

# Why Girls' Education Matters More: A Student Survey in Ho, Ghana

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## Abstract

Fifteen students and three faculty members from The Ohio State University-Agricultural Technical Institute (Ohio State-ATI) in collaboration with 10 more students from The Ohio State University-Columbus, Kenyon College, and The College of Wooster traveled to Ho, Ghana to investigate what obstacles impede girls' primary education. The group constructed a survey in a pre-travel class and interviewed over 130 women and 60 girls. The researchers discovered that 98.0% of respondents agree that Ghana needs to put more emphasis on girls' education and that moving forward in development will require both societal support and personal development. The biggest impediments to educating girls is the cost (54.4%), even in so-called public schools, followed by the recognition that large families make it difficult for parents to have money to invest in their girls (11.4%) and, hence, girls must work at home, in the market, or in the field (11.4%). Changing this reality will require public support (16.4%) and forward thinking on the part of the community (6.6%). Additionally, a key factor in this survey process was the benefits to our students. They reported that this study offered them a means to discuss substantive issues with local women in scripted conversations, to develop self-confidence, and to learn the effect of different life opportunities.

## Introduction

When Jawaharlal Nehru stated, "You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women," he was alluding to the fact that women and girls throughout the world work many more hours than their male counterparts and, as their reward, have less access to healthcare, food, and education. It took until the 1980's for the world to get serious about addressing this inequity in any meaningful way. "Experts believe educating girls is the most important investment in the world [because of] how much they give back to their families," says Gene Sperling, top economic advisor to both Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton (Alter, 2008). Development specialists discovered that, when programs emphasized girls' education, declines in women's fertility,

infant, child and maternal mortality, and HIV infection rates followed. Educated mothers improve their farming techniques resulting in improved nutrition for their children. Educated women pay for well-baby care and have money for doctors when their children are sick. Moreover, girls' education accounted for increases in both women's earnings, which were 20% higher for girls who completed primary school, and the likelihood that their children would persist in school (Levine, 2006). The World Bank decided to encourage African governments to invest in improving the educational status of girls so that when they reach womanhood they may have the opportunity to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and Ghana's government resolved to take this step (World Bank, 2000).

In 2000 a team from the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) studying girls' primary education sought to determine why girls' enrollment stubbornly remained well below the 50% mark. Ruby Avotri et al. (2000) cited as contributing factors: the cost of schooling, the frequent incidence of child labor, low nutrition and health status, few role models, low aspirations, large family size, distance to school, low parental educational attainment and employment opportunities, inadequate educational materials and facilities, and non-supportive attitudes and behaviors of teachers. Researchers frequently heard the same story, that teachers mistreated girls. "The added problems of sexual harassment, early pregnancy, and the lack of female teachers to act as role models in junior secondary school were major obstacles to female education" (Fentiman et al., 1999). Girls' embarrassment at not having toilet facilities during menstruation or proper clothing like shoes added to the likelihood of their dropping out. The lack of ability to protect themselves from predatory teachers or village men as they walked to school convinced parents to keep their daughters home where they were also available to help with household chores or petty trading alongside their mothers.

The FAWE report proposed changes, such as improving girl-centered learning materials, increasing school health and feeding, subsidizing school-

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related expenses for girls or allowing parents to make monthly rather than annual payments, providing separate toileting facilities, and shifting resources by increasing class size at the tertiary level. The study noted that, without intervention and with an annual population growth rate of 3.6%, Ghana's educational problems would get worse.

In the decade since that report, girls' education in developing countries has remained a priority. Worldwide, the studies show that girls' enrolled in school has increased from 38% in 1980 to 48% in 2008. Unfortunately and unaccountably, during the same period, boys enrollment has decreased from 62% to a mere 52%; and 28% of all primary school aged children are still not attending (SASI Group, 2009). In Ghana, on the other hand, real improvement in completion rates show that currently 87% of children complete fifth grade (See Table 1). These statistics address neither the quality of the education nor the government's investment. While the United States spends 28% of education dollars worldwide, Ghana spends 5% on their GDP on education. Ghana allots 1.8% of the GDP for elementary education, which totals approximately \$87 per pupil (SASI Group, 2009).

