

Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers to Females' Educational Attainment: Qualitative Evidence from Rural Communities In Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Although significant progress has been made to rectify gender imbalances in education and development, socio-cultural and economic challenges still constitute barriers to females' educational attainment. Using a qualitative research approach involving 16 participants and data collected through semi-structured interviews, we explored socio-cultural and economic factors that constitute barriers to females' educational attainment in a rural district in Ghana. From the thematic analysis of the interview data, the findings showed that socio-cultural barriers – driven by traditional gender roles, cultural norms, along with economic barriers, including poverty and limited resources – hinder females' educational attainment. Drawing on social norm and gender performance theories, we argue that socio-cultural and economic barriers are critical issues that shed light on the complex challenges females in rural communities face as they strive for educational attainment. We recommend the implementation of local-level awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives to transform negative perceptions surrounding females' education in rural communities.

KEYWORDS

socio-cultural barriers, economic barriers, educational attainment, rural communities

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Introduction

Sociological studies in education usually consider the intergenerational transmission of education of children as a measure of social mobility and educational attainment. However, socio-cultural and economic variables also play a key role in educational attainment of children. Educational attainment refers to the highest level of education that a person has successfully completed and it is validated through the assessment of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies (Fehrler et al., 2009). Educational attainment is usually measured with the highest education programme successfully completed, which is typically certified by a recognised qualification. In the literature, prior researchers (Fehrler et al., 2009; Glewwe & Kremer, 2006) have used the education production function approach to examine educational attainment. This approach views educational attainment as output while the variables that contributed towards the output are viewed as inputs. In the process of education, inputs could be teachers, parents and schools that play important roles in education. The education production function approach argues that, the socio-cultural environment in which the students receive the education is of crucial importance (Fehrler et al., 2009). Therefore, exploring socio-cultural and economic factors that constitute barriers to females' educational attainment is significant. In this study we conceptualised educational attainment as females who completed senior high school but could not attain tertiary level education due to socio-cultural and economic barriers they faced in rural communities in Ghana.

Socio-cultural Barriers and Educational Attainment

Socio-cultural barriers are man-made constructs derived from social norms and cultural values within societies that affect thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Adanna & Agbasiere, 2020). According to Yaqoob (2012), socio-cultural barriers are hurdles related to social and cultural matters in which society and culture do not allow anything against the set patterns, thus creating hindrances for the unacceptable phenomenon. Evidence suggests that socio-cultural barriers have often restricted access to intellectual resources of females. For example, early or child marriage plays a pivotal role in the lack of success to reach gender parity in educational attainment (Dunga & Mafini, 2019).

A number of prior studies on socio-cultural barriers and education have been conducted in different context domains such as access, participation and retention. For instance, Mucee et al. (2014), in a study to establish socio-cultural factors that influence students' access to secondary school education in Kenya, reported that early marriage, child labour and preference of boys to girls in accessing secondary education are among socio-cultural practices that hinder females' progress to secondary school education. In a related study, Kipkulei et al.

(2012) employed a cross-sectional survey design to assess the extent to which socio-cultural and school-based factors affect female participation in primary school education in Kenya. Their findings suggested that early marriages, female genital mutilation, family views about women's education, and teacher-student interactions influenced the participation of females in education. Similarly, Alhassan and Odame (2015) investigated the extent to which socio-cultural factors contributed to the low participation and retention of girls in basic schools in the Northern Region of Ghana and found that early marriage, handling household chores, female genital mutilation, working as a housemaid, and discrimination against girls when it comes to parents paying for their children's formal education are socio-cultural factors that contributed to female's low participation and retention in basic education.

Economic Barriers and Educational Attainment

Theoretically, economic barriers such as poverty and parents' economic status affect educational attainment. In addition, parents with low educational and job skills tend to have an adverse impact on their children's future in the family. For example, parents and children in poverty do not have the same access to opportunities, resources, or support (Coleman, 1988). Therefore, there are fewer opportunities for learning and higher education. The theoretical literature implies that socio-economic status and socio-economic background are key determinants of students' ability to attain a certain level of education. Previous empirical studies have investigated the relationship between economic barriers and educational attainment. These studies have also suggested that low household monthly income is a significant determinant of females' educational participation. For example, Dunga and Mafini (2019) examined socio-economic factors that influence the participation of the girl child in educational activities in Malawi and reported that a higher percentage of girls, unlike boys, were out of school due to household income. Likewise, Muhammad et al. (2021) focusing their investigation on the socio-economic factors affecting females' education in Malawi concluded that parental income levels affect females' education. Similarly, Arafat et al. (2021) in their investigation into economic barriers that accounted for high school dropouts among females in Bangladesh found that poverty and deprivation served as barriers that inhibited females' future education by restricting their opportunities and social mobility. They concluded that among the financially challenged families, females' domestic duties took precedence over their aspirations of getting an education. Additionally, Benedictom et al. (2020) investigated the determinants of female academic performance in secondary schools in Tanzania and found that parental economic factors are the main determinants influencing a girl's education. The empirical literature shows that the socio-economic background of students is

