole, needs to recognize this issue and take steps towards changing their mentality towards educating their girls. Guineans place a high value on religion and authority. The government must choose individuals who currently understand the importance of education to communicate the need to groups with people of importance in the communities. Imams and other religious leaders must hold meetings and campaigns, stressing the importance of educating girls. When parents see that respected people in authority support girls going to school, they will be more inclined to let their girls go to school. In Senegal, *10,000 Girls* was started by a group of local girls who wanted better education. What started as a tutoring service turned into a non-profit organization with the goal of maintaining girls in school. This organization has several different programs including education and entrepreneurship. Organizations like these are crucial to maintaining girls in school.

ii. Strengthen Policies that Allow and Encourage Young Wed Mothers to Continue their Education.

There should be policies set in place to protect the young wed-mothers' education. For example, a policy put in place that makes completion of 8th grade mandatory. This would ensure that girls who are married at a young age would receive a basic knowledge of reading, writing, and mathematics.

iii. Take Measures Against Child Marriage and Labor.

Through policy change and legislative measures, the government must decrease the prevalence of child marriage and increase importance on child education. This can be done through establishing child protection laws. As of now, there are no parameters in place for how young one can marry. The Guinean government must recognize the importance of protecting young girls and allowing them to complete their education unhampered.

iv. Educate the Populace on the Importance of Girls Education

In the world of development, there is an initiative commonly referred to as the *Information, Education and Communication (IEC)*. This happens when a country takes to posters, flyers, and the media to educate the populace on a particular issue. Many health organizations use this method often in educating the public on specific health issues (Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Programmes, 119). Through the media (Television and radio programs), the government can educate the general public and create a new mentality towards the importance of girls' education. An example of this is the short film, *Binta y la Gran Idea* (2004) (*Binta and the Great Idea*), a Spanish-Senegalese co-production directed by Jvier Fesser. It took the very relevant issues on girls' education and made it relatable to the local culture. It was successful in portraying the very real problem that many girls in West Africa face today.

Establishing similar community based programs in Guinea would be greatly beneficial to girls and the way in which their education is viewed by their families and guardians. When parents and guardians understand the importance of educating girls, it would be safe to assume that they themselves would begin enforcing the enrollment of girls in school.

Gender Based Violence

In reference to the statistics shown in the introduction, it can be seen that Gender Based Violence (GBV) is a serious issue faced by many girls in the Guinean school systems. There is little to no data to show what the government has or has not done to eradicate GBV in schools.

i. Government should Put Policies in Place to Ensure Repercussion for GBV Perpetrators.

In no form should GBV be accepted in schools. The government must work with local school districts and all those who are involved in child education of any sort to ensure that if a case of GBV is reported, that it is dealt with swiftly and accordingly. Article 8 of the constitution states that all are equal in the sight of the law and that men and women have the same rights. Not one gender should be held at an advantage or disadvantage over another. (Guinea Constitution, 2010). Guinea must uphold the laws in their constitution and hold its citizens accountable to them. The policy should include:

- Repercussions for teachers who sexually abuse students
- A no tolerance stance from the government
- A way of recording and accounting for teachers who are found to be guilty of GBV
- Teachers who are fired from schools for GBV should not be allowed to be rehired at other institutions

ii. Install Mandatory Training Courses for all Teachers on the Issues of GBV

The Ministry of Education should draw up proposals for a short course that teachers must complete before being allowed in a classroom. Proof of completion should be mandatory. According to the Relief Web Gender-based Violence training course, several assets should be included; understanding gender analysis, the universal declaration of human rights, addressing GBV practices, and gender mainstreaming (2016).

iii. Draw up a Code of Conduct

All schools must have mandatory codes of conduct that teachers should sign upon hiring. This code of conduct should list the many kinds of GBV for the common understanding of both administration and teachers.

iv. Inform Teachers and Students on the Different Facets of GBV

Along with mandatory courses, schools should be encouraged to offer courses that counsel teachers on creating and maintaining a safe emotional environment for their students. An environment of safety and acceptance must be fostered in schools to promote change.

v. Allow parents, guardians and victims a voice and platform for activism against GBV

Encourage communication between parents, teachers and government representatives on these issues. Show the public that the government is willing and caring about the eradication of GBV in schools. Management, teachers, students, and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), must be encouraged to work together to create a safe school environment. GBV must be categorically unaccepted in all schools at all levels. In order to monitor this, the government would have to put polices in place to protect those who advocate against GBV. To refer back to the community based approach, someone of influence in the community should be the one to make the first move to speak out against GBV, the rest will follow.

