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Gendered Experiences of Teaching in Poor Rural Areas of Ghana

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Abstract

The low presence of female teachers serving in schools in deprived rural areas is one of the main constraints militating against girls' access and achievement in basic education in Ghana. Studies suggest that low self-esteem among girls is a key factor preventing them from attaining higher levels of education, which can be enhanced through more gender sensitive teaching methods, and the presence of female teachers as role models. This paper investigates the reasons why the majority of Ghanaian teachers avoid –if they can - postings to rural deprived areas and why girls, in particular, are not entering the teaching profession. The study adopts a predominantly qualitative approach, exploring the perceptions of primary stakeholders involved in basic education, including female teachers living in deprived rural areas, girls at upper primary and secondary levels of education and community members. Districts with the lowest percentage of female teachers were selected for the study – where, also, the lowest percentage of girls enter and remain in the basic school system. The paper suggests reasons why Ghanaian girls continue to miss the opportunity to be taught by female role models and why they do not opt to become teachers themselves.

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1. Introduction

International agencies and governments agree that in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals in sub-Saharan Africa over the next decade requires strategies that remove the barriers to educational attainment (UNESCO, 2003). A number of strategies have been identified, particularly in relation to improving the enrolment, retention and attainment of girls. For example, the low presence of female teachers serving in disadvantaged rural communities has been identified as one of the main constraints militating against girls' access and completion of basic education (Sutherland-Addy, 2002; Casely-Hayford, 2000; Brock & Cammish, 1997a). One of the most effective approaches for improving female educational attainment therefore is to use female teachers as role models for girls (Rugh, 2000; King & Hill, 1993). Studies also suggest that low self-esteem among girls is a key factor preventing them from attaining higher levels of education and that gender sensitive teaching methods can improve girls' retention rates in school (Casely-Hayford, 2002b; WUSC, 2000). Further, research by the Foundation for African Women Educationalists (FAWE, 1999) suggests that girls are more likely to stay in school particularly if the school deals with reproductive health issues and if girls are able to talk to a woman in authority.

This paper reports on the findings of the Ghana Female Teacher Study¹ (Casely-Hayford with Wilson, 2001), which investigated the needs of female teachers in six remote rural areas in northern, southern and middle Ghana. Within each of these zones, the two districts were selected² that had the lowest percentages of female pupil enrolment rates in the country and the lowest proportion of female teachers working at basic education level.³ Female teachers constituted 14.3 per cent of Juabeso Bia and 15.5 per cent in Wassa Amenfi in the southern belt; 13.1 per cent in Kintampo and 10.6 per cent in Sene (10.6 per cent) in the middle belt; and 7.8 per cent in Tolon Kumbongo and 14.3 per cent in East Gonja in the northern belt of the country. The project explored the experiences of female teachers, the reasons why very few female teachers accept postings to these areas and why girls are not entering the teaching profession.

The first section of the paper briefly describes the qualitative research methodology that was used to capture the reasons why women came to be rural teachers in such poor communities, the difficulties they experienced in integrating into the community and in balancing personal and professional lives. The final section of the paper considers the ways in which secondary school girls in the community perceive female teachers' status and their likelihood of entering the teaching profession.

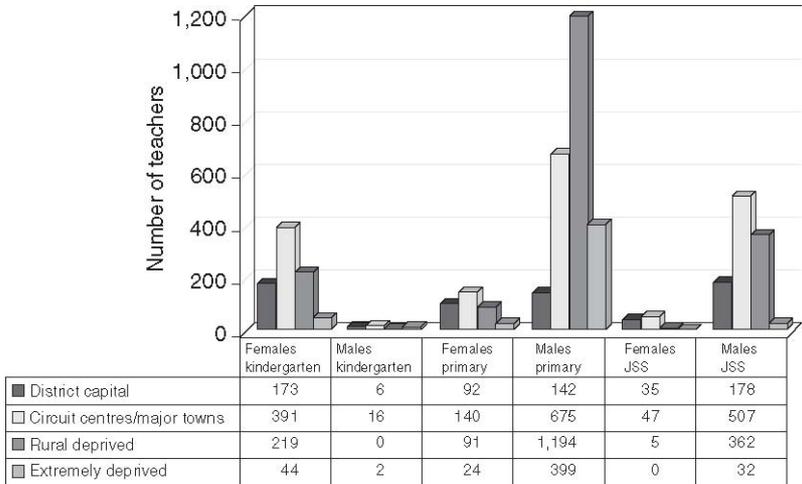
2. Experiencing the lives of female teachers

