

Rural Livelihoods, HIV/AIDS and Women's Activism: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Primary Education in Uganda

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Abstract

In Uganda, various stake holders including the government, NGOs, and women activists have undeniably played important roles in the combat for gender equality in primary education. However, there is evidence that success has not yet been realized. This article is based on research conducted to discover why gender inequalities in Uganda's Universal Primary Education persist despite deliberate measures to eradicate them. Two questions are addressed, namely: does HIV/AIDS contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in rural areas? What is the importance of linking theory and practice in women's activism in such a context? The findings reveal that HIV/AIDS affects household access to essential livelihood assets prompting responses and pathways incompatible with girls' schooling. These included girls' involvement in sex for economic gains, which obviously exposed them to the risk of contracting HIV. A vicious cycle of HIV/AIDS and gender inequality therefore exists despite women's protracted engagement in activism even in the era of HIV/AIDS. I argue that there is a need to refocus women's activism towards more practical rather than theoretical engagement. Apparently, there has been too much theorizing about the need to perceive the achievement of gender equality as a social justice issue. Such a perception must be accompanied by corresponding practice rather than just rhetoric. For example, the vicious cycle of HIV/AIDS and inequality could possibly be broken by a radical feminist movement capable of, not only advocating for, but also instituting practical measures to eradicate gendered discrimination at the household level to begin with. In addition, there is a need for the provision of better HIV/AIDS medical care and children's school requirements particularly in rural areas. There after, we shall comfortably count the achievements of women activism for educational gender equity in Uganda and Africa at large.

Keywords: AIDS orphanhood; AIDS-induced Poverty; Educational Gender equality; Rural Livelihoods; Vulnerability, ethnography.

Introduction

Uganda is one of the countries that have made deliberate efforts to achieve gender equality in all aspects of life. These efforts are manifested in the guarantee of equality in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (Government of Uganda 1995), the establishment of the Ministry in charge of women and gender affairs in 1986, the National Gender policy (1997), the National Action Plan of women (1999) among others. Within the education sector, various measures have also been put in place to facilitate the

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achievement of gender equality. These include the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the problem of educational gender inequalities remains unabated (see Kakuru, 2003; Kasente, 2003; Okuni, 2003; Kakuru, 2006). Several factors have been considered responsible for the persistence of educational inequalities including the work of patriarchal beliefs, practices and values (Kwesiga, 2003, Kakuru, 2006). HIV and AIDS have also featured among the factors reinforcing the existing forms of social inequalities including gender (Ellis, 2000; Barnett, 2004; Muller, 2004; Mohlahlane, 2006; Kakuru, 2007). Given that various initiatives have been put in place to facilitate the achievement of gender equality in education without much success, it is important to advocate for the need to refocus women's activism towards more practical rather than theoretical engagement.

This paper reports on research which identifies the various ways in which household processes influence schooling in the face of HIV/AIDS and how the role of women's activism can be useful in changing the status quo. It begins with a brief explanation of the HIV/AIDS situation in Uganda and the nature of Ugandan feminism. I then provide a brief background on the rural livelihood context and methods used in the study. In presenting the findings, I discuss the contribution of rural household livelihood situation on the persistence of gender inequality. I also identify the potential of women's activism to remedy the situation.

Situation of HIV/AIDS in Uganda

The first Ugandan cases of HIV/AIDS occurred in Rakai district in 1982. By then, the spread of HIV infection was attributed to interactions between illegal traders on the shores of Lake Victoria and the then National Resistance Movement (NRM) guerrilla war (Aspaas, 1999). The situation was not helped by the legacy of Uganda's political and economic breakdown of the 1970s and early 1980s which had heightened the poverty levels (Barnett & Whiteside, 2002). It is not surprising that Uganda is one of the countries that have had high HIV prevalence rates in the world since there seems to be an implicit relationship between HIV/AIDS and poverty (UNDP, 2002).

