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SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATION AMONG GIRLS IN ERITREA

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Abstract

Education is defined as the entire process of developing human abilities and behaviour. In other words, education is an organized and sustained instruction meant to transmit a variety of knowledge, skill, understanding and attitudes necessary for the daily activities of life (Sifuna and Ofiend, 1992). Although, societies have become increasingly aware that man and woman are equal in dignity, yet in many parts of the world the existing educational system still benefits men at the expenses of women. It simply shows that this equality is acknowledged theoretically, but in practice it is often ignored.. The present educational system of Eritrea also reflects this truth. Even though both boys and girls are enjoying equal rights and access to education before the law, yet discrimination still exists in many forms. Girls continue to face numerous stereotype gender bias in schools, families and the society and it hinders their learning and sustains their under education (Christiana Okojie, Onwuka Chiegwe and Edoja Okpokunu., 1996). In fact, women constitute the majority among the illiterate population.. For instance, according to 1994, Statistical report of Ministry of Education of Eritrea, women constitute 90 per cent of the illiterate population out of the total population of the country. This paper mainly focuses on the socio-geographical perspectives of education among girls in Eritrea and attempts to explore the causes of the existing gender disparity in education and their consequences.

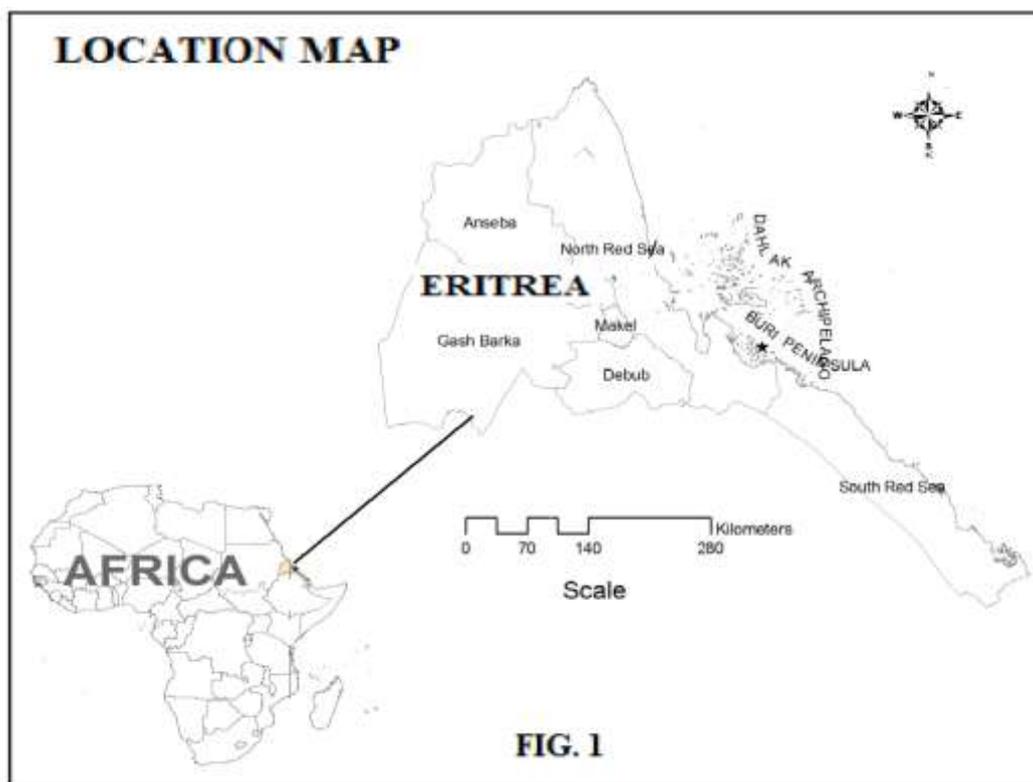
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1. Introduction