The study was carried out by Sarah Wilson and myself in 2000 and was financed by Ghana's Ministry of Education in order to review key policies that could increase female enrolment into teacher training colleges and increase their deployment to rural areas. After extensive interviews at the national level with Ministry of Education officials and other key stakeholders we decided to employ an ethnographic approach by living with the female teachers in the rural areas we studied. We focused on the lives, aspirations and experiences of 22 female teachers serving in 20 poor rural communities in the six sampled districts across Ghana (Table 1). Interviews were also held with male colleagues serving in the same schools and other female teachers in more prosperous areas that were nearer to the district capitals and education circuit centres. The data collected from these interviews allowed for triangulation, a comparison of the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in diverse contexts. Informal interviews were also conducted with girls in their final year at senior secondary school (SSS) concerning their career interests, choices and attitudes toward the teaching profession. This gave the research team important insights into the reasons why rural Ghanaian girls do not see female teachers as role models and become teachers themselves.

The research team lived in the communities in which the teachers worked, engaging in their daily lives at the school and within the community setting. The aim of taking a more ethnographic approach was to reach a deeper understanding of the challenges female teachers faced. However, this strategy demanded considerable endurance since we needed to adapt to the living conditions in remote rural areas, which often lacked clean water, access to food and clean accommodation. The research strategy brought us face to face with some of the same problems female teachers faced such as poor roads and inaccessibility, lack of clean accommodation, a lack of food and potable water, as well as personal insecurity, malaria and poor medical care.⁴ Our experience of living for only a short time in these remote areas exposed us personally to some of the main reasons why long-term postings in remote rural schools are avoided by most women.

Another effective research technique was the use of in-depth interviews, which we conducted with each female teacher. Using a life history approach we were able to capture the main events leading up to their posting and changes to their lives after moving to a remote area. This approach also allowed the team to build rapport, trust and shared understanding of the steps leading up to the decision and the life changes that followed in accepting to live and serve in a deprived rural area. It meant that we could share experiences in our own lives with those of the teachers in the study and build a sense of commonality.

Table 1: Teacher participation by kindergarten, primary and junior secondary school levels across the six study districts



The Ghana Female Teacher Study indicated that the majority of teachers living in these rural areas were male with only a few female teachers who were often found teaching in circuit centres and at the kindergarten level.

In-depth interviews also suggested that there were two types of female teacher serving in the rural areas: the *long serving female teacher* who was often ‘untrained’ and had married into the community; and, second, the *newly trained young female teacher* who was serving a two-year term and did not want any close association with the rural area she was serving. The individual interviews and female teacher profiling activity revealed that there were often no professionally trained female teachers who were married and in the childbearing phase working in these areas. Some of the different experiences of these two groups of teachers are described below.

3. Becoming a rural teacher: the gender dimensions

The majority of female teachers we spoke to were encouraged by family members to become teachers. Some women had taken up teaching as untrained pupil teachers and discovered their interest in teaching before entering training college. Others had been assisted and encouraged by a religious leader to enter the teaching profession. Some of the diverse motivations for joining the teacher profession are indicated in the following responses:

- I applied to work as a pupil teacher and realized I enjoyed the work.
- I was encouraged by a family relation.
- A minister or religious leader encouraged me.
- My husband was a teacher and I admired him.
- My mother was a teacher and I admired her.

I started as a Kindergarten teacher and worked without pay for sometime before being hired as a pupil teacher.

Self motivated and had the required results.

I liked children.

I saw no other female professions beside teaching.

I wanted to be a secretary but developed an interest after teacher training college.

