

Unpacking Community Participation: A Gendered Perspective

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In recent years heightened attention has been directed towards the connections between schooling and local communities in sub-Saharan Africa. While community participation in school management has been emphasized as a strategy to promote sustainable development and improve quality education in sub-Saharan Africa, in practice this strategy has reproduced power hierarchies at the community-level. Furthermore, it has had limited impact for advancing gender equality because community participation in sub-Saharan Africa is not framed to encompass the dynamics of power that exist at the community level and how societal structures govern how community members participate: specifically girls and women. In this paper, I outline the gendered effects of community participation in schooling and alternative methods of participation using specific case studies from West Africa.

Introduction

Notions of community participation have been prevalent in development discourse, but particularly in the field of education-for-development (Edwards, 2017). Community participation has taken on different forms and meanings depending on the context. Within the context of education in sub-Saharan Africa, community participation has been framed as the involvement of the whole community (families, parents, school institutions, community members) in the education of the child. While there are various ways of participating in education, Heneveld and Craig (1996) have identified five channels in which communities can participate in education throughout sub-Saharan Africa: (1) children come to school prepared to learn; (2) the community provides financial and material support to the school; (3) communication between the school, parents, and community is frequent; (4) the community has a meaningful role in school governance; and (5) community members and parents assist with instruction. Understanding the complexities of community participation in education throughout sub-Saharan Africa is critical because it is one of the most effective strategies that determine school effectiveness (Fitriah, 2010). As such, community participation in education has been promoted in multiple ways by influential international organizations working on issues related to education—including the World Bank, UNESCO, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and regional development banks (Edwards, 2017; UNESCO, 2009; World Bank, 2004). More recently, as a strategy to improve education quality, community participation has been embedded both in the framing of Sustainable Development Goals and in their implementation. This new trend has received immense attention from education and development researchers, who highlight the importance of community participation in improving school quality and

ensuring sustainable development (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Nkansah & Chapman, 2006). While community participation in the management of school affairs has been emphasized as a strategy to promote sustainable development and improve quality education, in practice this strategy has reproduced power hierarchies at the community-level. Furthermore, it has had limited impact for advancing gender equality because community participation is not framed to encompass the dynamics of power that exist at the community level and how societal structures govern how community members participate: specifically, girls and women. To further elaborate on this argument, this paper will provide the context of education in sub-Saharan Africa, a brief history of community participation, the various notions of community participation, and the impact on gender. The paper will then provide an analysis of alternative methods of community participation in schooling.

Context

The importance of educating girls and its effect on society as a whole has been well documented and extensively researched for many decades (Biraimah; 1982; Manion, 2011; Unterhalter, 2007). This research supports numerous international initiatives such as the global *Educational For All* framework and the *UN Sustainable Development Goals* to promote girls' access to basic education (Mundy, 2006). While many developing countries have achieved gender parity in basic education, studies show that gender parity has not translated into gender equality *through* education (Manion, 2007). Plan International 'State of the World's Girls' report outlines that 63 million girls currently do not attend formal primary and secondary schooling in the Global South (2015). While unequal access to formal education and experience through formal education among males and females appears to be widespread in the Global South, women in many countries throughout Africa tend to experience more gender discrimination compared to their male counterparts (Manion, 2007). Across sub-Saharan Africa, women continue to contribute to the development and progress of their communities notably, yet most lack the formal education to improve their own condition, reduce their social barriers, and release their economic burden (Egbo, 2000). In 47 out of 54 African countries, girls' prospects to completing primary school are less than 50 percent, whereas completion rates for boys are well above 70 percent (UNESCO, 2011). Similarly, of the 58 million children out-of-school, 31 million of them are girls and Sub-Saharan Africa continues to account for approximately 52% of all out-of-school girls (UNESCO, 2015). Increasingly, much of the discourse surrounding girls' education has shifted from a focus on increasing girls' access to school to much closer attention on the quality of education that girls receive (Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). However, primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa often lack the necessary resources required to provide quality education, particularly to girls. In recent years, the burden of ensuring quality education has fallen on the shoulders of parents and community members (Dei, 2004). In other words, more and more communities have now engaged with primary schools to support quality education. The next section will outline trends in community participation throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Trends in community participation in sub-Saharan Africa

