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RESILIENCE OF THE AFRICAN GIRL CHILD: FROM HOMEMAKER TO AN ACADEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *Contrary to the stereotypical perception that a woman's place is in the kitchen as a wife, a homemaker, mother and care giver, there is evidence that successful women have endeared these childhood challenges and defied all odds to prominence in their chosen fields of career interest. This paper elucidates the lived childhood experiences of selected female academics and how they have navigated the tensions around their heteronormative gender roles in their early lives into adulthood. As a qualitative research study, 15 participants, thus, newly recruited female lecturers from the University of Education Winneba were purposively selected and interviewed. The findings illustrate the importance of early family life experiences of girls to their academic and career progression. It further highlights the tensions and gender inequalities in the early life experiences and adult life of female faculty. This draws attention to policy imperative in addressing gender inequalities that are engrained in Ghanaian traditional practices both at home and in school*.
KEYWORDS: Girl child, home maker, child hood experiences, gender roles, gender justice, resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The African girl-child continues to hold less power, wealth and voice both in public and private spheres than almost any group globally. Despite the numerous interventions to bring about gender justice, women and girls continue to occupy highly disadvantaged positions. This is so because the surging feminist scholarships have tended to focus more on adult women studies and ignored or marginalized girls. As a result, girlhood generally remain under researched and under theorized Corrie Decker (2010), Abosede George (2014), Sadiyya Haffejee (2019), Jen Katshunga (2019), and Heather Switzer (2018).

Girlhood studies are however critical and relevant to understanding the adult experiences of women who have meandered their paths and ways into leadership roles. Establishing a sustained discourse and a robust body of scholarship in African Girlhood research is critical to understanding the resilience of the girl child from a docile homemaker, wife, mother or child to a professional careerist. According to Wright, 2016, the role of the African girl has morphed from docile homemaker to resilient heroine for herself and her people which present a more nuanced experience.

In Africa, there has been research on women over the past decade (see for example, Prah, 2002; Mama, 2004; Apusigah, 2008; Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Ogbogu, 2009; Morley et al., 2010). The

knowledge from these small but useful studies have enhanced our understandings of the gender inequalities that persist. For example, Assie-Lumumba (2005), Mama (2003) and Tsikata (2007) have highlighted that colonialism has fundamental impacts on the creation of the gendered nature of access to education particularly higher education in Africa. Within this discourse, studies on girl hood or early life experiences of women has been the portrayal of girls as victims of sexual abuse, school drop outs, child/ force marriage, child labour, with limited emphasis on their agency. Similarly, in Ghana, the gaps in literature paradoxically show that the Ghanaian girl child is largely both invisible and extra visible in research literature. Within the academic space, limited research has been conducted to shift the discourse from deficit theorisations of the girl child into projecting the agency of girls. Culturally, African societies believed a woman's place was in her home, caring for her husband and children, as opposed to the workplace. Therefore, valued feminine traits such as meek nature and submissiveness were feared to be lost if women entered the workforce (Astin, 1984; Nieva and Gutek, 1981; Akinlabi and Olatunji, 2012). Women are expected to perform duties as wives and mothers, so right from childhood they are nurtured and socialised to prepare them into woman hood.

Today, as women make strides into various professional fields, in particular, institutions of Higher Education, it has become relevant to examine how they manoeuvred to navigate their expected traditionally and culturally assigned heteronormative roles to pick up careers. It is for this reason that this paper focuses on the early life stories of newly recruited female academics at the University of Education, Winneba and how that has impacted their adult lives and careers. In particular, it explores how female academics navigate the culturally accepted girlhood roles and expectations of being and becoming good and subservient wives and mothers to pursue careers as members of faculty. The essence of the study is to put the lived experiences of successful female academics in historic perspective as well as highlight the power of the growing African girl child in challenging stereotypes of "womanism, domestication, subservience and inequalities".

Contextualizing Girls Education in Ghana

The dearth of research on Girlhood studies in Ghana has primarily focused on the girl child as victim of circumstance, abuse and violence (Kumi-Yeboah, 2015). A colonial account of the role of the girl child as described by Odamtten 1978, is depicted in the vocational training and apprenticeship offered to young women and young girls by the Basel missionaries. According to Odamtten, girls, during the colonial era were kept in the homes of individual missionaries whose wives taught them domestic duties, lessons in Sewing and needle work. Thus, this marked the beginning of female girl child education, as well as vocational education and apprenticeship training in the Gold Coast (Knispel & Kwakye, 2006, p. 49). These training were to prepare the girls to become good mothers and wives in the homes so as to foster stability in their marriages. The practice was that, whereas, the boys went to School to continue their Education, the girls were made to further their education by staying with the Basel Missionaries and serving them as house girls.