Like in other developing countries, HIV/AIDS in Uganda has affected the most productive people aged 15-49 years (UAC, 2006). Among this age-group, the prevalence varies between males (5.0%) and females (7.5%), and it is the leading cause of death (MOH and ORC Macro, 2006). The current HIV prevalence rates indicate regional variations as well as variations between urban and rural residents. The most tragic mode of transmission so far has been heterosexual activity, which accounts for about 84 % of the cases (UAC, 2003). Others include mother to child (vertical) transmission, sharing of un-sterilized piercing instruments and traditional cultural practices like circumcision, widow cleansing and widow inheritance. Despite the pandemic nature of AIDS, Uganda has made great progress in reducing the national adult HIV prevalence rate from a high 29% in the 1990s to a current 6.4% (UAC, 2006). Unfortunately, a concern has been expressed over the possibility of rising HIV infection rates possibly due to complacency as well as a decreased intensity of prevention programs, funding and political commitment (MoH, & ORC Marco, 2006).

The impact of HIV/AIDS on the education sector is well-documented (see Kelly, 2000; Bennell et al., 2002; Evans, 2002; World Bank, 2002; Boler, 2003; Amone &

Bukuluki, 2004a; 2004b; Cohen, 2004; Delamonica et al., 2004; Kelly, 2004; Rugalema & Khanye, 2004; Bennell, 2005; Kakuru, 2006). A number of civil society organizations (including women's organizations) have also been instrumental in supporting the education of children affected and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. Most of the provided support is in terms of tuition fees, school materials such as furniture, books, pens and very little psychosocial support. Such support and facilitation does not guarantee the achievement of gender equality and it is no wonder that children's educational outcomes—particularly girls—remain unsatisfactory (see Kakuru, 2006). This paper highlights the need for women activism to work on ways of averting the effects of household processes on girls' education in the face of HIV/AIDS. The following section presents the nature and role of existing women's activism in Uganda's education.

Women's Activism in Uganda

In the past, the feminist movement in Uganda faced a lot of challenges and political suppression. For example, in 1978, after establishing the National Council of Women (NCW), President Iddi Amin banned all other women's organizations and their activities. (Tripp, 2000). In 1985, the then government under UPC (Uganda People's Congress) also attempted to control the delegation to the UN conference in Nairobi. However, the 1985 women's conference later became a turning point in Uganda's women's activism because the challenges were an impetus for a more independent women's movement.

Women's activism in Uganda begun to flourish in the mid-1980's when the National Resistance Movement's (NRM) increased women's involvement in leadership through the implementation of affirmative action in political decision-making (Tripp, 2002). The NRM government established the then Ministry of Women in Development (currently Ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development) in 1986. The NRM government also facilitated promulgation of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda where the guarantee of equality for all became enshrined. In 1997, the National Gender policy was established as part of Government policy of mainstreaming gender concerns in the national development process. The policy outlines strategies to achieve these objectives and the institutional framework, including roles and responsibilities of the line ministries, NGOs and the private sector. The National Action Plan for Women was later established in 1999. It outlines the strategic actions Uganda has to implement to concretize the 1995 Beijing platform of Action.

The growth of Uganda's women's movement was also linked to the then donor emphasis on non-governmental organizations' activities which further increased education and leadership opportunities for women. Women's activism organizations have indeed placed the education of girls and women high on their priority lists. Organizations such as ACFORDE (Action for Development) since the 1980's undertook activities to further stimulate interest in education for example through community mobilization (Kikampikaho & Kwesiga, 2002). Other associations such as FIDA (Federation of Uganda Women Lawyers), ACTIONAID Uganda, UCRNN (Uganda Child Rights NGO Network), FAWE (U) – Forum for African Women Educationalists, Uganda chapter and others have also engaged in advocacy and provision of services like bursaries and educational support to poor girls, improving sanitation in some schools, community mobilization and sensitization.

However, the challenge of persistent educational inequalities continues to blur the gains from the women's movement. For example, facilitating the enrolment of girls in school is an achievement but the challenge of how to keep those girls enrolled in school remains. Research has shown that most obstacles to girls' education are rooted within the household processes and practices. Uganda's women's activism has not yet achieved success in advocating for the institution of measures to counteract the negative impact of household processes and practices on girls schooling. This paper sounds a wake-up call for all those involved in women activism to seriously consider this as a matter of urgency.