The implementation of mass schooling in sub-Saharan Africa during the 50s and 60s resulted in the crisis of schooling during the 70s and 80s: poor infrastructure, lack of school materials, undertrained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and reduced resources (Lloyd, Kaufman, & Hewett, 2000). As a mechanism to address the various issues that arose with the implementation of mass schooling in sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers began introducing reforms that focused on improving quality education. One trend to improve quality education was the trend of decentralization, or the transference of control from the central to lower levels of a system. A central premise for greater decentralization of education in sub-Saharan Africa is that those “closest to the school, e.g., community members, have a better understanding of local conditions and are in the best position to make decisions about the educational process that best serve local needs” (Chapman, Barcikowski, Sowah, Gyamera, & Woode, 2002, p. 181). This central premise stems from three general arguments: (a) decentralization of programs will lead to greater responsiveness to the particular needs of local communities; (b) decentralization will result in better service delivery by transferring tasks from central authorities to be managed more effectively at local levels; (c) decentralization of social programs (such as education) will foster greater participation of local people, specifically in decision-making processes and more distributive equity (Maclure, 1994; Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983; Wunsch, 1991). However, it must be noted that the process of decentralization is not neutral a neutral process. In fact, engaging communities to participate in decision-making processes is a gendered process.

Unpacking community participation

This section will unpack the how using the term community participation to encompass a homogenous group can, in fact, reproduce unequal power dynamics and reinforce gender inequalities. Participation, in one form or another, has for many decades been a buzzword in international development (Cornwall 2006; Leal 2007). Indeed, over twenty years ago, Dudley (1993) noted that “participation used to be the rallying cry of the radicals; its presence is now effectively obligatory in all policy documents and project proposals from international donors to implementing agencies” (p. 7). In the decades after Dudley’s observation, the popularity of ‘participation’ as a central concept in development has only increased as many have recognized that achieving quality education for all requires the active participation of local communities (Nkansah & Chapman, 2006). Specifically, in sub-Saharan Africa, community participation has been widely used across the continent as development efforts have underscored the benefits that accrue to communities when their members participate in local community development initiatives (Apple 2008; Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003; Mfum-Mensah 2004, 2009; Muthuri, Chapple, and Moon 2009; Sultana 2009).

The central premise for community participation in education is based on the argument that beneficiaries of education programmes need to take active roles that empower them to monitor their schools and to make decisions about their children’s education (Kendall, 2007). Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour (2014) further argue that community participation in education initiatives creates opportunities to promote sustainable development, address community needs, build local trust, and shift the role of

community members from beneficiaries to actors (p. 352). However, community participation is not a panacea for sustaining quality education because various power dynamics exist in communities. All activities grouped under the notion of community participation involve power in some shape or form. For example, in Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour's (2014) case study of community participation in Ghana's *School for Life* complementary education programme found that local community members do not engage in the project in identical ways, and the ways in which they participate determine the different benefits they receive (p. 358). The *School for Life* programme was implemented in 1995 and provided nine months of education for children in rural communities who had either dropped out of school or who never enrolled in school. The objective of this programme is to offer a second chance education to children who are above the school-going age (Arkorful, 2013; Hartwell, 2006). Unique to this program was the community participation approach taken. In fact, the role of the community to identify and recruit individuals to be classroom facilitators, to identify children to participate, and to outline a school schedule is instrumental in sustaining the program. However, Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour's (2014) case study demonstrated that those most educated participated in the program more often. In other words, the education the community members receive determines the confidence and power they have to participate. Therefore, given that men were often more educated than women, they participated in more formal roles and were given more authority in how they participated. This case study emphasizes the importance of understanding the politics of participation and how power dynamics and societal structures influence who participates and how they participate.