(Casely-Hayford with Wilson, 2001)

The reasons why female teachers found themselves in very poor rural areas were equally diverse and often contradictory. The untrained teachers, for example, appeared to have had little choice about where they were posted since they were often recruited primarily for the purpose of serving in a rural area. Those who were trained were posted by District Education Officers. Our interviews suggested that these officers took account of the marital status and location of the husband of newly trained teachers as well as their background (e.g. training college, ethnicity, parent's socio-economic status) when choosing a posting for them. They also took account of the distance of the school from the district capital and accessibility to town centres (e.g. along a main road and near a 'junction') and whether the community had a reasonable level of social services. The study also indicated that in order not to 'scare them' (newly trained female teachers) away from teaching, careful consideration was also made of the newly trained teachers' ability 'to cope with difficult circumstances'. One senior education officer in Sene district stated that 'if you are posted outside the district, you are dead'.

Most District Education Officers took it upon themselves to 'protect' the newly trained female teachers from some of the communities being posted to remote rural areas. East Gonja District Senior Education Officers stated that they looked upon female teachers as 'their own daughters' and therefore did not post women to areas where they would be 'handicapped or fall victim to local chiefs or rich farmers who wanted to take them as their second wife'. The image they presented was that women were seen as having such a 'weak moral character' that they were likely to feel lonely and therefore become vulnerable to 'an unwanted marriage' with such local men. There was also the danger that they might marry local men from a lower socio-economic category. This was seen as a severe handicap for a young woman who had just completed tertiary education since it meant she would fall back into village life – getting married to a 'local man could detract from her hard earned status'. Although none of the newly trained rural female teachers we interviewed were married, most of them aspired to find a partner in the near future. Several long serving female teachers had married 'local men' during their initial years of teaching, most marrying farmers, cocoa purchasing clerks or local sub-chiefs. These female teachers were spoken of as 'being no different from the locals' – an image that contributed to their low respect from parents, and female students in their communities (see below).

However our research also suggested that if married rural female teachers were to follow social conventions of the day, then there was a danger that they would follow their husbands and eventually move away from the area. As one Girls' Education Officer in the Northern Region told us:

One of our major problems up here in the North is our female teachers follow their husbands; if the husband is posted to the village, the female will go – if he is not, she will not go. It is our culture that the woman should be near the man.

Some Manpower Officers and District Directors of Education were therefore keenly aware that they might start an exodus of newly trained female teachers out of the district and possibly the teaching profession by forcing them to teach in a rural area against their will. As one District Education Director explained: 'There is an unofficial policy to place female teachers to the towns in order to facilitate marriage. We want them to get proper husbands or their whole future is at stake' (October 2000).

Given these views, all six-study districts adopted an unofficial policy of posting newly trained female teachers mainly into towns. The long serving female teachers already residing in towns and travelling to the rural schools each day were happy to remain living in the urban setting. One long serving female teacher residing in a poor rural community remarked that if 'the government lets me be like the town lady teachers, I will stay'. Most of the sample of rural female teachers we interviewed were interested in taking up postings in more urbanised areas. They perceived their town counterparts as living a much easier life and having access to a number of benefits that were not available in rural areas such as: credit, markets, better social services and access to income generating activities, electricity and potable water.

Several interviews with newly trained female teachers confirmed that they did not feel they had the strength or willingness to serve in rural areas for an unlimited time – they set their own personal limits on how long they would remain before seeking a transfer or leaving the profession all together. Interviews with staff at the Manpower Division in the headquarters of the Ghana Education Service confirmed that very few women were willing to serve in the Western Region and Northern Regions of Ghana and most women often drifted 'back to headquarters saying that it was too difficult (Field notes, Female Teacher Study)'. The following vignettes highlight the experiences of two newly trained female teachers who had to cope with difficult aspects of their posting.⁵

Abena was a newly trained female teacher and sat cooking her stew while we interviewed her. She explained how difficult it had been to bring her personal items to the district. She was a 'Ga' from Labone (Accra) and trained at Foso (Central Region). She and another friend had been posted to the Western Region since they thought it would be 'an experience'. She arrived after eight hours of uncomfortable travel from Accra, which cost approximately 80,000 cedis in order to reach the district capital. Her colleague Kate was posted about seven miles away from the district capital – Assankragua

– but did not last one week before she asked for a transfer. Kate decided to leave and find another posting in another town (Winneba) closer to her home (Volta Region). Abena was left behind to endure in this remote district. Abena's only regret was there was no computer school in the district capital since she wanted to learn how to operate a computer and further her studies. One other male colleague from the same training college was also posted to the same town and was helping her adjust to life in the District Capital. She talked about her inability to find accommodation and the inconvenience of having to live with the education officers before securing accommodation.