Research context

The research was carried out in Luwero district in central rural Uganda between 2004 and 2005. People in the study area are subsistence farmers who grow crops and raise a few animals for food but sometimes have a little surplus for sale. Households which participated in the study had had an experience with HIV and AIDS by losing a person, having an infected person, hosting a child or children affected and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS or at least supporting or neighboring an AIDS-afflicted household. At the household level, 36 AIDS-afflicted households were initially selected to participate in the research. From the original 36 households, eight were later purposively selected for in-depth study through observation of their scheduled and unscheduled activities. Pupils (8 boys and 8 girls) from the eight households were also observed at the school level.

The initial plan was to sample 18 female-headed households among the planned 36. However, as it turned out, most of the households that had been affected by HIV/AIDS were female-headed. Only eight out of the 36 were male-headed and these were actually grand-parent headed households. The explanation for this was that men who had lost wives due to AIDS were normally quick to re-marry. Thereafter, they were unwilling to have discussions about the subject and for that reason, they could not be involved in the study. This made it impossible to sample by household headship.

Although focusing on AIDS affected households might appear to be stigmatizing for them, this was not an issue at all. At the beginning of the study, I asked some filter questions to know if the household was affected by HIV/AIDS and whether or not they were willing to participate in the study. Of the households which were recommended to me by the Local Council chairperson, only one denied having had an experience with HIV/AIDS and that household was automatically disqualified from the sample. Within these households, the heads were interviewed and where necessary other members were involved as well. The members were encouraged to participate fully and depending on the researchers' judgment of their willingness to participate, eight households were selected for in-depth study. The average household size was 6-8 members.

The research was aimed at discovering the interface between the impact of HIV/AIDS on rural households and the persistence of gender inequalities in Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE). I conducted an ethnographic study in three primary schools and their villages. Data were collected through participant observation, life stories, in-depth interviews within households and with key informants. I worked at each of the schools as a teacher and researcher where I observed lessons, and school activities such as assemblies, prayers, general cleaning, and sports. Ethnographic interviews at school were conducted with pupils (including the 16 under in-depth study) and teachers.

At the household level parents/guardians were interviewed. Interviews with children and teachers were conducted in English and household interviews were conducted in local language (Luganda) and later translated into English. To ensure accurate representation of the data, transcription and translation were done by a research assistant who had participated in the interview process and was a native Luganda speaker. The interviews sought to understand the interface between a range of in-school and household factors affecting children's school attendance and school/classroom participation.

Regarding the ethical procedures, there was a challenge of obtaining consent from children below the age of legal consent. However, consent was first sought from the parents and guardians of the pupils. In addition, pupils were also requested to consent and informed that they were free to choose which questions to answer and those not to answer. Permission to conduct the research was sought from all relevant authorities including the local leaders.

The interviews were recorded in notebooks and audiocassette tapes, which were later transcribed into text. The notes and interview transcripts were coded into the relevant study themes that were read and interpreted for meaning by examining various trends and patterns which explained specific behaviour and events. Conclusions were later drawn on the basis of the meaning derived from the trends, patterns and frequencies presented in the data.

Research Findings

The study shows that after the implementation of UPE in Uganda, school enrolment skyrocketed. This narrowed the gender gap in enrolment and benefited the poor, rural and disabled children who would otherwise have not been able to access school. At Tulo and Tuso primary schools, the number of girls enrolled was higher than that of boys (see table 1). At the study schools, generally lower primary classes were bigger than upper primary classes in size but there was no significant difference in the ratio of girls to boys. However, increased girls' enrolment did not guarantee total equality. The research revealed that inequalities in achievement remain unabated. This was mainly attributed to the nature of livelihood activities and general household processes. People in the study area rely on household labor intensive technology to care for the sick, to transport goods to the market for sale and to earn any income. The study communities were also characterized by a gender-biased division of household labor and allocation of household resources. Consequently, there were disparities in school attendance, inequalities in educational achievement and general enjoyment of children's educational rights.