Power and Participation

To further understand the complexities of community participation, it is important to understand power and power dynamics that govern how community members can participate, specifically women. For Foucault (1983), power is "a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others [...] instead it acts upon their actions" (p. 220). From this perspective, power is understood as something that is exercised, not possessed. Foucault resists defining power in a metaphysical way, insisting "something called Power [...] which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action" (p. 219). In other words, Foucault (1983) refrains from defining power and rather focuses his inquiry on how power is exercised in particular contexts. Therefore, for Foucault (2003) the issue is to determine "what are the various power-apparatuses that operate at various levels of our society, in such different domains and with so many different extensions" (p. 13).

Within this definition, I can argue that there is no homogenous form of community participation since the way in which power is exercised in each circle of interaction is context specific. With this in mind, Foucault encourages us to think of 'powers' rather than 'Power.' For example, the power a teacher exercises over their students is not the same as the power that those students exercise to resist the teacher's demands, nor is it the same as the power exercised by that teacher's director. Similarly, these kinds of powers are likely to differ from the power exercised by a parent (Gallagher, 2008, p. 398). This exemplifies Foucault's (1978) claim that "power is everywhere" – power

circulates and exists in various networks, relationships, and structures (p. 93). Therefore, power is not concentrated in the hands of institutions and trickled down the social hierarchy; rather, power animates local practices and is distributed through all levels of society.

Whose Voice?

A Foucauldian conception of power could suggest that it is useful to examine power in community participation within the context of networks that exist and relationships that are formed (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Given that power always involves a relationship between at least two entities, it will vary “according to the nature of [those] relationships, the personal characteristics of the actors involved, [and] the resources (social, cultural, material) available within [those] relationships” (Gallagher, 2008, p. 403). Therefore, when analyzing the power dynamics involved in community participation, merely stating that men possess power over women in a community is simplistic and does not encapsulate the various networks and relationships that exist among community entities.

The discourse on community participation assumes communities to be homogenous, harmonious, and static entities, whose resources can collectively be mobilized for a perceived collective community good (see DeStefano, 1996). However, communities do not speak with a single voice. Communities in sub-Saharan Africa are heterogeneous, multi-layered, and governed by various hierarchies of power—determined to an extent by economic, ethnic, age, gender, caste, and other social factions that disagree about educational goals and management of local schools (Dunne & Humphreys, 2007). Since different hierarchies of power exist within communities, the question of concern should not be whether communities participate in school management; rather, the question should be who is participating—which community members are having their voices heard, which members are participating in decisions about schools, and whose agenda is being advanced. Very often it is the most visible, vocal, wealthier, more articulated, and educated groups that participate in managing schools. Given these restrictions, it is often those who are most vulnerable (women, girls, rural dwellers) who are excluded from community participation in school management (Moghadam, 2005; USAID, 2015). While women are not formally excluded from participating in the decision-making processes of school management, gender inequalities and social norms in the community frame how women and men participate. Eto (2012) argues that in mixed-sex activities of deliberation, for example, men tend to have more dominant roles than women, or meetings tend to be at times when women are not available. Therefore, while participation is open to all, power dynamics and gender relations between the sexes govern how participation is actualized and it is these relations of power that are often masked in the notion of community participation (Eto, 2012, p. 104). The next section will outline the connection between gender and power, as it relates to community participation.

Gender and Participation

As mentioned earlier, the justifications for community participation in school management are (a) to improve quality education and promote sustainable development, (b) to involve and empower communities in decision-making processes,

