

GENDER PERCEPTIONS AND SCHOOLING PREFERENCES IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

Sub-Saharan Africa is lagging behind in the EFA and MDG objectives. Economic and cultural theories attempt to explain the gender gap issue in the enrolment and dropout of boys and girls across the continent. Our aim is to study opinions and attitudes of Cameroonians about girls' schooling. The empirical material, gathered across six Cameroon provinces, consists of answers to a questionnaire (331 respondents), and discussions with 21 focus groups about the dilemma of marriage versus schooling. We elicited contrasted positions from our respondents. A large majority of participants supports girls' education, but parents face financial and social constraints that sometimes make them give priority to marry off their daughters. Our analysis thus highlights the combination of economic and cultural approaches in the data. Some geocultural as well as gender differences characterise our results and are reflected in the enrolment gender gap.

RÉSUMÉ

L'Afrique sub-Saharienne est à la traîne dans l'atteinte des objectifs de l'Éducation Pour Tous (EPT) et ceux du Millénaire pour le Développement (OMD). Des théories économiques et culturelles proposent des explications au sujet des disparités d'inscription et d'abandon scolaires des garçons et des filles à travers le continent. Notre but est d'étudier des opinions et des attitudes des Camerounais, relatives à la scolarisation des filles. Le matériel empirique, recueilli à travers six provinces du Cameroun, se compose des réponses à un questionnaire (331 répondants), et des discussions avec 21 groupes-témoins sur le dilemme du mariage et des études. Nous avons obtenu des positions contrastées de nos participants. Une large majorité d'entre eux soutient l'éducation des filles, mais les parents subissent des contraintes financières et sociales qui les forcent parfois à marier leurs filles. Notre analyse souligne ainsi la combinaison des perspectives économiques et culturelles dans les données. Quelques différences géoculturelles caractérisent nos résultats et sont reflétées dans les disparités de scolarisation relatives au genre.

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that in spite of improvements in female participation, girls' and women's access to education remains limited in several countries across the region. Once enrolled, girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys; their academic achievement is poorer than that of boys and few girls opt for math- or science-related fields of study (Odaga & Heneveld, 1996). Of the thirty countries considered at serious risk of not achieving the Education For All

(EFA) goal worldwide, half are in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2006).

Economic and cultural theories are complementary in the study of various factors affecting school registration and dropout. In this paper the objective is to get information of Cameroonians' opinions and viewpoints of the importance of girls' schooling. We use both quantitative and qualitative material, gathered in different parts of the country, to give a comprehensive picture of the viewpoints.

BACKGROUND

Formal schooling was considered undesirable for women in early modern Europe (Whitehead, 1999); as Rinehart (1992, 2) puts it:

"Received wisdom about the nature of woman included a belief in the undesirability, even to an assumption of the impossibility, of a fully intellectually active woman. To educate her is to equip her to become independent of rather than dependent on man, another subject rather than his object, active rather than passive, in short, to give her the means to strike out for an equality with men, whatever that equality may mean in a given time or culture. Such equality is frightening to many of both sexes."

Gender discrimination in western education was later exported to colonised territories. As one of the major colonial inputs in Africa, for the first happy few who acquired it, schooling meant for "civilizing the savages". It was at its best "education for adaptation" rather than "education for modernisation"; later, girls received "education for domesticity" (Koponen, 1994, 526). Boys received the skills necessary for employment in European enterprises as clerks, technical and agricultural instructors. "Much of the domestic education provided for girls was seen as particularly relevant for the future wives of the emerging African male élite." Waylen (1996, 62).

Various theories contribute to explain low schooling rates and gender asymmetry in post-colonial educational systems in Africa. The economic perspective highlights family size, resources constraints, sibling ranking, child labour, and parents' investment strategies (Alderman & King, 1998). Educational inequalities are better understood as due to the evaluation of returns to education and household return constraints than as due to gender stereotypes or reliance