Eritrea is one of the east African countries located in the horn of Africa. It sprawls between 12° to 18° north and 36° to 44° east, is bounded by Red Sea in the northeast and east, by Djibouti in the southeast, by Sudan in the north and northwest and Ethiopia in the south, fig.1. So far as education in Eritrea is concerned, for the last four centuries; Eritrea was under the rule of different colonizers i.e., Turkey, Egypt, Italy, Britain and Ethiopia. Education in Eritrea was introduced by different religious institutions and colonial powers. In pre-colonial era, Eritrean education was dominated by the Orthodox Church and Islamic religious institutions. Different colonials established different educational system in their own way keeping in view their own benefits. But the proper system of education was established only after the independence of the country in 1991. In fact, it was after the independence of the country, the process of rebuilding education was again initiated. Both the quality and quantity of education increased. Every child got the right to education. As a result, the



majority of Eritrean children enrolled in the schools and thus the enrollment of the students increased dramatically (Ministry of Education, Nov. 1998). After the independence, the government of Eritrea has been continuously working on education and placing it among the top priorities. The state proclaimed “education for all” aimed at expanding education equally to all citizens of the country without any discrimination. In addition, the government incorporated “positive discrimination” to its policies for the female participation in socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions (Curle, Adam., 1970). For instance, in 1997, the government of Eritrea allowed a reduction in Grade Point Average (GPA) for the female

students who would participate in the university entrance exam (ESECE). That is a GPA less than 0.2 scored by female was acceptable for registration. This action was meant to change the negative attitudes of the society towards women and to improve their position in the society. Despite the noticeable progress made in improving the quality of education in general and girls' education in particular, in the last eight years, gender imbalances in education in Eritrea show stagnation at the secondary and especially at the tertiary levels though significant progress has been made at the primary level,. In 1998-1999, the female enrollment from grade 8 to 11 was 45 per cent, 40 per cent, 37 per cent, and 33 per cent respectively (Ministry of Education, 1999). This data shows that with every increase in the education level especially from the junior onwards, their number starts to decline.

Women were often excluded from the full exercise of those civil rights, which many men enjoyed. Education is one aspect of those civil rights hardly touched by women until recent time. Now equality is at least conceivable. There is every reason to suppose that with the general spread of education, the proportion of girls enrolled in the schools will increase. Yet, disparity between male and female exists at all levels of schooling (Giele, M., 1998). Therefore, this research paper attempts to make a general assessment of female students at two secondary schools i.e., Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School and Tsaeda-Christian Secondary School in many respects, such as percentage distribution of male and female students at all levels of school, withdrawal and repetition rate of female students, attitudes of the families towards female students and finally, the significant factors affecting female academic performance.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To observe the female and male enrollment ratio at all levels of the secondary school.
2. To determine the withdrawal and repetition rate of female students.
3. To identify the factors that affect female academic performance.
4. To suggest policy recommendation on the basis of findings.

3. Methodology

The present study is based both on primary and secondary data. To arrive at the research objectives, two data collection techniques have been employed, especially in case of primary data, i.e. through conducting interviews and distribution of questionnaires. Two Secondary schools are selected as a sample framework for the purpose in such a way that these schools will represent the whole country in one way or the other because one is located in the heart of the capital city, Asmara and the other is located at a village. These two Secondary schools are Keih Bahri Comprehensive secondary school and Tsaeda Christian secondary school, representing both the urban and rural areas respectively. Both of these schools are Government owned. They comprise both male and female regular students, with a population of 3038 in Keih Bahri Comprehensive secondary school and 899 in Tsaeda Christian secondary school. These two secondary schools are selected out of 16 secondary schools in Zoba Makael in central Eritrea. These two schools have been selected for the purpose. Firstly, because of the convenience or accessibility; secondly, it is calculated to be cost-effective, and finally, from these two schools, constructive information can be gained as there is a big gap

in educational standard between these two schools, one giving the real picture of urban centres and the other of rural areas.

Besides, secondary data pertaining to the present study was collected mainly from the published documents of Ministry of Education, Department of Statistics and planning and University of Asmara, Research, Training and Testing Centre and also from browsing the Internet.