and (c) to develop the capacity for schools to address the particular needs of local communities. While these justifications aim to promote inclusivity and equity, the practice of community participation often obscures the gendered nature of power dynamics in communities —that is the ways in which notions of gender (societal expectations of men and women) interact with how power is exercised. Under the guise of community participation, communities are often perceived as gender-neutral units with shared interests in education. However, this perception neglects the importance of distinguishing who participates, how they participate, within which structures they participate, and at what stage they participate in school management. For example, the implementation of Parents Associations —formally organized committees through which parents can play an active role in education —throughout sub-Saharan Africa best exemplifies community participation strategies that did not distinguish who participates and how. The objectives of these Parent Associations were to create a liaison between the school and the community and to encourage children’s enrolment in school, to improve school performance, and to empower local communities (Compaoré, 2006; Mundy, 2008). During their formation, Parent Associations were particularly prominent in the rural regions, where the education sector has shifted from state-led school management to an increase in community-based school management (Sultana, 2009). When Parent Associations were formed, the ideal for these committees was to have both mothers and fathers participate. However, if we question who has an active role in Parents Associations, who is present at Parent Association meetings, or whose voice is valued, in most cases it is men who are present at committee meetings and their voices that are being heard (Spear & Dambekalns, 2016). These male-dominated Parents Associations run the risk of neglecting issues specific to the needs of girls – e.g., barriers to education for girls (access, enrolment, completion) and inequalities in education for girls (classroom participation, gender-based violence, menstrual hygiene management) (World Education, 2015).

Therefore, without a gendered perspective —one that situates the participant within the wider societal context and examines power relations involved —community participation, in fact, can reproduce inequalities present in wider society. For instance, women’s participation in the process of planning and decision-making regarding school resources and school management is constrained by gendered responsibilities (productive and reproductive), logistical constraints relating to women’s time, as well as local norms of what is deemed appropriate gender behavior (Agarwal, 1997; Cornwall, 2003). In other words, a woman’s ability to participate in planning and decision-making processes is governed by social perceptions of their abilities and social norms of women’s behavior and actions —e.g., speaking in a public forum (Sultana, 2009). Consequently, a woman’s autonomy to participate is curtailed by sociocultural ideologies of her capacities to participate.

As mentioned earlier, distinguishing who participates, how, and at what stages determines how ‘participation’ is implemented into practice. However, simply including women in participation strategies will not in itself enable them to exercise their agency or promote gender equality in practice because power relations that exist between men and women, and *among different women* are not addressed. Emphasis is placed on the

latter to highlight the hierarchies of power that exist *between* women and the harmful nature of collectively categorizing women into one group. Intersectional feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990) argue against homogenizing women into a single group as it assumes that all women share the same perspective by virtue of being women. An intersectional approach to community participation in sub-Saharan Africa requires an analysis of social inequalities among those who participate, one that moves beyond the gender marker but explores the interaction between different identity markers (ethnicity, race, age) that underpin social, political, and economic formal rules and informal norms and cultures (Evans, 2016). In other words, intersectional analysis of community participation in sub-Saharan Africa speaks directly to questions of power in relation to racism and sexism. Therefore, questioning what power dynamics are in place that enables some members of the community to participate while excluding others.

Cornwall (2000) posits that situating women on school committees as “a legitimating device may merely shore up and perpetuate inequitable ‘gender relations’ *between* women” (p. 13). At the community level, the myth of female solidarity can often wear thin as female participants may not identify themselves primarily, or even at all, with other women. Therefore, to assume female solidarity is to dislocate women from their social networks and relationships and to ironically “mask women’s agency in the pursuit of projects of their own that may be based on other lines of connectedness and difference” (Cornwall, 2000, p. 13). Indeed, notions of community participation ignore the fact that women experience simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion based on other social processes—such as, social relations of class, kinship, and marriage—all of which can complicate how people participate.

Participation and Women’s Associations

Community participation is often perceived as increasing the empowerment [1] and agency of women. However, as mentioned earlier, participation takes place within a context that is governed by pre-existing power relations and unequal dynamics that dictate the ways in which people participate. These power dynamics can constrain how women participate in school management and further perpetuate societal inequalities. Therefore, to examine whether participation can address power dynamics and in fact enhance women’s ‘agency’ requires us to look at developments within communities. Indeed, in response to the unequal dynamics prevalent in the communities and the advent of the global feminist movement, women in local communities throughout sub-Saharan Africa are getting organized and using their networks to gain social power and improve their situation.