The liberalization of formal education by various Governments of Ghana opened up more opportunities for women to pursue other disciplines and mode of study aside the vocations. Over the past decades, governments in Ghana have consistently implemented policies designed to

promote and improve the quality and accessibility of education to all children especially at the basic level. Significantly, these educational policies are intended to promote affordable education for all school-going children, enhance accessibility and sustainability as well as to ensure equality for social justice with special reference to young girls.

The introduction of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy in 1995 and the Capitation Grant in 2005/2006 were to provide quality education in teaching and learning (Senadza, 2012; Akyeampong, 2006) to support all school-going children and to lessen the economic burden on parents to be able to pay fees to send their children to school. The emphasis on these policies was to encourage more parents especially those in economically deprived areas to send their girl-child to school.

However, in sub-Saharan Africa about a third of primary school age children are not enrolled in school. The majority of children who drop out of school are young girls who come from poor and rural backgrounds (World Bank, 2010, 2011). Thus, the Ghana government's 2007 education reform policy on girl-child education promotes the education of adolescent girls. This has led to significant progress in expanding access to education for girls in order to bridge the gender gap (Adesina, 2009; Akyeampong, Djangmah, Oduro, Seidu, & Hunt, 2007). Irrespective, young adolescent girls continue to face numerous challenges as they pursue equal and greater educational opportunities. Poverty and parental decision-making supported by cultural practices remain difficult challenges which affect unequal access to education for the girl-child (Academy for Educational Development, 2002). Numerous studies have brought attention to the gaps that exist between boys and girls at the basic level, especially young girls from poor families in remote rural areas (Palmer, 2005; Pryor & Ampiah, 2003; Sutherland-Addy, 2002).

Few research studies have been conducted about the educational challenges facing young girls in Ghana and the resulting implications on human development in varied aspects of society. In-depth studies concerning the educational experiences of young girls are needed to address the challenges they face for generations. Understanding girls' responses to critical questions could help generate a framework to bring uniformity and guidelines that offer solutions to the above challenges.

METHODOLOGY

My interest in this study was primarily to explore the gender inequalities experienced by female lecturers in their childhood and how such experiences have impacted their careers. So, I adopted phenomenological case study design to illuminate the lived experiences of the participants involved in the research. As Patton (2002) described, the lived experiences of the participants provided a firmer understanding that allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the participants' total experiences; and to produce a rich and holistic account.

A qualitative interpretivist phenomenological approach was adopted for the study. The target population was all newly recruited female lecturers who have served less than five (5) years in the University of Education, Winneba. In all, fifteen (15) female lecturers were purposively selected. Purposive sampling looks at particular settings, persons or events and deliberately selects for the vital

information they can offer that cannot be offered by other sources (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In this study, newly recruited female lecturers, who had just joined the academy (UEW), were selected to share their experiences on how they were able to make it thus far amidst the challenges and cultural demands confronting the girl child. Their stories, in my estimation were relevant to the design of the study and would offer the information needed. A semi-structured interview guide was used at different interview times on a one-on-one basis to elicit information from the respondents. Participants were assured of utmost confidentiality and anonymity, hence the use of pseudonyms and numbers in the transcribing and interview excerpts.

Characteristics of Participants

Despite their differences, there are several commonalities among the participants that provided a useful starting point to discussing their varied experiences. In terms of academic background they had all obtained a minimum of post graduate degrees (MPhil) and were full time faculty members. Four (4) out of the fifteen participants had obtained their Doctorates while Five were enrolled Phd Students. Their professional backgrounds were also varied, some as trained teachers, counsellors, and civil servants. They all tell stories of varied difficult childhood experiences. Eight (8) were married. All the participants seemed to be very experienced with their years in professional practice. It is the accounts of these fifteen (15) female lecturers that are the data analysed in this study.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Early School and School