School	Type	Girls	Boys	Total
Tulo	Public	392	364	756
Tumo	Public	118	132	250
Tuso	Private	340	120	460

Table 1: School Enrollment by Gender

School Attendance

Women and girls undertook most of the tasks for the benefit of members of the entire household. In the face of HIV/AIDS, female's household tasks are multiplied. In

addition to the daily routine tasks, females have to take care of patients, and orphans due to AIDS. Taking care of an AIDS patient is extremely expensive in terms of labor. If such a patient is bed-ridden, they require assistance to take medication, feed, sit, stand and so on.

In households that had bed-ridden patients, girl children missed school often to supplement their mothers' or grandparents' labor in care giving for the sick or in other tasks such as taking care of younger siblings, cooking, and working in the garden. Out of the 36 households that participated in the study, six had bed-ridden patients, of whom four were orphans living with HIV/AIDS, under the care of grand parents. Whenever the children under grandparent care were bedridden, the older girls in the household bore a significant amount of the burden. I observed that grandparents were very good at getting things done systematically but in most of these cases, they needed somebody to be help them run around and support the patient to go to the toilet, and do other quick errands. That is how some girls ended up missing school to give the required support.

Even in households where patients were not bed-ridden, girls' school attendance was still affected. For example, all people in the study communities who had taken the HIV test were members of a local post-test club (PTC). They had regular meetings every Wednesday at the Voluntary Counseling and Testing Centre (VCT). Among the objectives of the PTC was to encourage and support each other, and to promote behavior change and positive living. I observed that most girls who had been identified as belonging to AIDS-afflicted household missed school consistently on Wednesday because they had to house-sit. The age of girls affects their ability to participate in household chores and other activities during school time. In households with no older girls, it was normal to ask the neighbors to help out although in some cases boys also got involved. This implies that girls in lower primary, and boys generally were less affected than girls in upper primary.

Even worse, all households in the study communities had memberships in the village funeral associations. This was an arrangement in which every member household was obligated to contribute food in kind, money and labor whenever a member household lost a person. Male labor was required to dig the grave and put up a shade for mourners, while female labor was necessary for food preparation and service. Whenever there was a funeral in the community, some girls missed school, as they had to stand in for their mothers who were participating in the funeral activities. In the rare cases where women were unable to contribute labor at the funerals (for example due to illness), they sent their daughters and nieces (school girls). Cases of girls who missed school because they had to step in for their mothers or female guardians in providing labor at the funerals were thus not uncommon at the study schools. Although men also performed certain roles at the funerals which required them to be absent from their households, there was almost no urgency for their labour to be substituted by the boys. Boys' school attendance was only affected if the death/funeral was in the family or close neighborhood.

The situation above was much worse for girls who were fostered because of AIDS. It was found out that girls who lived with relatives after the death of their parents usually complained about discrimination. For example, whenever there was an emergency that required somebody supplement adults' labour, they were always the first to be asked to step in. Boys in a similar situation would only be asked to step in if there was no older girl in the household. The study thus shows that girls and boys were not

provided with equal opportunities to attend school daily. At the moment, the efforts of women activism have been directed at advocating for material and financial resources for children affected and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. The issues that continue to derail the struggle for gender equality are still rooted in the nature of livelihood pathways, and culture as manifested in the household processes. Women's activism in Uganda must devise strategies of advocating for the reduction of the educational burdens of rural girls. One way is to advocate for a law against involvement of girls in household and village tasks during school time.

Household Resource Allocation and Educational Achievement

The study revealed that there was gender inequality in the allocation of household resources. By resources, I mean time and money invested by children on schooling. Boy children had more access to time for school purposes mainly because they were allocated fewer household tasks than girls. As such, there were observed gender differences in tardiness. For example, although the official time for pupils to report at school was 8.00 am, very few girls – particularly in upper primary – made it, yet for the majority of the boys it was always possible to be at school on time. Moreover, tardiness at the study schools was punishable. Children who came late were asked to do extra tasks at school when others were having break. In cases where they failed to complete the punishment tasks within the break time, they missed the lesson(s) after break. Almost every day, I observed children being punished for various reasons among which tardiness was very common.