Infrastructure, Toilets

According to the *United Nations Children's Fund* an estimated one in 10 school age girls in Africa skip school during menstruation or drop out because of lack of lavatory sanitation. Enrollment rates for girls in Guinea increased 17 percent between 1997 and 2002 after improvement in school sanitation (Lafraniere 2005). However, there are still many improvements that need to be made. Through an informal study that I conducted in the town of Fria in 2013, I gathered information on the problem of toilets. Out of the 89 schools in Fria only 3 of them had separate toilets for boys and girls. Only 20 of them had toilets that were completely enclosed (without sagging doors/broken windows etc.) Girls must deal with circumstances such as menstrual cycles and the fear of GBV. Fixing this particular infrastructure issue would show great strides towards making education more accessible to girls. A seminar lead by health professionals should be taught in each school at the beginning of each school year stressing the importance of hygiene. A high importance should be placed on proper toilets and feminine hygiene.

i. Create and Maintain Policy to Ensure that Every School has Enclosed Toilets

The government should review funding for schools and create a budget specifically for the construction of enclosed bathrooms for each public school. Private schools must be given a deadline in which they will be required to produce proper bathrooms.

ii. Investing in a Program to Renovate Existing Bathrooms in Schools

The government must put forth effort into getting funding to ensure that public schools that already have toilets will be renovated to proper standards; separate urinals for boys, completely enclosed structures, locks on each stall door.

iii. Ensure that Bathrooms are Gender Separate

There must be proper signage on bathroom walls/doors indicating which gender the bathroom is for. This will decrease the risk of GBV and rape in schools and will also allow for girls to feel comfortable when using bathrooms.

iv. Construct Policy that Every School must Hire Caretaker Specifically for the Maintenance of Bathrooms

The ministry of education must create a section of its department that specifically handles school bathrooms. One of this department's duties will be to ensure that every school has a caretaker that cleans the toilets daily.

v. Department of Health Schedules Unannounced Inspections of Toilets Quarterly

The Ministry of Education and the Department of Health should work hand in hand to ensure that the toilets of the schools are being properly maintained.

vi. Fines

Schools that do not have proper toilets at the end of the grace period would be fined by their local government. This means that each town, city and village must have parameters set up that will allow for the inspection of schools at said period of time and a plan for enforcing the fines.

Increase Female Role Models

A conscious effort must be made to increase the number of female teachers in Guinean classrooms. The government should set and work towards specific quota targets for women teachers hired. The reason for this is that the Guinean girls need to see that there are women in positions of leadership. This will foster their motivation to stay in school by seeing women take on non-traditional roles of leadership. Because female teachers are rarely the perpetrators of GBV, this will also help to reduce sexual harassment in the classroom. Where there are low numbers of trained teachers, females may still be integrated into the classroom setting by being assistants (Dee, 2006).

Pertinent to the hiring and retaining of female teachers is increasing the quality of working conditions for teachers. There should be no discrimination based on gender during the hiring process and pay and benefits should not depend on gender. When this is done, female teachers will feel more encouraged to work. Just as gender biases affect girls in the classroom, they affect women in the work force. A change must start from the top down in order to address the issue.

In order to obtain more female teachers, there must be incentive programs/scholarships to encourage young females to become teachers. This could include scholarships for girls who choose to become teachers. Food aid (if women are married) and even childcare would be a meaningful statement in putting an importance on female teachers.

Gender sensitivity training for teachers must also be provided. While the increase of female teachers will potentially help girls feel more comfortable in the classroom there is a possibility that female teachers are liable to perpetuate the same discriminatory behavior as their male counterparts (Dee, 2006).

There is evidence that shows a correlation between the number of female students and female teachers. In Guinea, less than 50% of primary school teachers and 30% of secondary school

teachers are female. In 2013, the total number of primary school girls out of school was 61% (Unesco, 2016). Female teachers can make classrooms feel safer and inviting. With the increase of positive female role models in the role of teachers, girls will be more empowered and motivated to continue in school. In order to get more female teachers, girls need to finish school. The female teachers that are currently teaching in primary and secondary schools should be acting as advocates; not only for girls retention but for more female teachers in the school system (Sida, 2015).

Recommendations

Formal evaluations of the issues discussed above should be carried out locally before any action is taken in addressing the issue of improving accessibility to education for girls. This issue is deeply rooted in cultural bias. Based on this policy analysis, it is recommended that the Guinean government take a multi-faceted approach to the accessibility of girl's education. Due to the complexity of the issues, it would be imprudent for any one alternative to be the only course of action in improving the situation. An "all-hands-on-deck" approach should be employed. This issue involves several factors; community, government, religion and infrastructure.