The discussion is focused on the gender inequalities in the early life experiences of the female lecturers both at home and in school. As described in other research, gender and social stratification are central influences on child upbringing and schooling in the Ghanaian context (Nukunya, 2009; Dunne & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2016). Gender differentiation in childhood occurs within the institutions of the family and school. For girls, the equalizing promises of education are in tension with the gender positioning in cultural expectations in the home. In Ghana, girls as they grow up are expected to perform household chores at the same time as going to school. This dual role is not expected from young men (Nukunya, 2009). Discussions with the participants highlight these tensions and gender inequalities in their early life experiences. The following were typical examples;

I grew up in a village... and a typical village girl growing up among [male] siblings. We followed our parents to the farm …you will go to school in the morning, you will come back and eat and do some household chores and go back to school in the afternoon... sometime we will go to the farm to bring firewood to the house and go back to school in the afternoon. … While the boys relax, the girl has to cook, sweep and clean dishes as additional responsibilities (Participant #2)

You are aware that girls in traditional Ghanaian society performed many roles as cooks, waiters and fetching water. We were not allowed to be in school. We cooked and served the food to the family. We wash the dishes. We sweep the rooms. We had no quality time to play. Whilst we did

this, our brothers and male cousins will be in school learning or playing football with their colleagues. (Participant # 6)

The participants, #2 and #6 are highlighting the gender differentiations in the home. They point to the gender inequalities of these early experiences in which females work while boys go to school or play. This differential treatment by gender is more acute in situations where parents prefer to send their sons to school rather than their daughters/females (Twumasi, 1986; Nukunya, 2009). These differential practices illustrate social relations and practices in which females are subordinate to males. Importantly here, it marks the introduction of academic disadvantage experienced by females arising from the heteronormative gender assumptions within the family. This effectively (re-) produces the advantage of males. This male preference in educational access provides gender pathways that allow males to progress academically. Females on the other hand are persistently required to fulfill domestic duties which are constraining factors to academic progress and may prompt drop out (Dunne & Ananga, 2013). The gender differentiations in educational access and its impacts on academic progress and performance were mentioned variously by the participants. The gender patterns are highlighted by Participant #7 as she reflects on her school experiences:

In our days, most parents did not enrol girls in school. Those enrolled were withdrawn by parents at various stages … I had quite a brilliant academic pursuit at that time as a girl growing up… that is how I managed to keep up the educational focus till this time. … when I cast my mind back we were about 30 students or so and only seven of us were girls in the class. … We [the girls] competed hard with the boys… there was one girl whose name I have forgotten, that rubbed shoulders with me very much academically… if she was second I will be third, if she was first I will be second, and then one boy was competing with us. I will say academic brilliance prevented my parents from getting me out of school. (Participant #7)

From the participants' perspectives, academic brilliance was a factor determining whether girls remained in school or are withdrawn. There is a sense in the above extract that girls who were in school must 'prove' themselves. In addition, girls must appear to be gifted, intelligent and demonstrate academic excellence. This was regarded as significant to girls remaining in school in a context in which family decision making processes consistently privileges education of boys to the disadvantage of the education of girls. As Participant #7 suggests, being academically brilliant was necessary to prevent parents from withdrawing a girl child from school. The need to prove academic excellence further reinvigorates the cultural norm which serves as a gendered barrier to equitable access in education (Apusigah, 2006; Morley et al, 2006). The participants' accounts illustrate the importance of the early family life of girls to the academic and career progression of senior female academics. Conversely, under-representation of females in education is connected with practices of withdrawing girls from school. The role of the family in the perpetuation of gender differentiation is a critical index in this study. In the home, most African women and men tend to socialize their female children into stereotypical gender roles (Chabaya et al., 2009) and the study participants constructed their early life experiences within this discourse. The words of participants #8 and #5 provide accounts of the way their family perceived girls education;

Our mothers were taught that the woman must grow up to be a quality wife. They defined this quality to mean an obedient woman who diligently serves the husband from bed and the kitchen. It did not include educational attainment. This was the mentality with which we were brought up as girls and women. … It affected the education of many girls. … They were denied education, withdrawn from education or dropped out because there is a perception that the woman's place is in the kitchen, not in school, not the offices. They used these ideas to train us. (Participant #8)

We knew from our community life that they say no matter how much education a woman receives, she ends up as a wife. … This view has been used to deny education to many girls. Look at all those girls hawking on the streets of Accra. They should have been in school. Some are even hawking or working as porters to get resources that they would use to buy item in preparation for marriage … so you end up having more boys than girls progressing in education. (Participant #5)

There are many issues that can be highlighted. The words of Participant #8 endorse the heteronormative gender assumption within the family which expects girls to be subservient to boys as obedient serving wives. In her account (participant #8), she describes her mother's perspective on the future life of girls in which she was rather negative about her education and all girls. Alongside this, there is reference to a wider community culture in which girls' education was not considered useful and an active socialization process that promoted male leadership and responsibility. While the above perspectives represent the dominant experience of the participants, some had more affirming experiences in their childhoods. Some parents, for example, did not accept that females were good only at domestic tasks. Positive experiences and the support of the mother were described by participants #10 and #14.