Esther was another newly trained teacher posted to the Western Region. She explained that she was from Kete Krachi in the Volta Region but she attended Holy Child Training College in Takoradi. She was posted to a very deprived rural area by the religious unit. The research team visited one Friday and found her teaching alone at a school with over 100 pupils while her male colleagues had all found reasons not to attend school, such as poor health and the need to go to town to collect their salary. Esther was inspired to serve in a rural area partly as a result of her religious conviction – she hoped that she could make a difference to people's lives in the area. Her brother had accompanied her on her first visit to the community (Pisasso) when she spoke to the Chief and the community members. They were very happy to have a female teacher especially one heading up the school. They promised to do everything possible to make her stay comfortable. She was given a bungalow and the community supplied her with foodstuffs until she was settled. But the community itself had a severe water problem (onchocerciasis) and she was not taking precautions by boiling the water.

Esther was happy serving the community, and helped organise the people in order to improve the school structure and facilities; one of the JSS girls told her that she would go into teaching after completing the SSS. She was facing some difficulties with the male teachers at this school since she was the Head and much younger than the other three men who were all untrained teachers. In Abena's case, there was a distinct sense that she had tried to adjust to living in a remote area with her friend but eventually found herself 'left behind' in what was a particularly difficult setting. Esther's case in contrast suggested that she had strongly engaged in community life and had discovered a 'mission'. Out of the sample of female teachers whom we interviewed, she and one other female teacher in East Gonja were the only teachers who had a strong service ethic. Esther was not thinking of her own comfort in taking up the post but was more concerned about what it meant to offer a service to the community, what impact a newly trained teacher could make on a community and what leadership, community relations and organisational skills were needed to mobilise the community and assist the school. She was also concerned about the girls in the village and attempted to act as a good role model for them.

4. Adjusting to community life in a remote rural area

If you feel proud you will face problems but if you get into a community and are friendly you will have no problem with them. For example, the previous teacher

had to leave due to a poor relationship with the community.

(Female teacher in rural Ghana, field notes)

The Ghana Female Teacher Study found that the most important quality of a newly trained female teacher was her ability to develop good community–school relations. These were essential for both male and female teachers so that they were able to function in a comfortable and effective manner. Without a good relationship with the community, some of the female teachers who had been serving for over ten years in the same district were unable to get help to undertake a simple construction and repair job for their school, despite numerous attempts. This sometimes resulted in bad feeling between the teacher and the community and led to teacher absenteeism until the school building was repaired.

Several newly trained female teachers we interviewed were not well adjusted to their new communities. They spoke of loneliness and did not see themselves as potential change agents or role models. They were also very sure that they would have to leave the community within a short period. Two years appeared to be the longest time they could consider committing themselves to living in a particular community. Most spoke of their plans to pursue higher education at the University of Winneba or Cape Coast. Unlike the newly trained female teachers who were often from urban centres outside the district in which they were teaching, most of the long serving female teachers were from rural areas themselves and had family living in nearby communities. This made their adaptation to the community in which they were teaching much easier

The problems experienced by female teachers living in rural areas were compounded by their low socio-economic status in the community. Untrained female teachers received 160,000 to 180,000 cedis net salary (approximately 45 US dollars per month) and, in some cases, were found to use teaching as a supplementary source of income to their primary activity of hairdressing and/or trading. In contrast, trained female teachers received a salary of between 270,000 and 320,000 cedis depending on the female teacher's rank. Not surprisingly, longer serving teachers reported that they could not survive on the salary provided by the Ghana Education Service (GES). All teachers interviewed in the study complained that their salary was low in comparison to women working in the health sector and those working in other occupations who were serving in rural areas and receiving extra allowances, accommodation and other benefits. They also worried that as much as 5–10 per cent of their salary had to be used to travel to the district capital to collect their salary at the end of each month. These monthly trips also took them away from their school duties since they had to travel during the week when banks were open.