Readings and discussion revealed these realities to students in the fifth annual The Arts in Ghana with Service Learning, a two-part course that begins in Wooster with a three credit hour class in spring quarter and moves to Ghana for a five credit hour, three week residency in Ho and a few days each in Cape Coast and Accra in the summer (Figure 1). In the pre-travel course students study Ghana's history and culture with an emphasis on various art forms, such as drumming, dancing and singing, fantasy coffins, drum making and creating batik cloth. The coursework also keys in on social issues and solutions, like microfinance programs, health, agriculture and extension, and traditional governance (Elder, 2008). After studying the importance of girls' education to expand a country's development capacity, the faculty leaders proposed adding a collaborative research component to this tour and offered girls' education as the research area. Students agreed to develop questionnaires, to participate in conducting research as part of their in-country commitment, and to contribute to a final paper and presentation upon their return to the United States.

Through this project faculty and students collaborated to explore issues of girls' educational opportunities and life outcomes in order to determine the effect an emphasis on girls' education has had in Ho. (Note: This paper refers to "girls" as the Ghanaians educators and politicians generally do, meaning children and young women up to age eighteen.) In addition, students evaluated the impact of this research project on their experiences and

understandings through group discussion, journaling and term paper writing.

**Table 1. Ghana Educational Statistics (World Bank 2009)**

	2000	2005	2007
Primary Completion Rate	82%	86%	87%
Ratio of girls to boys in primary school	92%	95%	95%



**Figure 1. Map of Ghana**

## Methods

Reading Ruth Levine's "Educating Girls, Unlocking Development" (2006) inspired students to find and discuss articles about education and girls' chances in developing countries. Then, they proceeded to develop a research design. They reviewed the FAWE surveys and found that those had isolated multiple factors, which mitigate against girls attending primary school (Table 2). They also ascertained that the effect of girls' education is great, leading to girls' marrying later, and having fewer and healthier children. It was encouraging to find that primary school-educated women are three times less likely to contract HIV/AIDS (Alter, 2008).

In small groups students listed the questions they most wanted answered based on those they had read in the FAWE survey. Fortunately, the one student who had traveled to Ho with previous study tours was available to guide each group as the groups compiled, reviewed and perfected questionnaires (Figure 2). Each student agreed to interview five Ghanaian women or girls, so that the group might collect a significant number of responses for analysis.

Students planned to interview secondary school girls and women from post-high school on. The



**Table 2. Impediments to Girls' Education (FAWE, 2000)**

<b>SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS</b>	
•	traditional, accepted roles, including religious discouragement of education (Islam and <i>trokosi</i> )
•	gender stereotyping in courses offered to girls
•	parents' negative attitude, especially if illiterate themselves
•	parents' fear of intimacy with opposite sex
•	parents' fear educated girl will challenge and criticize
•	educated girls adopt husband's name
•	poor self-esteem among girls
•	early marriage and pre-marital pregnancy
•	separated parents can't control children
<b>SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS</b>	
•	uneducated parents
•	household size and poverty
•	low nutrition and health status
•	direct cost of education, including higher cost of girls' uniforms
•	poor families rely on family members to contribute to survival
<b>SCHOOL FACTORS</b>	
•	fewer schools in rural areas, less access to preferred single-sex schools
•	transportation or boarding costs
•	poor facilities
•	inadequate instructional materials
•	teachers' low expectations for girls
•	extremely poor teaching methods
•	few female teachers and sexual harassment
•	classes often not in local languages
<b>POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS</b>	
•	country's economic conditions
•	employment prospects
•	national policy on girls' education

primary school (Table 3), 90.4% of the interviewees had attended or completed secondary school and 14% had attended or completed tertiary education. Our interview pool included one registered nurse who had recently retired, several secondary schoolteachers, the lone male interviewee who had attended the University of Legon, and three teachers' college graduates.

Respondents noted that parents increasingly emphasize school and more girls are attending school. Nearly all interviewees, 98.0%, agreed that Ghana should put even more emphasis on girls' education. They stated that the greatest obstacle to educating girls is the cost (Table 4). Parents must provide special clothes, pay annual textbook fees and miscellaneous school fees, such as money for a new roof, utility

to be interviewed. Students conducted interviews before breakfast and at the end of televised football (soccer) games. Students found the responses they received to be more nuanced. A great deal of humor accompanied these interviews, which opened up avenues to friendships.

bills, and teachers' paper supplies, and lose the wages and help of their girls while they are in school and studying.