Descriptive method is used for data analysis. The compiled data on different subjects have been tabulated and presented in an appropriate manner.

4. Procedure of Data Collection

As has been mentioned earlier in the methodology that two data collection techniques have been employed i.e. interviews with the concerned people and questionnaire distribution. The interviews include both male and female students, teachers, school Directors and parents. The interviews were open ended. A total of 15 respondents were selected systematically for the interview from both the schools. That is, the Directors of both the Secondary schools, and a total of 8 teachers. Out of this, 6 (2 males and 4 females) were from Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School and 2 (1 male and 1 female) from Tsaeda Christian Secondary School, and a case study includes 4 female students from Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School and one from Tsaeda Christian Secondary School.

The other method employed was questionnaire distribution in order to give ample freedom in answering sensitive questions, such as family income, parental educational level, and academic performance of the respondents as well. The population of the study consisted of high school (8-11 grades) female students. A total of 94 respondents were identified to take part in responding the questionnaires. Respondents were identified through Systematic Sampling technique. That is, 78 female students that comprise 5 per cent of the total 1564 female students were drawn from Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School, representing the urban area, and the rest 16 students who comprise the same per cent of 318 female students drawn from Tsaeda Christian Secondary School, representing the rural area. Therefore, a self-administrated questionnaire that contains 24 objective type questions were prepared and distributed to the systematically selected 94 female students with the help of their teachers. Finally, these interviews, questionnaires and archival materials coupled with my own observation allowed me to arrive at good inference for generalization. The given Table-1, shows the sample size of both Secondary schools.

Table-1 Sample size of both the Secondary schools

Schools	Total No. of Female students	Respondents of the Questionnaires	Respondents of the interview
Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School	1564	78(5%)	4(5%)
Tsaeda Christian Secondary School	318	16(5%)	1(5%)
Total	1882	95(5%)	5(5%)

Source: By the researcher himself

5. Findings and Analysis of the Study

So far as findings and analysis of the study is concerned, both the responses to the interviews and questionnaires are dealt separately.

5.1 On Responses to the Interviews

The responses and comments of the interview coupled with statistical data from Ministry of Education are presented and discussed below, table-1 and 2.

Table-2 Enrolment rate for both male and female students at Secondary level 1998/99

Year	Enrollment at Secondary Level			Gross Enrollment Ratio in (%)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1991/92	27627	14281	13346	12.2	12.2	12.1
1992/93	31531	17141	14390	13.6	14.3	12.7
1993/94	32756	19432	13324	13.7	15.8	11.5
1994/95	36728	22097	14631	15.0	17.5	12.3
1995/96	39188	23713	15475	15.5	18.3	12.7
1996/97	40594	24262	16332	15.7	18.2	13.0
1997/98	41615	25198	16417	15.7	18.4	12.7
1998/99	47533	29777	17756	17.4	21.2	13.4

Source: Ministry of Education, Department of Statistics and Planning (1998-2000)

The above table shows that the female enrollment at secondary level has increased from 13,346 in 1991/92 to 17,756 in 1998/99. But in terms of **Gross Enrollment Ratio**, it is only an increase of 1.3 percentage points. But in case of male students' enrollment, only during the academic years of 1991/92, it increased from 14,281 to 29,777, which in terms of **Gross Enrollment Ratio** means an increase of 9 percentage points. Thus there is a big gap between the female and male students enrollment according to the given data.. Not only this, there is too much disparity between the enrollment rate of rural and urban areas depending on the accessibility of the schools. For instance, the urban Centre Asmara being the most accessible to Secondary level education accounts for the highest female enrollment. In Asmara, the gap between male and female enrollment is comparatively less. But at the same time, if we look at the female enrollment rate by level, it declined further.

