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Striding Forward: girls and women in Ugandan schools

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ABSTRACT This article looks at the important role that teachers and headteachers can have as role models for children living with challenging circumstances. It focuses particularly on girls struggling against the odds to complete their education in Ugandan schools and improve their life chances. The commitment to women's rights espoused by Uganda's government is gradually undermining longstanding patriarchal norms. The implementation of universal primary education has forced these issues into the school arena. This article explores how the changing roles and increasing self-awareness of women working within Uganda's education system is impacting on girls' aspirations.

Educators in Britain, and the politicians and civil servants who make policy, have been in a stir in recent years about how to drive up standards by making the most of the time allotted to the school day. As the discourse has been emptied of pedagogy it has been filled with business-based models of time management. How to make learning relevant, exciting and effective seems to be of lesser concern than how to slice it into standardized one-hour chunks.

When you step back and think globally – a bigger question looms. Before you decide on the most effective way to divide up a school day you need to ensure that every child has access to school in the first place. The *Education for All* conference in Thailand in 1990 acknowledged the scale of the problem. At that time there were 100 million children out of school. The highest proportions were in sub-Saharan Africa. When the Millennium Development Goals, aimed at halving global poverty, were set in 2000, Universal Primary Education (UPE) was high among them. By 2015 it is intended that each of the world's children would receive at least five years of primary schooling.

These targets are nuanced too, since they acknowledge that girls are disproportionately affected, comprising at least 60 per cent of those missing the opportunity of schooling. In 2005 a United Nations summit evaluated progress towards these goals. If significant strides were indeed being made towards UPE, then by 2005 the benchmark of removing the gender gap in schools' enrolment

was supposed to have been reached. It hadn't, but some countries were making significant progress – including Uganda.

Problems and Contradictions

I worked in a rural school in Masindi, Uganda in the summer of 2001 as part of a 'Global Teacher' programme organised by Link Community Development (LCD) – an educational Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) now working in four African countries. At that time I became acutely aware of the problems – and the contradictions – for girls and women in the Ugandan education system. Facilitated by LCD I returned to Masindi in 2005 and visited a range of schools. I was aware of several indications of progress and development at different levels of the education system, but particularly struck by the advancement in the position of girls and women. By interviewing girls and women teachers and headteachers I was able to gain an insight as to how this has happened. Hopefully the Masindi experience can be translated to other regions within and beyond Uganda with a similar social and economic profile.

Although urban centres, promising opportunity, are growing fast (as are the shanty towns around them), many African countries remain largely rural. More than 80 per cent of Ugandans live in rural areas, working mainly as subsistence farmers. In Uganda, gender roles are very clearly defined. Women are responsible for the bulk of domestic work, though they contribute many farming hours too. Children assist with both domestic chores and digging, though it is boys you are more likely to see looking after goats or cattle and girls you are more likely to find doing the cooking and cleaning, washing clothes and collecting water from the nearest well or borehole.

And yet the Ugandan Parliament boasts a higher proportion of women than does the UK. President Museveni has lost support, particularly in urban centres, for his personal desire to cling on to power for yet another term; however his period in office has brought major steps forward in education and health, felt especially strongly in the countryside. He has consistently talked the language of rights, including a strong promotion of women's rights to equality.

Uganda implemented UPE in 1997. This guaranteed that up to four children (two boys, two girls) from every family could receive seven years of free primary education. In bringing this policy forward the rights to education of previously marginalised elements such as girls, and children with disabilities, were particularly strongly promoted. The enthusiasm with which this was taken up encouraged the government to remove the bar at four children so that every child was entitled to free education. Overall, since UPE was established, enrolment has trebled. Classes in primary schools run from P1-P7, and although theoretically these are for 5-12 year olds, many children who missed the opportunity for education before UPE are taking it now, and there are students up to 17 or 18 years old in a number of primary schools. All secondary education, though, is currently in fee-paying schools.

Diminishing Returns

In 2001, the contradictions appeared stark. The youngest classes in a school (P1 and P2) would have roughly equal numbers of boys and girls but by P5 the numbers of children in class would have shrunk considerably and the proportions of girls would have diminished most. Girls were generally a small minority in P7 classes.

Some drop-out factors affect boys and girls equally. Others are gender specific. Progress from one class to the next is dependent on passing end of year exams. Those who fail have to repeat a year, and, not surprisingly, those who continually fail lose heart, and are unlikely to see much value in education. The tension for families struggling at subsistence level, between seeing their child as an economic unit in the here and now, or a more educated and potentially higher-earning family member in the future, is often resolved in favour of the present. Where parents are suffering from illness (in a country where the HIV infection rate is significant, malaria is still common, and average life expectancy is still in the early 40s), there is pressure on children to be economically active from an early age. They are often found doing the work their parents are no longer physically capable of struggling with.

Where an increasing amount of domestic work is required, or there is a need to look after sick parents or relatives, it is much more likely that girls will be withdrawn to fill these roles. But perhaps the biggest factor is pregnancy and early marriage. In the 1990s Uganda led the way in Africa as a country stemming and even reducing its high HIV infection rate; and condom use was encouraged as part of this. One byproduct was to reduce the risk of early pregnancy. Today, Uganda's HIV/AIDS policy plays to the tune of its evangelical Christian funders from America, stresses abstinence alone, and claims that condoms are ineffective in combating the spread of disease. Not surprisingly, early pregnancy remains a critical issue.