Most of the female teachers interviewed were also involved in activities to supplement their teaching salary with farm and off-farm work. Urban-based female teachers had a great advantage compared with their rural counterparts in being able to earn extra income. In some cases, however, such supplementary income-generating activities contributed to the low status of the teacher in the community. District education officers gave examples of how female teachers were found carrying out

degrading tasks such as selling ice water in the evening at the local lorry station. Rural-based female teachers spoke of their inability to engage in these petty trading activities (such as selling of ice water and ready-made food) compared to their urban counterparts.

Rural-based female teachers also compared themselves to their urban counterparts who had been able to build their own homes, purchase bicycles, clothing and purchase televisions and other consumer items on credit. Rural-based teachers were also at a great disadvantage since they did not have access to credit or a large market to sell items. No one in the rural area was willing to give building materials on credit and therefore they found it difficult to build and maintain their homes. Most of the rural female teachers interviewed were engaged in farming activities for both consumption and market purposes. There were also reports that their children would assist them with farm activities during the school hours. One community, in the Western Region had agreed that instead of the community providing food stuffs for the teachers – the children could farm for the teachers on Fridays. The school used the children on a rotational basis and farming activities became a main source of income, which supplemented the teachers' salary and food supply.

5. Teachers' personal and professional lives

The interconnections between female teachers' professional and personal lives took many forms and were clearly gendered. The main factors highlighted during the literature review and pre-fieldwork interviews of the Ghana Female Teacher Study point to the socio-cultural factors and family/home constraints facing women in the teaching profession (Casely-Hayford with Wilson, 2001). Female teachers in Ghana were found to make a range of adjustments in order to meet the demands of their professional life while maintaining their family and home life. Several changes in a female teachers' working life such as marriage, childbearing and child rearing roles have a tremendous impact on their professional performance and ability to cope. Studies in Ghana point to the complex and multiple roles Ghanaian women balance, managing their home and working lives (Nikoi, 1998; Ardayio-Schandorf, 1994; Opong & Abu, 1987).

Their responsibilities as mothers and wives played a major part in the difficulties rural women teachers faced. For example, one of the most important dilemmas they identified working in rural areas was the problem of how to educate their own children, particularly given the quality of the local schooling. Female teachers who were posted to rural areas made it clear that they would not live in remote areas over extended periods because of the poor quality of education available to their children. In some districts, this meant that they would only accept postings to schools near a major town or circuit centre where they could access private schooling. Only two out of 18 female teachers (with children) had their own children attending the school they were posted to (Nyankontre and Bissaso). Both these schools had a large teaching force and were considered to be better developed since they provided both primary and JSS education. The other communities had only 'village schools' often

with only three classrooms and one teacher. The majority of female teachers put their children in private schools outside the community in which they taught (Ningoor, Nketrakura). Both trained and untrained teachers spoke of being unable to support their children beyond the JSS level because of their limited income from teaching.

Female teachers in several rural communities (particularly in East Gonja districts of Bankamba and Kojobonikope) also indicated that, because they were unable to supplement their salary with other income generating activities, they were unable to support their children at senior secondary or tertiary level institutions. These women were often solely responsible for the payment of the child's education since their husbands were farmers and solely responsible for providing food for the family. Other studies in Ghana reflect this trend (Casely-Hayford, 2000).

Another gendered issue was whether female rural teachers had any opportunity to develop their careers. The majority of female teachers we interviewed in the study districts did not have any way of upgrading their professional knowledge. We found that many untrained female teachers serving in rural areas did not purchase newspapers or books, nor receive any regular in-service or special training or incentives from GES programmes since these were only open to 'trained teachers'. This left untrained 'pupil' teachers at a severe disadvantage – many of them worrying about their job security and happy to maintain a low profile in the teaching service. Interviews with both District Education Officers and other teachers revealed some of the problems of retraining and upgrading female teachers already in the system. Education officers spoke of long serving female teachers as 'untrainable' since many had lost their basic literacy skills and most were seen as alienated from the teaching profession and more likely to see themselves not as teachers but caregivers to children.

Male teachers' perceptions of female teachers were particularly discouraging. Negative male perceptions of female teachers have been highlighted in several studies. Male teachers are reported to believe that female teachers do not spend as much time in the classroom and do not prepare for classroom teaching in the same way they do because of their domestic responsibilities and reproductive role in the family.