Table-3 Student's Educational Performance from grade 8-10 in 1999/2000

School	Grade	No. of Students		Total
		Male	Female	
Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school	8 th	650	589	1,239
	9 th	637	479	1,116
	10 th	595	388	983
	11 th			
Tsaeda- Christian secondary school	8 th	269	190	459
	9 th	249	95	344
	10 th	241	56	297
	11 th			

Source: Ministry of Education, Department of Statistics and Planning (1999-2000)

The given table-3 clearly displays that the number of female students decreases with increasing educational level. For example, according to the Statistical data of Ministry of

Education 1999-2000, the number of female students at Tsaeda Christian Secondary School decreased from 190 in 8th grade to 56 in 10th grade. Similarly, for Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school, out of 589 female students at grade 8, only 388 female students ended up to grade 10. This data shows that the proportion of female students falling with increasing level of education. Not only this, the small number of female students at the university level is also evident from Table-4.

Table-4 University Entrance Exam (ESECE) result for Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school and Tsaeda Christian Secondary school

Number of Candidates				Candidates admitted to University								
Schools/exam Centre	Regular		Total	Degree program		Diploma program		Certificate program		Total		Sum Total
	M	F		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school	215	192	407	44	25	13	3	24	11	81	39	120
Tsaeda-Christian secondary school	79	18	97	11	0	3	0	13	1	27	1	28

Source: University of Asmara, Research, Training, and Testing Centre (2000)

Table-4 clearly shows that the number of female students sitting for University Entrance Examination has been less than the male students. But this difference for the students of urban Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School is much less than the one for the students of rural Tsaeda-Christian Secondary School. Further, while 39 female students of urban Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School took admission to University, only one female student of rural Tsaeda-Christian Secondary School took admission that too in Certificate programme. Thus this Table not only reveals the existence of disparity between sexes pursuing secondary education but also disparity between urban and rural educational institutions.

Table-5 Student's Educational Performance from grade 8-10 in 1999/2000

School	Grade	Withdrawal		Promotion		Repetition	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Keih-Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school	8 th	6.4	5.0	27.6	38.7	7.7	14.4
	9 th	5.0	4.3	35.4	31.8	9.5	13.8
	10 th	5.5	4.7	35.3	33.7	11.4	9.3
	11 th						
Tsaeda-Christian secondary school	8 th	10.4	5.2	37.7	21.6	10.8	14.1
	9 th	13.4	5.4	35.6	23.8	7.5	14.2
	10 th	15.9	3.7	32.7	17.8	7.9	21.9
	11 th						

Source: Ministry of Education, Department of Statistics and Planning (1999-2000)

A glance on the above table clearly shows that with respect to the students' school performance, as most of the interviewees also agree, is not the enrollment rate at the Secondary level. But drop out, repetition, and withdrawals are the worst problems. According to the given table 2, improvements are seen over the past eight years. However, still there is a

relatively high repetition rate for girls than that of boys. Especially high repetition rate for girls is observed at the end of the first year of the secondary level. In both the schools, high repetition rate for girls is observed. But the withdrawal rates were almost proportional for both genders.

This study also reveals that comparatively there exists high withdrawal rate among the rural female students than the urban female students. According to the Director of Tsaeda Christian Secondary school, withdrawal rate among rural female students and high repetition rate among urban female students is mainly because of the rigid traditional attitudes in the rural society. People believe that secondary education is sufficient especially for girls. Hence, they prefer them to marry than to pursue their education. Moreover, from security point of view, the parents are afraid to allow their daughters to walk long distances to school. Hence, distance of school from their residence also matters for their withdrawal. On the other hand, the lack of interest in schooling, lack of confidence, they more interested in beauty and are confirming with men's attitude that females serve males simply mean that the females are meant to take care of domestic affairs, are some of the reasons mentioned by both genders for the high repetition rate among urban female students.

An attempt was also made to find out reasons that why female participation at secondary level was so low? And what the attitudes were towards female education both in rural and urban areas? Most interviewees often referred to the role of tradition in female education. But what is the substance of traditional attitudes in this context?