Some pupils do heavy work before school in the morning and by the time they reach school, they are probably less able to concentrate compared with others who are still fresh as captured in the following excerpt:

“I leave home after working in the garden and reach school already tired. At school, sometimes we are allocated work in the gardens if one arrives late. In addition, these days Mr. ‘A’ enters class very early and begins the lesson, but people at home do not understand this. They think when we are at school we are just resting and therefore should do a lot of work before. I have to work in the garden at home, come to school running, and sometimes even hungry. Only my mother would understand my situation but since she passed away, life is so difficult ...” *Girl orphan, Tulo.*

Most such girls were from AIDS affected households either female-headed or grandparent headed. Although girls from ‘normal’ households also suffered similar challenges, the magnitude varied because their livelihood situations also differed. For example, there was less need to supplement household labour if none had been lost due to death or illness. Pupils from AIDS affected households therefore had more livelihood challenges that directly impacted on their schooling.

These challenges were more pronounced at public schools where households depended on cultivation for livelihood than at the private school where the majority of parents/guardians earned some income from jobs or trade. At Tuso primary school, only 7 pupils (4 girls, 3 boys) had lost parents due to AIDS out of a population of 460, and at Tumo, 56 out of 250 pupils admitted to having lost their parents to AIDS. The differences

in numbers of orphans enrolled at both schools might suggest that households with more challenging livelihood situations send their children to government schools and those that are better off send theirs to the private school. This might explain why gender differences in tardiness were less noticeable at the private school.

Apart from time, there were gender differences in access to income for school needs. Whereas boys were normally allowed to work for cash to spend on school needs, girls were generally confined within the household. Consequently, boys had easier access to money for lunch and learning materials such as exercise books and pens unlike girls. The study findings show that due to household restrictions on 'acceptable' means of earning income, some girls had resorted to engaging in sexual relations with older men in exchange for gifts and money. Such gifts were as small as a bottle of soda, an exercise book, and body lotion. One of the schools was located quite close to the small trading centre and this was an opportunity for men to seduce school girls.

The most notorious group of men guilty of enticing girls with gifts and money was found to be that of boda-boda (motor cycle taxi) cyclists who operated near one of the schools. These men were assured of access to daily income and therefore found it quite easy to lure girls with cheap gifts. This had further consequences for girls' survival in school. For example, the temptation for some girls to get involved in sexual relationships in exchange for cash caused pregnancy and consequently school dropout. Although it was difficult to establish what proportion of girls were involved with older men, it was a common complaint among parents and teachers during the conversations. The issue also came up in some interviews with children as well, but nobody could directly point out the culprits. This made it impossible to come up with statistics.

However, the study shows that the major reason for school dropout among girls was pregnancy, while for boys it was the temptation to work. According to the study findings, there was gender inequality in the allocation of household resources since girls had access to less time to attend school as well as work for money. Such differences in opportunities also produced differences in learning outcomes. There was a culture of recognizing pupils who performed well in term examinations and in all three schools, girls in lower primary were always better than boys but the opposite was true for upper primary. This might suggest that the older girls faced challenges that directly impacted on their ability to learn and achieve as highly as the boys. In this research, household resource allocation was cited among the causes of differences in performance between lower and upper primary girls. The challenge for women activism is how to advocate for a change in the way resources are allocated in the household in order to facilitate the provision of equal educational opportunities for all children.

Inequalities in Educational Rights

The research shows that there were gender differences in children's enjoyment of educational rights. Although the Government had put in place UPE to facilitate access to schooling for all children, this was more of myth than a reality. Many children were in fact 'part-time' pupils since they attended school only a few days in weeks. The gender differences in children's enjoyment of the right to education are therefore not necessarily out of deliberate efforts by anybody to violate this fundamental human right. Rather, it is a result of *de-facto* (indirect or unintended) discrimination.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child identifies *de facto* discrimination as a violation of rights standards (Cohen & Epstein, 2005). *De facto* discrimination in this research was executed in the household processes particularly in resource allocation and division of labor. The magnitude of *de facto* discrimination against girls was amplified by the impact of HIV and AIDS on their household livelihoods. For example, AIDS-afflicted households where labor was sometimes diverted from productive activities to taking care of patients were vulnerable to income and food insecurity.