One in three interviewees went so far as to say that education for girls is more important than for boys. While 80.0% confirmed that having a female teacher inspired and helped girls, 82.0% described schools in Ho as already "girl-friendly." When asked

**Results and Discussion**

This survey of more than 200 women and girls and one man in Ho yielded 175 completed surveys. All the information was entered into Microsoft Excel 2007. The Excel tables were then imported into SAS software (SAS Inst. Inc. Cary, NC). Data were treated as categorical data. We used PROC FREQ model, and significance was analyzed using the chi-square test. The interaction between responses and age were analyzed; however, this interaction proved insignificant. Therefore, we compiled all the girls' and women's responses.

The study found that, while quite a few of the interviewees' parents and grandparents only had the opportunity to attend some

**Table 3. Educational Attainment (Ohio State-ATI Survey 2008)**

Family Member of Interviewee	Percent with NO education
My Grandmother	48
My Grandfather	39
My Mother	23
My Father	14
Interviewee	3

**Table 4. Obstacles to Girls' Education in Ho (Ohio State-ATI Survey 2008)**

PRIMARY OBSTACLE	Percent of respondents
School too costly	54
Girls must work	15
Too many children	12
Girls don't want it	6
Parents don't emphasize	6
Parents prioritize boys	4
Poor school facilities	1
No answer	1
P=0.39	

## Why Girls'

the open-ended question, "What else do girls need to be successful?" some longed for more support for girls (16.4%) and a few for forward thinking (6.6%).

Women and girls in Ho believed that girls' education brings better jobs (31.9%), access to higher education (19.5%) and a woman president in the future (12.4%). For themselves, these interviewees expected their educations to lead to a satisfying career (37.7%), a better position (14.8%), an opportunity to get a university education (16.4%), or a chance to travel (11.5%).

But their overwhelming hope for the future points to education as a key factor in eliminating poverty (91.2%).

### Benefits to Student Learning

Educators stress lifelong learning for students and seek to model that imperative. At Ohio State-ATI faculty members engage in research to inform and enrich their teaching. Since Ohio State-ATI only grants associate degrees, faculty members teach only first-year and sophomore undergraduates. They have neither teaching assistants nor research assistants. Working side-by-side with undergraduates to investigate the effects of national and international policy on the minds and lives of local people in Ho proved to be an enjoyable and reinvigorating experience.

In self-reports, students indicated that this research experience helped them to build self-confidence and self-awareness. One mentioned, "*I learned that I like doing interviews.*" They grew from their opportunities to discuss substantive issue with interviewees, even in our scripted conversation, and in some cases the interview process initiated a lasting bond.

For nearly all the students, this was their first experience conversing through a translator. They discovered firsthand what "lost in translation" means when they had to discourage translators from answering for the interviewee. Understanding and interpreting different life chances helped them to see hope through Ghana's increased emphasis on education, especially girls' education.

### Summary

Throughout this project, faculty and students collaborated to explore issues of girls' educational opportunities and life outcomes in order to determine the effect an emphasis on girls' education has had in Ho. Girls' education's role as an agent of social change is well documented. Ohio State-ATI students' survey sessions with rural girls and women in Ho about the effect education has had on their lives and those of their families showed that nearly all respondents (90.4%) had completed or were in the process of completing secondary school whereas a generation before approximately 50% of women and 40% of men had no education at all. Interviewees see a positive change in the emphasis on girls' education but agree

that there is more to do. They showed a nuanced understanding of educational benefits when 54% rated family as more important than education (43.0%) but stressed that education will also improve their families.

Additionally, students learned how to conduct oral history and interviews, work collaboratively, construct a questionnaire, work with a translator, negotiate the importance of education in two cultures, and appreciate the relative difference in educational opportunities in the USA and Ghana. At the same time, the students learned that these countries' educational processes are far from complete. Through group discussion, journaling and term paper writing, students expressed that this research experience allowed them see how the social sciences can improve people's lives by assessing local needs to give leaders the information to help them make appropriate changes.

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