Cultural Recommendations

The starting point for addressing these issues should be at a community level. Even though policies and practices are made on a government level, if the mentalities of parents and guardians are still one of bias against girls' education, a top-down approach will not bring sustainable change. A high focus should be placed on initiatives that open a dialogue between education providers and guardians. Both the state and local governments should start campaigns that promote girls' education. Communities need to be inundated with information on the benefits of educating girls. While all the recommendations listed in the research work hand in hand, cultural bias against girls' education is arguably the most important. Getting the community involved has been seen to work in some areas of Guinea. Changes are being pushed for in the community and by the community. In 2013, *Comités des Mères des Elèves Filles* or (COMEF) was started with the help of UNICEF and staff from the *Ministry of Pre-university and Civic Education*.

There are those who recognize that a change needs to be made and steps are being taken to bring change, yet the change will be more affective if the approach is interdisciplinary. It is recommended that policy makers encourage and foster intentional dialogue with communities. Representatives from each region must come and meet with the Ministry of Education in Conakry (the capital city) and draw up a plan of action to address the specific cultural issues that keep girls out of school. One of the largest cultural issues that keeps girls out of school is child marriage. According to data gathered by UNICEF, between 2002- 2012, 63.1 % of girls were married by the age of 18 and 19% were married by the age of 15. The ministry of education needs to create a complete plan of action for maintaining these married girls in school. As with other approaches, this plan will not succeed without the support of fathers, and husbands. This approach cannot be one sided though it is recommended that it starts from the government. Once again, communication and education is key. A public awareness campaign that focuses on the husbands of married teenagers should be started. Leaders in the community such as the Imam, Chef d'état, Chef du Quartier, Pastor, and Priest, must all work together to make this a priority. Advancement for girls is inversely advancement for Guinea.

Addressing Gender Based Violence

GBV is tied to cultural issues, but for the sake of detailed recommendations, it will be dealt with separately. A very high focus must be placed on finding administration to implement policy changes and hold local schools accountable. *The Council of Europe* has defined GBV to be any of the following; physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm or suffering towards women. This also includes threats of said acts, coercion in public or private life (EIGE Europa, 2016). Using the afore-mentioned definition of GBV as a guideline when drawing up the code of conduct, special effort must be placed into outlining every aspect of GBV:

- a) Verbal abuse and discrimination
- b) Yelling and humiliating girls in front of classmates
- c) Sexual abuse
- d) Intimidating female students

It is recommended that the Guinean government work with humanitarian organization such as UNICEF to outline policies that will protect girls in school. Working with an NGO will help to hold the Guinean government accountable to the change that needs to be made. Many of these reforms should be implemented simultaneously. As the government dialogs with communities about the importance of girls' education, it must add credibility to their words by changing policies to protect them.

Infrastructure Issues

While a heavy focus needs to be placed on addressing cultural issues and biases that create barriers to girls' education, the other aspects lending to this issues cannot be ignored. Several steps go into solving this issue:

1. Allocate a board to create policy that mandates toilets in every school
2. Procure funding for building and preparing school bathrooms
3. Partner with an NGO to ensure accountability from both local government and schools

While the issues of funding was not discussed in this research an educated guess would assume that the government would not readily have the funds to build toilets in every school. International organizations are an option of alternate sources of funding.

Female Role Models

A high priority should be placed on making sure that there are more female teachers in the workplace. An environment of welcoming should be fostered at the local level. Funding for scholarships should be provided for girls who wish to go on to college to become teachers. This can be done by either seeking out partnership with an NGO, or by allocating local government funds towards scholarships towards females. This would require only a minor change in current educational policy as Guinea already provides a variety of scholarships to university students.

Conclusion

Guinea is not the only country in Africa that suffers from lacking educational systems. Cameroon, Botswana, Swaziland, and Gabon are just a few of the African countries with deplorable literacy rates. In recent years Africa's economy has been largely dependent on the exportation of raw materials. Growing economies require increased international trade and education is the key. Economic growth and education are inexcusably linked (Watkins, 2013).

In Guinea, the juxtaposition of culture and tradition, and the rapidly developing world is leaving girls somewhere in the middle. The approach to accessibility for girls' education should be cyclical, not linear. Instead of addressing one issue at a time, a multifaceted approach will provide accountability and will help to improve sustainability. Studies show that a country's economy is greatly dependent on the education of the woman that inhabits it (Roudi-Fahimi, n.d.).

Using a multi-faceted approach, the Guinean school system will be able to be more receiving of girls. Not only will girls be just as likely to enroll in school, but also there will be a substantial increase of girls completing both primary and secondary schooling. The goal is to give girls the opportunity that should be offered to everyone regardless of gender. Girls deserve to be offered the opportunity to an education that provides them a brighter future.

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