In response, such households were compelled to reduce their expenditure on education and to increase children's involvement in cropping activities even during school time. Indeed HIV/AIDS has been identified as a factor contributing to the breach of the principle of equal opportunity among children affected by HIV/AIDS, particularly girls (CRC, 2003). Although girls in various parts of the world suffer inequalities within their households –in terms of access to resources, opportunities and educational achievement or deprivation-(Nussbaum, 2003), in the face of HIV/AIDS, the bad situation becomes worse.

The research also shows that children's rights within the school were violated. Some children were subjected to corporal punishment despite the fact that that it is unlawful. Again there were gender differences in children's violation of rights within the school. Children in the study schools were normally punished for tardiness, missing school, failing classroom exercises, and sometimes for lacking the required learning materials. All these problems were analyzed as outcomes of the unfortunate situation within the children's households. Analysis of the collected data shows that the magnitude of these problems was greater for children from AIDS-afflicted households, particularly girls. The findings therefore show the influence of household processes on children's experiences of gender inequality within the school.

This research reveals the burden that must be shouldered by women's activism. Whereas many women's and children's organizations are advocating for material and financial support for girls and orphans, there is a whole range of issues that remain unaddressed. The *de facto* discrimination within the household is a big cause of the inequalities existing within the school system. The provision of financial and material resources does not exactly help much because the situation in the households counteracts these efforts.

Conclusion

This article is a result of a study that was conducted to learn about the interface between school and household processes in the persistence of gender inequality in Uganda. The study focused on how household responses to the impact of HIV/AIDS on their livelihoods translated into gender inequality in UPE in Uganda. The article presents a discussion on the need for women's activism to recognize the contribution of household processes and practices to educational gender inequality in a context where various measures have been put in place to address the problem.

Women's activism in Uganda has been going on for decades now. In fact the 1995 constitution which has been acclaimed as one of the most gender sensitive constitutions (Nabacwa, 2001) is a result of policy advocacy some of which was done by women's organizations. Such an achievement does not down play the challenges of women's activism particularly in a male-dominated /patriarchal context. The study shows

that despite the existing efforts by women's activism to address the problems of girls, there have not been significant changes at the grass root level particularly in the factors that affect girls' schooling. At the household level, gender biased division of labor, and allocation of household resources continue to impair the education of girls enrolled in UPE schools. In the face of HIV/AIDS, the household tasks are multiplied and these problems are magnified in corresponding proportions.

The role of women's activism includes advocating for the less privileged groups of women and girls. Such groups may include rural women/girls, the illiterate, the economically disadvantaged or any other groups which have neither forum nor opportunity to express their needs. Primary school girls at the grass roots have no opportunity to be heard. Their voices are mute. The only way to put their concerns on government agenda besides that of voluntary organizations is through the creation of the lacking forum by speaking out on their behalf.

There is a need for women to work on measures capable of counteracting the impact of household processes on girls' education. History has shown that mere community sensitization or girl education campaigns do not exactly produce the desired impact. This is mainly because the girls are officially enrolled in school but in practice they learn or benefit less than boys. The real cause of this scenario is the existence of unfavorable conditions within these children's circumstances. For example, in order to increase girls' protection from the negative impact of household processes, it is necessary to establish and strengthen a legal framework to eliminate all forms of *de facto* discrimination. The current legislation against gender inequality has not produced any significant results at the household level because it is a private sphere. The constitution of Uganda addresses *de jure* discrimination, which is easier to detect and prevent.

The role of women's activism in providing remedies could also include researching on the best ways of providing legislation against all forms of *de facto* discrimination that underlie educational gender inequality in the time of UPE. And since rural women/girls cannot speak for themselves, we have to ask ourselves the question of who is most qualified to articulate their concerns? Another area that requires urgent research therefore, is the possibility of strengthening the ability of women not in similar circumstances to effectively represent disadvantaged women.

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