Female teachers are accused of being lazy, bringing their babies into the school when they are still nursing and often of being late (Avotri *et al.*, 1999). They are also seen as engaged in 'unhelpful conversation during school hours' (GES/DAE, 1995). Male teachers were recorded as having the following views:

men are more resourceful, they quarrel less, are more helpful, are more energetic, have more leadership qualities, are smarter; women have mood swings, they are gossips, are bossy, cause confusion because male teachers may express an interest in them.

(GES/DAE 1995: 30)

Both men and women thought that women were absent from work more than men because of childcare responsibilities and health problems caused by childbearing and lactation (GES/DAE, 1995).

Despite this, women are believed by community members to make better teachers, particularly at the kindergarten and primary levels, since they are thought to be more patient, more sensitive, less strict and more trustworthy particularly concerning financial matters. At the same time, community members felt that women did not make good school inspectors.

6. The effects of the ‘poor supply’ of female teachers on girls’ education

The Ghana Female Teacher Study uncovered a crisis with respect to rural education in Ghana, particularly in light of the poor supply of trained female teachers and the lack of interest of female teachers to serve in rural communities. The study further confirmed findings from previous studies revealing that a cycle of deprivation prevents most rural communities in Ghana from using their basic education system as a means to human development (Casely-Hayford, 2000). Here there is a vicious circle that links the lack of female teachers with girls’ low educational performance, underachievement and deepening poverty at the community level.

The problem of female teacher supply is directly related to a number of factors. First, the entrance and retention of female candidates at the teacher training institutions may be very low, not least because of the poor performance of female students at basic and secondary levels of education. Most of the 20 communities involved in the Ghana Female Teacher Study experienced very low levels of enrolment and high dropout rates among girls, particularly at upper primary and JSS level. Interviews with parents and head teachers revealed a lack of parental interest in education particularly related to the aspirations of female pupils despite intensive campaigns around girls’ education. Most parents were frustrated with the poor performance of teachers in their schools (especially compared with the town schools). They lacked evidence that their children were learning and would be able to achieve higher levels of education after attending the local school.

Girls’ low educational performance and underachievement has been associated in turn with the lack of female teachers in their schools. Croft (2000), for example, found girls’ low self-esteem in the basic core courses such as maths and English prevents them from attaining higher academic levels. Poor science and maths results of girls, particularly from rural areas were recorded throughout the basic and secondary levels of education in Ghana (Sutherland-Addy, 2002; FAWE, 1999). High academic requirements for entry into teacher training colleges then prevents girls from entering the teaching profession (Sutherland-Addy, 2002; Casely-Hayford with Wilson, 2001). However, the lack of female teachers as role models for girls in school as well as the lack of gender sensitive approaches arguably contributes to this cycle of underachievement. Gaynor’s diagram best illustrates this dynamic (see Figure 1).

The Ghana Female Teacher Study confirmed Gaynor’s analysis and uncovered a range of other gender and socio-cultural factors contributing to this cycle. Out of the 87 female senior secondary school (SSS) students interviewed only 11 said they would like to go into the teaching

profession (12.6 per cent). Very few of these SSS3 girls knew the secondary school courses required for entry into teacher training college – none of the girls had received career counselling or knew how to pursue their career choices.