My mother gave me a lot of freedom to do what I liked. One thing about her … she loved education. Because I loved education, she didn't treat me as her daughter. We were like sisters, and we confided in each other. My mum is great" She inspired me to aspire beyond the limitations society places on me. Anytime I am challenged by any limitations, I am motivated by her words (Participant # 10).

Mum was the boss in the family, and her words were orders. She had a very strong personality. She saw education as the only way to our good future. Although she was illiterate, she decided that we should have good education so we wouldn't end up like her (Participant # 14).

The responses challenge the ideas of Chabaya et al, (2009) who assert that boys and girls right from childhood are socialized into stereotypical gender roles; and girls grow with these perceptions and learn to fit neatly into these stereotypes (Chabaya et al., 2009). Contrary to views that African women socialize their female children into female socially constructed gender roles, the participants constructed their early life experience and access to education within a discourse that presented their mothers as their inspiration. Perhaps, the mothers being conscious of their own lack of proper education had projected their hopes onto their daughters and therefore allowed them that much freedom and encouraged them to study hard. The extracts show how, despite the wider cultural tendency towards heteronormative subordination of females and the consequent barriers to educational success for girls, families and mothers in particular can be a source of support and inspiration for young females. Nevertheless, the disadvantages experienced by the female lecturers

in their childhood have been highlighted by them as significant to female underrepresentation in HEI.

Adult life

The findings further revealed that transitioning into adulthood opened further avenues of struggle that relate to heteronormative gender assumptions within institutional practices and culture that the female lecturers had to constantly navigate. This discussion focus on the later life experiences of the female lecturers after their university education and in particular the tensions between their traditional cultural gender positioning and their new careers as lecturers. An overarching finding of the study points to the sustained tensions experienced by the participants between cultural expectations around gender and the opportunities offered by education. The tensions are related to the participants positioning as mature females, variously as married women and/or mothers/ Adults set against their careers. The cultural expectations of women who are married and /or have children, produces particular tensions for working women and their career roles. The strongly held view that getting married and having children is the main focus of life for all women reinvigorates tensions for those women who want to keep and progress their careers. In material terms, the academic participants who were also mothers had to juggle their domestic role and their career. The multiple roles of females as mothers and wives impacted on their career choice and progression. The difficulty that the female lecturers experience in navigating both family and academic work is a critical index in the under-representation of females. The constraining effects of serving two 'greedy institutions' have been elaborated in other scholarly works (Coser, 1974) and it features prominently in the participants' accounts of the ways they had to navigate their undivided loyalty to their family (husband and children) and their commitment to pursue careers in academia.

I am expected to write and research, present papers at conferences in order to be confirmed and promoted, all these require sacrifices beyond the working hours; it is difficult for me to forge ahead because I am confronted with the challenge of being a mother, a wife and a career woman. I am expected to manage my academic life and family life (Participant #8)

My role as a mother has certainly cost me a lot, when it comes to the job. (Participant #7)

It hasn't been easy. I could have even joined academia earlier than I have, but this family problem where will you be going- traveling forth and back, always make sure there is food at home (Participant #3)

