Peer relationships also helped the girls to cope with their problems. Through friends they gained practical support in a material sense, or help with schoolwork. Sharing food was particularly important in situations of extreme hunger. Emotional support and the sharing of problems, encouraging one another to continue attending school despite difficult circumstances, was certainly one of the factors facilitating attendance.

Conclusions to date

This study has reinforced other research showing why girls from disadvantaged backgrounds fail to attend school, but it has also gone further in showing how girls' desire for a better life is a key factor driving them towards continuing their education. Unsurprisingly, the role of the school is also crucial in enabling girls to achieve their aspirations, but schools themselves worked 'against the odds' in trying to provide a good education in a context of inadequate resources, difficulties of teacher recruitment and communities who showed little interest in formal education. Less expected was the finding that active or even passive encouragement and support from a range of adult 'role models', as well as from their peers, played a major part in girls' participation in school.

Ongoing and future work

Annual workshops in Nairobi or Kampala have provided a forum through which to present and debate research findings and plan future activities. As confidence in our understanding of the factors affecting girls' retention has grown, so we have worked with representatives from our NGO, government and academic partner organizations to develop small-scale interventions that can be piloted and subsequently evaluated in some of the case-study schools. The interventions in each country are different, yet complementary. Both address some of the challenges that keep girls out of school and aim to develop strategies that seek to change the ethos of the school. In Uganda the specific focus is to develop mentoring at the primary level, rolling out and strengthening the process within each community. Mentoring is also part of the Kenyan intervention, though here the key focus is on capacity-building of students, teachers and community members within a gender-responsive framework. The need for a sound research base to be established before beginning work on intervention strategies means that the time-table for these pilot studies is short. Nevertheless, we believe that these research-informed interventions will provide a worthwhile contribution to understanding what helps keep girls from disadvantaged situations in school, and will thus be of interest to policy-makers.

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PROJECT BRIEFING

Girls 'against the odds' in Kenya and Uganda

The route to a better life   July 2012

The research focuses on why some girls from very poor backgrounds or from families where education for girls is not valued, do nevertheless stay in school. Its findings show that girls stay in school because of their belief in the power of education to change their lives, because of the role played by their schools and because of key people who advise, encourage, support and act as role models showing what is possible.

Introduction

Both the Kenyan and Ugandan governments formally recognize gender equality as central to the attainment of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals, and have put in place various initiatives to support this. Indeed, considerable improvements have been shown in both countries with respect to gender parity in enrolment in primary schools. Yet statistics show that many girls attend school only irregularly, with significant numbers dropping out altogether as they progress through the educational system (UNESCO, 2011).

Academic research on this issue has often been large-scale and quantitative, and has tended to focus on the challenges faced by girls and why they drop out. In-depth qualitative studies focusing on retention have meanwhile been lacking (Hunt, 2008). This research therefore seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature by looking in detail at a range of case studies to find the reasons why some girls do stay in school.

In order to ensure that research and subsequent interventions are culturally sensitive and meet local needs, partnerships have been established between the Centre for Commonwealth Education and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Girl Child Network (GCN) and UNICEF, and links have been made with education ministries and universities in Kenya and Uganda.

The project and its aims

The study has three broad aims: to develop an understanding of gender and education in Kenya and Uganda; to develop intervention projects focused around the needs of girls; and to impact positively and directly on educational policy and practice.

The research is informed by Sen's capability theory (eg Sen, 1999), which provides a broad normative framework for the conceptualization, evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements (Robeyns, 2005), and so furnishes a lens through which to explore factors relating to retention.

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Sen's approach concentrates on the capabilities of people to live their lives as they wish, and the removal of 'unfreedoms' that stand in their way. As Subrahmanian (2007) suggests, it shifts thinking away from standardized measures of inequality to the nature of education in relation to individuals.

Within this conceptual framework, the key research question is: what keeps girls in school against the odds? From this main question stem a set of sub-questions:

1. What is the impact of cultural background on decisions to stay in school?
2. What determines whether girls from poor backgrounds continue with their schooling?
3. What is the influence of role models or mentors in the school or local community on girls' decision-making?
4. What is the role of the school in encouraging girls to remain in education?
5. What is the role of peer pressure in influencing girls' participation?
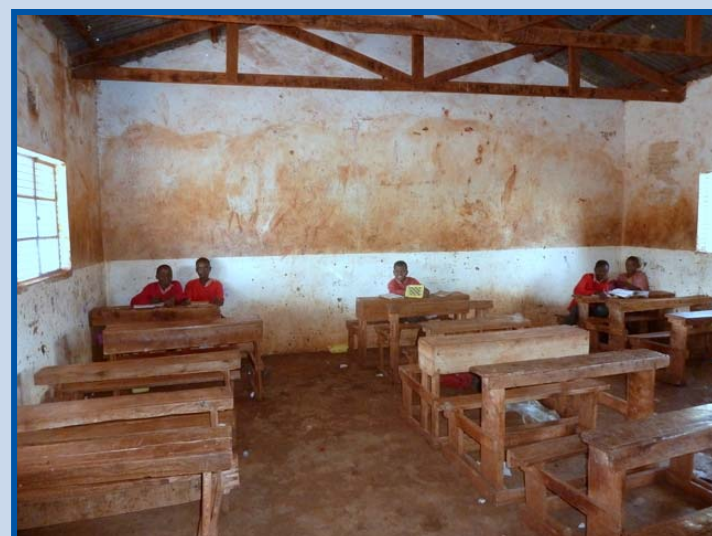
Research and development activities

Since existing research shows links between poverty and lower levels of retention, districts with particular challenges and hardships that make it difficult for girls to attend school were chosen. Fieldwork was undertaken across four case study areas in Kenya (Murang'a and Kiambu in Central Province, Ndhiwa in Nyanza, Kajiado in Rift Valley, and Nairobi); and four in Uganda (Nebbi in West Nile, Kyenjojo and Ntoroko in South Western Uganda, Bududa in Eastern Uganda and Nakapiripirit, part of the Karamoja sub-region).