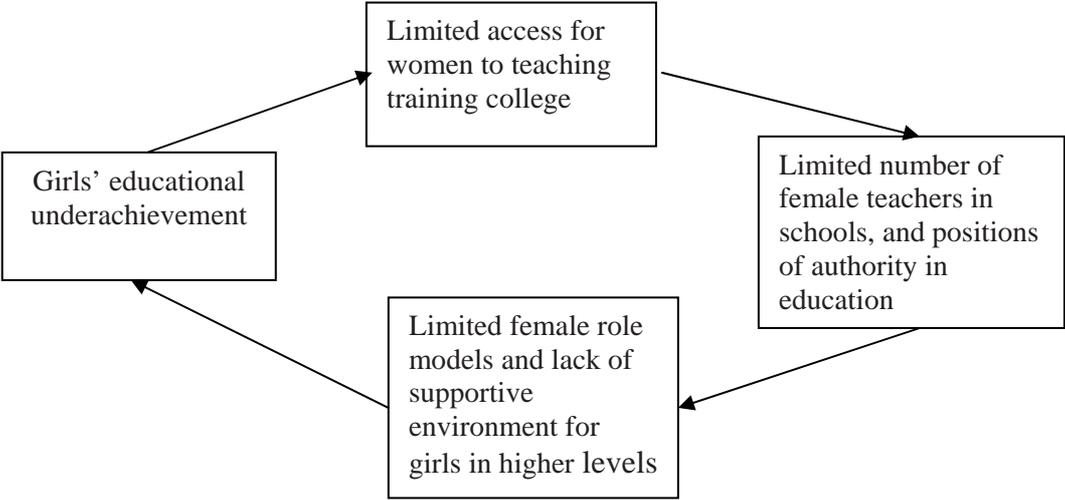


Figure 1: Cycle of girls' underachievement and limited female teacher participation
 Source: Gaynor 1997.

The majority of girls were taking programmes in business and vocational areas that would not qualify them for entry into a teacher training college and many explained that they feared maths and science subjects and opted for vocational and secretarial programmes that did not require the same level of intensity.

The most significant findings from our interviews and observations of female teachers within the six districts was the lack of positive female role models in the teaching profession for girls even within districts where there were female teachers. There was a danger, which most long serving female teachers appeared to be concerned about, that they would become ‘too much like the locals’ and that their students could not see a difference between the female teachers and the other villagers (newly trained teachers were exceptions to this rule). Many female teachers were not able to act or behave as good role models and they were acutely aware of this dilemma. Their own presentation, their social distance from the community, the location of their residences were all critical factors in maintaining a level of respect from community members.

Most importantly, female teachers’ adaptability and respect for rural life, their performance and attitude towards their work as a service to the community, was critical to their acceptance by the community. There was also a strong perceived link between their income level and their social standing. Interviews with both senior secondary school students and community members revealed that, in their view, the social status of the teacher was associated with what status symbols they could demonstrate to the community. When we asked SSS girls why they did not choose to enter the teaching profession, they explained that teachers had to walk to school while their own pupils were

driving around in cars. Several teachers spoke of their inability to buy suitable clothing for school because of their lack of access to ready-made garments, which were only available in the large towns. 'The female teachers look the same as the community members – no decent clothing to wear to school' (female teacher, Sene District). Several teachers mentioned that they felt embarrassed when walking to their farms in shabby clothing on the same path as their own pupils. Newly trained female teachers serving in rural areas kept their image up in the village by always dressing properly for school. However there was a significant difference between the quality of school uniforms worn by rural- and urban-based teachers.

Another indicator of the teachers' low socio-economic status was their inability to support their own children through higher levels of education. This was also the main reason that female teachers gave for not encouraging their own children to enter the teaching profession. Discussions with SSS3 female students in Kintampo and East Gonja revealed that these factors had a significant impact on their perceptions of the teaching profession.

Where teachers had prospered economically, they appeared to attract a higher level of respect. For instance, in the Western Region of Ghana, some female teachers and their families had done extremely well in supplementing their income from cocoa farming activities and plantain cultivation. These teachers offered positive role models in terms of being successful farmers and as a result had achieved a level of respect from the community. The social status of the female teacher was also affected by their role in the community. Where female teachers had married into the village, they were treated the same way as other local women – often with disrespect. Some of the female teachers in the community described how male pupils at primary and JSS level called them names and made fun of them in the community (Kojobonikope, East Gonja). In contrast, those female teachers who had maintained some social distance from the community and had demonstrated leadership capacities seemed to be able to establish a higher social status for themselves. They were still confronted with discrimination and derogatory remarks by elders and men but were able to contain these and wield some level of respect because of their community leadership roles.

However, the most important factor that affected the social status of the female teacher in the community was the perception of the community about her professional ability and performance at school. Newly trained female teachers commanded some respect and could maintain this, especially if they kept some social distance from the community. They usually remained astute and careful about interacting too closely with the community until they had established their position. Some took an active role in assisting communities improve the school but this required experience in community mobilisation, which most newly trained teachers were lacking. The interviews with men and women's groups across the 20 communities revealed that community members kept a watchful eye on their female teachers.