The assumption was that since most of the women's' life is spent in performing household tasks, people might feel that it is a waste of time and money to let her study subjects outside this domain. Moreover, the society as a whole has low opinion about women's capacity. In terms of mental and physical abilities, some parents question the intelligence of girls. They think that, "women do not have same mental ability as men". They often say, "When a girl is educated it becomes difficult for her to get a husband. If the man is illiterate there would be a social inequality, which he would not like. "On the contrary an illiterate girl can marry an educated man" is commonly seen and it is acceptable norm in the society. And one finds phrases like "she will marry an educated man and make us proud". Evidently many people believe that a girl is risking the loss of her good reputation as she attends higher education. The substance of traditional attitudes in the context of female education, as expressed through the interview responses seems to be dominated by a general low opinion about girls. The answer of one father from the rural areas of Tsaeda Christian says that, "she will marry and what she has learned at school will be good for her husband, not for me." This quotation reflects the impact of traditional attitudes and behaviours of the society on the issue of girl's participation in education.

Many female interviewees also mention poverty as a cause of their low participation. Analysis of the data shows that since most of the female students are from the poor families, they are expected to help with household chores. Most answers given by female interviewees reflect the necessity for a girl to help their mother by looking after younger children or taking over some household chores. They do not have enough time to study. For the parents , making a girl work at home is proper and acceptable. Although, some mothers express that they do not want their daughters to work with them, but they also mention the necessity of their cooperation. Rich families on the other hand by assigning maid who assists with

household chores help their daughters so that they can have enough time to study. The above observation finds apt substantiation in the words of a female student from Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary school; she says, “I am a student of grade 10. I have been failed two times, once at grade 8 and the other at grade 9. This is because I do not study at all. I have a lot of work to do at home. Since I am the only girl in my family. I have a duty to share the household tasks with my mother. But my mother does not want me to spend much time in household work, but I cannot let her do alone. Therefore, I am always busy at home; rather it is schooling time, which I consider as free time.”

5.2 On Responses to the questionnaires. The second part of the study deals with the questionnaires. The questionnaire was distributed among 94 female students in both Keih Bahri Comprehensive Secondary School and Tsaeda Christian Secondary School. Out of 94 questionnaires, the responses received were 80. In fact, the questionnaires were designed in such a way that touches all the important socio-economic and educational aspects, which are directly or indirectly concerned with the education, especially female education.

At the beginning, the survey attempted to find out the social characteristics of the respondents and their influence on the education.

5.2.1 Living status of the parents

. As Table- 7 shows, perhaps because the females are younger, they are more likely to have living parents. According to 75 per cent of the respondents both their father and mother are alive, for 8.5 per cent of the respondents it is only father and for 12.5 per cent of the respondents it is mother only. While very few stated that both father and mother were not alive.

Table-6 Living Status of Parents

Status	No. of Respondents	Per cent (%)
Both alive	60	75
Father only	07	8.75
Mother only	10	12.5
Both alive	03	3.75
Total	80	100

Source: Field survey by the researcher

5.2.2. The family income

Assuming income of the family influences female education, the questions were designed accordingly. As Table-6 indicates, most of the students are from poor family background whose average income is below 1000 Nakfa (Local currency) per month. That is more than 80 per cent of the respondents were from families whose income is below 1000 Nakfa.

Table-7 Family Income

Income	No. of Respondents	Per cent (%)
< 500 Nakfa	27	33.75
501 - 1000 Nakfa	36	45
1001 – 1500 Nakfa	12	15
1500 Nakfa >	05	6.25
Total	80	100

Source: Field survey by the researcher

5.2.3 Parental education level

In this regard, according to the respondents, more than 60 per cent of the female students have fathers with at least Secondary school education, 20 per cent have fathers with at least College level education. On the contrary, more than 50 per cent of the female students have illiterate mothers and almost 25 per cent have mothers with at least some secondary education. Very few about 3 per cent have mothers with at least College level education, table-7.