Four schools in each area were selected on the advice of the relevant District Education Office, and teachers were asked to identify five girls who continued to attend school despite evidence of economic, social or cultural

pressures militating against them doing so. Since girls begin to drop out of school at puberty, students were selected from Standard 5 (Kenya) and Class 6 (Uganda). Though expected to be 11 years old, because of late starts and disrupted patterns of schooling, they were sometimes several years older.

These girls (approximately 80 from each country) were interviewed individually at the start of the project, and their educational outcomes mapped over a three-year period. Focus groups of boys and of teachers, and an interview with the Headteacher, were also undertaken in each school, as well as interviews with each District Education Officer. With the addition of observational data, these provided the main data sources on which the findings are based. They were supplemented by a smaller-scale study interviewing 18-20 women in both Kenya and Uganda who had themselves achieved 'against the odds'.

Outcomes

What keeps girls away from school?

It is impossible to understand why girls stay in school without exploring the challenges – the 'unfreedoms' – that stand in their way, and undoubtedly the major challenge was poverty. Children missed school because they were too hungry to walk long distances (up to four hours each way in some rural areas). Walking to school having drunk only black tea and eaten nothing, then having no lunch, made concentration difficult, if not impossible. Clearly poverty, orphanhood and living in harsh environments affect both girls and boys. However, in these strongly patriarchal societies, especially in rural areas, females are more likely to be disadvantaged, both during childhood and into their adult lives. Poverty impacted on girls particularly because they were more likely to experience shame and embarrassment through having no shoes, or torn, shabby uniforms. They lacked basic necessities such as sanitary towels, so frequently missed one week of school in every four. Lack of light meant no homework: no homes had electricity, kerosene for lamps was often too expensive, or lamps were reserved for boys. Girls also carried a large domestic load, as well as often walking very long distances for water and fuel wood. Again, this left little time or energy for study. Worse off were the many HIV/AIDS orphans, fostered by relatives who frequently treated them effectively as slave labour.

Violence was another major problem in the home (particularly among fostered children), and within communities, sometimes fuelled by alcohol or drugs. Corporal punishment was evident in most schools, sometimes impacting negatively upon children's experience of, and willingness to attend school. Gender-based violence was rampant, with some girls directly experiencing rape, others being attacked on the journey to school, and some encountering sexual harassment

and abuse within school. Teenage pregnancy was common, and the practice of female genital mutilation of girls, followed by early marriage in one area, invariably brought an end to formal education.

The other common challenge was negative attitudes towards education among families and communities. In all case studies, most parents were under-educated and placed little value on education generally, resulting in a lack of support for both schools and pupils.

Why do girls continue going to school?

Despite the multiple challenges facing children in these areas, challenges which led to large numbers never enrolling, attending only infrequently or dropping out of school altogether, our research, in focusing on girls who do stay in school, has been able to identify three principal reasons for their retention.

A belief in the power of education
Firstly is the girls' belief in the power of education to change their lives. Their persistence and determination to succeed in order to make a better life for themselves, and assist others in their families and communities, was almost universal. Often, in the face of indifference from their families, they themselves made the decision to attend school. For these girls, education not only provided some meaning to their present lives, but was the key to a different kind of future. As a girl from Kiambu explained, 'I hope that in the future I will be able to overcome these problems and have a good life. If I stop coming to school now, how will my life be in the future?'

For some, the future encompassed secondary school, university and ambitious career aspirations, with girls imagining themselves as teachers, lawyers or doctors. Others, where there were few local women role models in high status employment, tended to have more limited and quite localized aspirations. Common across most girls, however, was a rejection of marriage in the immediate future because they saw this as constraining their independence and curtailing educational opportunities. A number rejected the idea of marriage outright, associating it with violence, abuse, hard labour, continuing poverty and dependency.

The role of the school
It is obvious that students must be well taught if they are to develop a foundation of knowledge and understanding and pass the examinations necessary for access to the next stage of their education, and the girls in the study were generally, though not unequivocally, positive about the teaching at their schools. Schools were also important in providing a relatively safe and attractive place where they had opportunities to develop their talents, to be with friends, to play, to be a child.

Both male and female teachers were often critical in encouraging and caring for girls at an individual level. Many showed awareness of the wider problems they faced, were willing to listen and even to give practical support, for example providing sanitary towels with their own money, or taking a sick child to hospital.

Despite a real lack of resources, several Headteachers went out of their way to make their schools places where children wanted to come. Many saw the improvement of the school's physical environment as important: some had developed water-harvesting systems, some had planted trees and flowers and others had focused on providing clean latrines and hand-washing facilities. Some sought directly to address poverty by providing food for children at midday, either lobbying for a feeding programme or even planting food to be harvested and eaten by the children. Another strategy, particularly in Uganda, involved developing co-curricular activities such as gender clubs, to teach life skills.

Key figures
Besides teachers, other people, usually within the family or local community, but occasionally national or even internationally known figures, acted as role models. These influenced girls directly or indirectly, and in so doing helped them to manage and sometimes overcome some of the challenges they faced. They offered advice, encouragement, practical support or simply understanding. In some instances they acted as catalysts for change, as in the case of girls living in Kajiado, where several were helped by family members to avoid FGM and move to a rescue centre. More indirectly, girls often admired from afar adult women in their communities who had achieved a certain level of material goods or who were in positions of authority, and whom they wished to emulate.