Our interviews with the Girls' Education Officers and female teachers themselves gave some indication of what characteristics were associated with their perceptions of 'good female role models

in such communities' – these included:

- proper dress;
- proper relations with men in the community (married or staying with one partner);
- humility and good relations with the community;
- a willingness to take up responsibility in the community;
- a basic level of proficiency in their teaching duties.

We found that very few long serving and newly trained female teachers exhibited these qualities. Most female teachers felt they were victims of the environment in which they were living, and instead of attempting to change their conditions they fell into negative patterns of behaviour.

7. Conclusions

The Ghana Female Teacher Study indicates that the strategies required to improve the supply and retention of female teachers in areas of rural poverty depend on improving the status of the teacher in general in Ghana. The current status of teaching is so low that several teachers reported dissuading their own children from entering the profession. Women are particularly vulnerable to this low status since they already occupy a low social status within Ghanaian society (Nikoi, 1998; Ardayfio-Schandorf, 1994) and are not likely to be attracted to, or remain in, professions that further handicap them.

The Ghana Female Teacher Study revealed the critical need to improve the skills of rural teachers, in order to avoid further polarising the problems of teaching and learning in these areas. Simple communication and community development techniques are needed in order to prepare men and women to serve as teachers. Teachers should also be better oriented and informed about the context of rural education, motivated to serve and make a difference to the lives of children in these areas: currently there is no course at the teacher training or university level that orients teachers to the harsh realities of rural education and the context of learning in resource deprived areas. Instead most trained teachers emerge with an attitude of 'doing time' in these areas and leave immediately after their two-year posting.

More research is needed to study the characteristics of female teachers at training college level. This would assist in the design of courses, which help teacher trainees adjust themselves to rural life. Only a few trained teachers married to local men remain teaching in the rural areas or large circuit centres where socio-economic conditions are better. The Ghana Female Teacher Study also reveals a tremendous need to raise the female teachers' self-image through closer dialogue, encouragement and training by the government of Ghana and the District Education Offices in particular. Untrained teachers should be included when in-service programmes are offered in the districts. Most importantly, teachers should be trained and oriented as change agents in the communities they serve. This

attitudinal shift will only come about with the introduction of more contextually oriented courses at training college and district levels.

The Ghana Female Teacher Study suggests that attracting more female teachers to serve in rural areas will depend largely on a change of attitudes among newly trained teachers particularly if they are to become effective role models for girls in future. Strategies, which ensure that female children from rural areas are mentored, supported and sponsored, appear to be long-term solutions to the problem. In the short term, female teachers from around the country could be encouraged, oriented and prepared to serve for at least two years after completing training college in poor rural areas.

Rural girls need to be mentored and financially supported in order to ensure that they attain higher levels of education. Rural Education Centres have been suggested as a key strategy for assisting rural girls in disadvantaged districts of the country in order to break the poverty cycle, which is compounded through poor educational quality and lack of parental care. Governments will have to support education for rural girls in order to produce the type of female teachers they so desperately need.

Notes

- 1 The full title of the study is *How the poor get poorer: an exploration into the participation, quality and needs of female teachers in deprived rural areas of Ghana*. It was funded by the Ministry of Education and the World Bank in 2000.
- 2 Three main sites were identified in six districts cutting across three ecological and socio-culturally diverse areas of Ghana (i.e. Northern Region, predominantly Muslim, Western Region cocoa growing and Christian and Brong Ahafo Region, transition zone and ethnically mixed).
- 3 The Ghana Female Teacher study resulted in a typology for identification of different levels of deprivation in rural Ghana. Three main categories were identified based on socio-economic infrastructure, location, number of schools and population strength. The categorisation included: less deprived areas, deprived and extremely deprived areas within the study districts.
- 4 During the fieldwork I succumbed to malaria and infections the last week of the study and could not find any pharmacy in the district capital with antibiotics to treat the problem; the team had to travel out of the district nearly 50 kms to find a hospital and obtain the necessary medication.
- 5 These vignettes were adapted from field notes based on in-depth interviews and translated from the local language Twi.

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