Table-8 Parental Education Level

Education Level	Father		Mother	
	Number	Per cent %	Number	Per cent %
Illiterate	17	21.25	33	41.25
Elementary	21	26.25	25	31.25
Junior	14	17.5	13	16.25
Secondary	20	25	07	8.75
College	08	10	02	2.5
Total	80	100	80	100

Source: Field survey by the researcher

Hence, from the above data one can possibly infer that both family economic level and parental education level have a great impact on female academic performance. Parents' education level has been correlated with parent's attitude towards girls' education.

5.2.4 Parents' attitude

In fact, the most influential factor affecting girl's education, as per the present study, is parents attitude towards girls' education. Females perceive their parents' attitude as indifferent as can be observed from Table-8.

Table-9 Parent's attitude towards Female Education

Parental Attitude	No. of Respondents	Per cent %
They do not accept	03	3.75
They say nothing	27	33.75
They always encourage	30	37.5
They differ in their opinion	20	25
Total	80	100

Source: Field survey by the researcher

While about forty per cent parents are discouraging towards female's education, the rest sixty per cent parents are ambivalent towards it, which implies that most of the female students are not getting unequivocal encouragement and support from their parents. Of the parents, between father and mother, , 45 per cent of the respondents opined father as more helpful, while 15 per cent said mother, and rest 40 per cent said both. Therefore, it is possible to infer from the responses of the majority of the students that although female students get less encouragement in general, but it comes from their fathers and this could be related to the parent's educational level.

6. Conclusion

As per our initial research hypothesis, the participation and success of girls in education is determined by cultural influences and expectations. Although many strategies and interventions addressing constraints have been used to increase girls' enrollment and their achievement in primary, secondary and tertiary education, yet disparity at all these levels persists. In case of educational perspective of girls' in Eritrea, this disparity increases significantly as one climbs the educational ladder. Consequently, very few females than males pursue their secondary education successfully. The male to female disparity in education is even worse in rural areas rather than the urban areas. While, the repetition rate is observed to be higher for urban female students than for rural female students, withdrawal rate is higher for rural females than urban one.

As per the findings of the present study the main reasons for this gender disparity in education is the rigid traditional attitudes and beliefs held by the society towards women. Accordingly, the findings significantly support our hypothesis that states cultural influences and expectations determine the participation and success of girls in education. According to the information gathered through interviews and questionnaires responded by the female students, it is evident that they are not motivated at all by their parents. The absence of proper motivation from parents results in the lack of competency. Girls' aspirations are also discouraged by the attitudes of male teachers and fellow students, who do not hesitate to convey directly or indirectly the message that, "women's place is in the home." They often say that a girl should seek a husband. This too discourages female students and creates lack of interest in schooling. Perhaps, parental income and socio-economic status as well as educational level of parents have important roles to play in female education. That is girl from lower socio-economic background are likely to develop lower self-confidence and sense of self-esteem. Moreover, girls are expected to perform a formidable amount of hard work. The daily chores of the houses are tedious, time consuming and exacting. Many other reasons were also identified such as, early marriage, pregnancy, conflict and tension within the family, poor educational quality and distance of schools from the community as constraints to education for the girls.

Therefore, there is a need for more action and experimental interventions to demonstrate simple but cost effective strategies for bridging these gaps. However, in order to design sustainable strategies, analytical research is required to develop deeper into factors that explain girls' persistent limited access to and performance in education compared to boys. But whatever objectives we may specify for educating girls, the prime step should be to eliminate the stereotypic attitudes of the society towards women in general and girls education in particular.

Girls' educational advance is also associated with declining fertility rates because it reduces mortality and unwanted pregnancy of teenagers, raises the age of marriage and may influence attitudes towards contraception.

Improving the status of women will therefore require a reorientation of development effort, a redefinition of key concepts such as 'education and empowerment', and gender development planning to improve the range and quality of integrated gender respective operations. A conceptual approach to gender issues in education is of immediate necessity to improve the

gender sensitivity of educational provision and analysis and to offer an acceptable or common approach for addressing gender issues in education.

Finally, it is worth recalling that women possess 50 per cent brainpower of the world. Thus, the need to educate this 'other half' of the community means better utilization of the human resources for the development of a nation.

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