a significant factor in determining their levels of educational attainment.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand barriers to females' educational attainment, we integrate two complementary theoretical perspectives that together provide a comprehensive framework for exploring socio-cultural and economic factors that influence educational attainment. First, the Social Norm Theory provides a foundation to explain the societal, cultural, and traditional beliefs that individuals internalise and adhere to regarding the behaviours and roles expected of men and women within the framework of socio-cultural and traditional norms (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). It encompasses the expectations placed on men and women, dictating their perceived roles and behaviours in society. In every society, individuals are anticipated to comply with social norms for various reasons, including familial expectations, pressure from relatives, the reinforcement of gender identity, and adherence to social and cultural expectations (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). Social norm theory has been used to examine the reasons behind the imposition of socio-cultural expectations on individuals, as well as its impact on the lives of females and males. Socio-cultural expectations are the standards and rules that guide our behaviours in society and tell us what is or is not acceptable. They are the internalised social norms for individuals or organisations; and for society as a whole, about what people should do (Khan et al., 2020). The social norm theory, therefore, provides an orientation to our study because it serves as an effective framework to analyse the socio-cultural expectations of a female and how these socio-cultural norms constitute barriers to their educational attainment.

Second, the Gender Performance Theory provides insights to highlight the importance of the socialisation process for individuals and how it perpetuates existing gender identities along with associated injustices and inequalities (Lorber & Martin, 2012). It explores the concept of gender performance within society, where certain codes of behaviours are assigned based on gender. Initially, there is an essentialist perspective suggesting that gender is biologically determined and manifested as a recognizable physical essence. However, the idea of gender performance challenges the notion that gender roles and identity stem solely from physical and biological factors. Instead, it suggests that gender identity is a socially constructed performance consisting of behaviours and roles assigned to particular genders. Social interactions, which are considered fundamental and inherent characteristics of the male and female genders, systematically reproduce these gender disparities (Lorber & Martin, 2012). In this study, we applied gender performance theory as a framework to analyse and understand social segregation between males and females, gender discrimination in domesticity and how these

constitute barriers to females' educational attainment in rural communities within the Ghanaian context.

The Present Study

In spite of the wide international recognition that investing in female education is the most effective way to achieve development goals, establishing gender equity in school enrolment, particularly at the tertiary level has become a major problem in many low- and middle-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). According to Adana and Agbasiere (2006), of the group of countries with the worst gender inequality in education, 60% are in SSA. Low levels of schooling among young females in SSA can also be linked to common factors related to poverty and backward traditional settings (UNESCO, 2014). Unfortunately, there is lack of country-specific in-depth qualitative research evidence in SSA regarding how socio-cultural and economic factors serve as barriers to females' educational attainment.

Within the Ghanaian context, although significant progress has been made to rectify gender imbalances in education and development, socio-cultural and economic challenges still constitute barriers to females' education. However, it has been argued that in order to ensure socio-economic development of nations, there is the need to break every socio-cultural barrier to female access and participation in education. There is extensive literature that focused on females' retention, access, participation, enrolment and completion (Alhassan & Odame, 2015; Benedictom et al., 2020; Dunga & Mafini, 2019; Mucee, et al., 2014). However, it appears little attention has been focused on studies that explored socio-cultural and economic barriers to females' educational attainment in rural communities (Latif et al., 2020).

We also noticed from the literature that studies on socio-cultural and economic factors affecting educational attainment focused mostly on primary and secondary education (Maria & Awan, 2019; Mucee et al., 2014). Additionally, the literature with regard to how socio-cultural and economic factors influence educational attainment has been inconsistent with contradictory findings. For example, while prior studies by Okafor et al. (2017) concluded that obstacles to females' education are more of socio-cultural beliefs and practices; other researchers (Mucee et al., 2014; Bior, 2019) however, argued that, socio-cultural and economic factors may not be associated with secondary school education attainment. They indicated that governments, non-governmental organisations, and school sponsors have provided enough resources and facilities to enhance education. Given the inconsistencies and contradictory findings, further research is needed.

In Ghana, available evidence shows that female enrolment at the basic level

of education outnumbers their male counterparts (Forsgren et al., 2019). However, the high female enrolment at the basic level tends to dwindle as they move up in the educational ladder. Gender disparity emerges at the secondary and tertiary levels. According to Sarker et al. (2017), although there has been considerable progress in access to education, gender disparity persists with regard to low female educational attainment in rural communities. It has also been asserted that in some rural communities, parents prefer to send their sons to school at the detriment of their daughters. Meanwhile, Schoon and Cook (2021) indicated that obtaining a degree by females is a highly valued and desired developmental outcome. Unfortunately, not all young females have the same opportunities to pursue this goal since persistent social disparities and family socio-economic disadvantages are generally recognised as predictors of educational attainment. The literature search so far revealed that within the Ghanaian context, apart from studies (Adetunde & Akensina, 2008; Alhassan & Odame, 2015) that investigated socio-cultural and economic barriers to females' educational attainment in the Northern Region, it seems there is hardly an empirical study that used qualitative method to explore how socio-cultural and economic factors influence educational attainment of females. Given the paucity of research, the present study sought to fill this lacuna. Based on empirical and theoretical literature, the current study's objectives were to explore how:

1. social factors serve as obstacles to females' educational attainment in rural communities;
2. cultural factors serve as obstacles to females' educational attainment in rural communities;
3. economic factors impede females' educational attainment in rural communities.