Teachers and Nurses

When I interviewed children about their aspirations in 2001, boys invariably told me that they wanted to be teachers, although one said he would prefer to be a pilot. Girls, without exception, said they wanted to be nurses. In a sense both genders are aspirational – they are saying they do not want to be subsistence farmers like their parents and grandparents. But it surprised me how little the girls drew on the role models of women teachers in their schools. No doubt they were aware of a hierarchy – headteachers tend to be men, as do teachers of older, higher status classes, yet schools not only have many women teachers but one in each school is accorded the status of 'Senior Woman Teacher'. Moreover women teachers in particular have been encouraged to lead on drama within schools and to focus drama activities on themes such as girls and women's rights – especially the education of the girl child – and to challenge assumptions and actions within the community which limit girls' potential.

On my last day at a Ugandan school in 2001 there was a farewell ceremony which included poetry, songs and drama. Children from P6 acted out a very powerful drama about the necessity of girls exercising full rights to education as a stepping stone for their life beyond school. The audience applauded, but one fairly strident member of the community stood up and, as the applause died down, intervened in an accusatory tone, saying: 'You have done this drama but what have you understood from it?' She made each performer personally describe their role and what they had learned. The responses were really heartening. Boys and girls both clearly understood the messages and implications of what they had acted. It bode well for the future.

Widening Horizons

Returning in 2005 I could see the changes at first hand. My first interviews with girl students were revealing. 'My parents are farmers growing maize, beans and cassava. I help them on Saturdays,' 15-year-old Rita told me. 'But I want to work in computers. My parents would also like me to do that.'

Prossy, a 14-year-old orphan, who had fled the civil war further north, told me 'I would like to be a teacher. I would like to teach in a primary school because I want to each them as they have taught me.' Her school was one of the 20 per cent in Masindi district that now have a woman head teacher. And this head teacher has made a point of ensuring that there are women teachers in the most senior classes. Another orphan at a different school, 13-year-old Joy, was the most aspirational. 'I would like to be an ambassador. I would like to visit other countries, and work on behalf of my country so it can have development.'

I felt disappointed when 13-year-old Lilian admitted she would like to be a nurse, but then she had doubts: 'you have to learn a lot of science'. She thought for a moment, smiled and said, 'another idea is to be an accountant.'

Lilian's twin sister Dorcus definitely did want to be a nurse but this was clearly a thought-out decision rather than just fulfillment of a gender stereotype. 'I would like to be a nurse. You can get a lot of money. Teachers can get money but a nurse can get more money. If you are sick a nurse is the one who can help them. If my father or mother is sick I want to be able to help them.'

Dorcus was very proud of the fact that at her school – which also has a women head teacher – the girls outnumbered boys in P7. She was very aware of friends who had quit school. 'I tried to help my friends who were dropping out. I told them Uganda is a good country. There is UPE, why are you staying at home? Girls must study and look to the future.'

Breaking the Barrier

Her head teacher at Kigulya School, Byakagaba Lillian, is very proud of her. She has been a head for three years. 'Most of the headteachers are male,' she acknowledges, 'but there are women willing to take up these posts. There are more male headteachers because of marginalisation. People used to think that

women couldn't do what men could do. They thought they were not capable. I think this is totally untrue.' She acknowledges that until now it was rare to see a women teacher with the oldest classes but she attributes that more to women teachers being fearful of teaching boys physically stronger and not much younger than themselves. 'But these days there are more female teachers in all classes, and if the head teacher is a female she can act as a role model and then the girls can stay in school.'

A few miles east, at Kigumba School, is Ciria Margeret, a teacher with 13 years' experience. Several of those years were spent with younger classes but in recent years she and another female colleague have been teaching in P6 and P7. 'People did not believe that female teachers could teach at that level. But it has happened in our school and we are now two. It helps the girls and makes them interested in working harder. When they see female teachers there it helps them to aim higher. It gives them courage.'

It takes courage too, to head Bweyale school – Masindi's largest primary. It has more than 2,500 pupils on roll, a very large proportion of them internally displaced orphans from the civil war in the next district north, including former child soldiers who have witnessed and participated in killings. The headteacher there is Akugizibwe Annet. She was a reluctant headteacher: 'I never wanted to become a headteacher. I wanted to be a classroom teacher, but over time I have come to like my post. I feel I can develop the whole school.'

When she was introduced to speak at a district education conference I attended, her high esteem among male colleagues and district officials was clear. She acknowledges though that:

> earlier on, women were thought of as inferior people who couldn't perform, couldn't do anything, but the current government has empowered women and they are coming up. This empowerment has come from the district too. The district has realized that women can perform and they have tried to employ more women to head schools. And women like me are a role model to the girl child to motivate them.

Motor of Change

Masindi is a typical region in Uganda and in many respects typical too of the countries bordering Uganda. The educational advancement and the empowerment of girls and women in Masindi is clearly a motor of change and development in the wider society, and one which, if it can be reproduced gives hope to other districts in Africa beyond the old borders arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers. Children aged 15 years or under now make up more than half the population of sub-Saharan Africa. Their education – girls as well as boys – will significantly determine the future of this continent.

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