The tensions between professional and domestic demands are clearly illustrated by the participants above. All the three participants have young children. They were clearly torn as on the one hand, they wished they had been able to spend more time with their children and on the other hand, academic responsibilities require them to spend more time at work. Ultimately, all three participants indicated they had to resist the all-consuming demands of the domestic sphere in order to promote the careers they have worked so hard to achieve. These tensions are delineated in other studies that have identified family responsibilities as a factor that impact negatively on female career advancement within an academic context (White, 2003; Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006). At home, as explained by participant #3, she is a mother and a wife in charge of all domestic duties, combining this with the demands of her career means that she commutes every

weekend to meet the family needs. Participant #3 claims that but for these demands, it would be possible for women to rise faster up the academic ladder, as they could concentrate all efforts on building their careers. However, she also points to women's readiness to sacrifice everything for the wellbeing of their families even if means taking risks as she does by driving a considerable distance all alone in order to meet family needs. This illustrates norms of the patriarchal society in which most Ghanaian women find themselves and the expectation that women have to adjust their lives to cope with conflicting employment and family roles (Nukunya, 2009). The discussions with participants #3, #7 and #8 substantiate the proposition that the timing of their family and career cycles is a key issue for women (Acker 1994). Caring for young children is a demanding task that draws upon a mother's time, energy and emotions. The combination of family and career suggests interminable stress, conflict of interests and constant tension. The timing of child birth is another important issue for the female academics. However, even if a female postpones having children until her higher education is complete, the arrival of young children will still coincide with the age and career stage when she is expected to make an impact on the academic field. It is in this regard that Currie, Thiele and Lewis (2002) assert that it is easier to get along with one's career when the children are older rather than having to juggle the career while rearing younger children. This point was also made by Participant #2, "If you are fortunate and you are like me and your children are older, then your husband can fix dinner and wait for you, so you walk home to a warm dinner and" … (Participant 2). Nevertheless, the social expectations of women as mothers together with their career demands meant that as participants #3, #7and #8 explained 'they had to make extra efforts to balance those multiple roles'. They agreed, however, that family well-being would always be their priority. In contrast, an unmarried participant describes the space she has to focus on her career while at the same time acknowledging the societal expectations on married female academics: Without a family, I have more time for work and research. I can work until late in the office. There is always a trade-off. If I were married, I might not have come this far … The way I work, I wouldn't have time to look after a family … a family would be in my way. Oh yes, I enjoy being single. My colleagues ask me for advice when they have personal problems. Sometimes, I can help because my values are different (Participant # 4).

This comment implies that unmarried female lecturers have some level of independence and did not need to seek 'permission' from a spouse as is the usual case of the married participants. The differences highlighted by Participant #4 raises interesting issues for further comparative explorations of the career progression of married and unmarried senior academics and to what extent marriage constrains career progression for women. The research participant accounts strongly suggest that their family situations placed limitations on females' work in ways that subtly and overtly affect their career progression. This was emphasized in terms of research and publication. The point is that the latencies in the family situation have serious consequences for female underrepresentation within HEIs and subsequently for their career progression. A major challenge was the task of combining motherhood with academic life. The participants elaborated the ways that their academic career was nested with motherhood and other domestic responsibilities. Participant #3 illustrated this succinctly. The participants' stories also illustrate the need to constantly negotiate their position as wives and /or mothers at different points in the careers. These extracts show the ways that gender heteronormative assumptions of women interact with their career aspirations and the ways they make extensive efforts to navigate them.

It was a challenge for me to enroll on a fulltime PhD programme, particularly in a University outside of … Ghana. I cannot leave my family behind and I don't think my husband will be too happy about such a decision. (Participant #10)

It was quite a challenge because my husband was also working at …, he was also a teacher, a music teacher … it was difficult for him to come here and stay with me in … and I too cannot leave my post here to go and join him, so sometimes we alternate, he comes here and I go there but in the long run I happen to travel more. I will always go to …. (Participant #9) …This is a German colleague. she asked me, how did you get your husband to manage and support you and I said you have to negotiate before the marriage, (Participant #1)

The comments above, point to the tensions around expected gender and cultural expectations of the participants as females, wives and their careers. Hence, they have to make choices to be able to manage these tensions. Acquiring a PhD is critical and a requirement for career progression of faculty members in HEI, participant #10, is ready to sacrifice that in the interest of her marriage, family and husband, although family responsibilities are not the sole preserve of women. In that consistency, both the real and the opportunity cost of females' commitment to pursue academic career progression was the neglect of some family responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The study has documented the importance of early childhood experiences and post-university adult experiences of successful female academics. In addition it has highlighted the ways that gender inequalities and heteronormative assumptions are reproduced in families and society and how these have impacted the educational and career development opportunities of female lecturers in Ghana. One argument that can be made from the findings is that early family life of girls was important in the academic and career pursuits of senior female academics. Further to that is the argument that combining motherhood with academic life is challenging for females and militates against their career development and progression.

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