Similarly, the promotion of girls’ education and the increase in school enrolment for girls has led to a heightened consciousness of unfair power dynamics that permeate society at large and more specifically within schools. In light of this reality, growing numbers of mothers in sub-Saharan Africa have organized their own Mothers Associations with the specific purpose of improving the education of their daughters. The objectives of Mothers Associations include: (a) to raise public awareness of the importance of girls’ education, (b) to encourage girls to enroll, (c) to monitor girls’ attendance, and (d) to remove barriers to education for girls (World Education, 2015).

The goals and mandate of Mothers Associations are unique to their community but in general focus on improving school learning conditions for girls (both in school and around the school community). Evidence suggests that mothers' associations in Benin have had a significant influence on the educational development of girls (World Education, 2009). For example, by setting up walking program to and from schools to protect girls from gender-based violence, intervening with families that have accepted child brides to negotiate plans that would allow girls to continue their primary school, and setting up daycare programs for teenage mothers to prevent teenage mothers from dropping out (USAID, 2007).

In Benin, as a form of activism, Mothers Associations have collaborated with NGOs to implement community workshops on sexual assault, to create presentations for International Women's Day, and to generate radio broadcasts in local languages on the benefits of educating girls (World Education, 2009). In fact, through their activism, mothers have extended their influence more broadly in economic and political realms. The more mothers took ownership of the education of girls in their community (ex. reaching out to different parents to encourage enrolment, raising funds to create housing for teachers, setting up a caregiving students for teenage mothers) the more confidence they received to voice their concerns and to be more visible in the affairs that concerned their community (USAID, 2007). Through mothers' associations, women gained a strong voice to both support and improved the learning environment for girls in school and to speak out in the community. It must be noted, that although Mothers Associations have brought women together, hierarchies of power still exist between women. Evidence demonstrates that in communities where literacy rates differ dramatically across the community population, women who are most literate tend to have their voices heard most, therefore, reproducing inequalities.

In their study of Mothers Associations in Burkina Faso, Spear and Dambekalns (2016) also note that in spite of the perception of solidarity among women, this is not often the case. Within Mossi society, there is a rigid hierarchy, among women as well as between the sexes. Spear and Dambekalns (2016) further note that women with status will control resources, be appointed to positions, and be listened to and followed by the other women. While hierarchies of power exist, mothers' associations in Benin have created a degree of solidarity among women interested in advocating for one cause: gender equality in education. This limited solidarity has become a source of leverage and empowerment for women to advocate in larger, male-dominated parents' associations, and to collaborate with other male partners in the community to promote gender equality (Compaoré, 2006). Using this leverage, women are challenging the power dynamics and tensions that exist: between women advocating in public forums/participating in school management, and sociocultural ideologies and expectations for women's behavior/ability to participate.

Conclusion

Community participation in school management has become hegemonic in development discourses and generally conceals the processes of unjust and illegitimate exercises of power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Ideally, community participation in school management

would (a) improve quality education and promote sustainable development, (b) involve and empower communities in decision-making processes, and (c) develop the capacity for schools to address the particular needs of local communities. While these objectives are noble in their aim, in reality, community participation is not a panacea to achieve gender equality because notions of community participation do not encompass the power dynamics and the complexities that govern community relationships. Therefore, a focused lens is required to examine how community participation can promote agency, transform power relations, and encourage inclusivity. Suggestion for future research is to further unpack the characteristics that encourage and allow Mothers Associations in certain communities to overcome hierarchies of power and to work in solidarity for gender equality.

Leva Rouhani is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Leva's doctoral research assesses how Mothers Associations in Benin have mobilized to address gender-based violence; whether the activities of Mothers Associations have led to women's empowerment; and whether Mothers Associations have had an impact on changing harmful social norms and attitudes that lead to or propagate violence against women and girls.

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Notes

[1] The term empowerment and its implementation remains highly contested, ambiguous, and difficult to measure. For the purpose of this paper, empowerment is a process that involves the mobilization of people, the building of capacity, the resisting of norms, and the creation of enabling environments.

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