Methodology

We used qualitative research approach, specifically the case study design to explore how socio-cultural and economic factors served as obstacles to females' educational attainment in rural communities. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2017) qualitative research methodologies provide rich and in-depth understanding about social phenomena in their natural settings. Hence, an open-ended inductive and qualitative approach was used for this study to ascertain the meanings, contextual influences and the processes of socio-cultural and economic barriers to females' educational attainment in rural communities.

Study Area

The study was conducted in the Manya Krobo District in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to the Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistical

Service, 2021), the population size of the district is 70,676. The district is largely rural, with 69.4 percent of the population living in rural areas and 30.6 percent in urban centres. The main economic activity in the area is agriculture, which is farming and fishing. The area was chosen based on the fact that despite modernity, the people of Manya Krobo place emphasis on socio-cultural beliefs and practices that potentially can constitute barriers and hinder change of attitude especially towards education. For most of the socio-cultural problems in the area, traditional beliefs, norms and practices such as early marriages, teenage pregnancy, and their puberty rites named (Dipo) have made inhabitants of the rural communities accept them and disregard all negative impacts of these practices. Therefore, a study that investigates how socio-cultural and economic factors constitute barriers to females' educational attainment in the area is significant.

Participants and Sample

The study participants comprised females, parents, teachers, and opinion leaders in the Manya Krobo district. We used purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 2014) which is a valuable technique that enables researchers to concentrate on specific phenomena and delve deeply into information-rich cases; facilitating a comprehensive understanding of central research issues. We selected 16 participants, made up of 4 females, 4 parents, 4 teachers, and 4 opinion leaders for the study. Also, purposive sampling was used because it deals with a sample that has persons with special knowledge or characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Therefore, the study sampled post-secondary females who could not continue their education to the tertiary level, parents of these females due to their knowledge in social and economic conditions in the area, teachers who have stayed and worked in the communities for more than five years and are abreast with the socio-economic issues in the area and opinion leaders who have knowledge regarding social and economic challenges in the study area. The sample size for the study is in line with the recommendations that in qualitative studies, information saturation; the point where no further information is gleaned from data sources is typically achieved with a sample size of 6-10 participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data for the study. In semi-structured interviews, there are baseline questions that are asked of every interviewee. The interviewer, however, can ask further questions depending on the interviewees' answers (Creswell, 2014). In this study, there were baseline questions that every participant was asked. Also, there were follow up questions that were asked during the interview which varied slightly from each participant depending on their responses. The questions for the interview were grouped into three

thematic areas as follows: (a). *Social factors that serve as obstacles to females' educational attainment in rural communities*; (b). *Cultural factors that hinder females' educational attainment in rural communities*; (c). *Economic factors that serve as barriers to females' educational attainment in rural communities*.

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The participants were informed and asked to sign a consent form and participation in the study was voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained during data collection. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. The interview was audiotaped and each interview required approximately 45 to 60 minutes during which time field notes were also compiled.

Data Analysis

We followed three steps in the thematic analysis of the interview data. Firstly, we examined the scripts in order to have a broader understanding of the participants' responses in the first phase. Then using the MAXQDA 20 software, coding was done. A hybrid strategy was used that incorporated both inductive and deductive coding. To be able to understand participants' perspectives regarding the issues raised during the interviews, concepts that were not included in the predetermined procedure were identified through deductive coding by using keywords from the interviews. We formed subthemes in the third step by taking into consideration the differences as well as similarities in participants' views. After the theme analysis was completed, we combined the results and narratively presented them.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in three sections: (1) social factors that constituted barriers to females' educational attainment; (2) cultural factors that served as barriers to females' educational attainment; and (3) economic barriers to females' educational attainment. In presenting the findings, pseudonyms have been used to represent the participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. These are Female 1, 2, 3, and 4; Parent 1, 2, 3, and 4; Teacher 1, 2, 3, and 4; Opinion Leader 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Social barriers to females' educational attainment.

The analysis focused on identifying key themes and patterns in participants' accounts of the social barriers to females' educational attainment. After careful analysis, four main themes emerged. Findings from the thematic analysis are presented as follows: illiteracy among parents, lack of role models, attitude of females towards education, and teenage pregnancy.

Illiteracy among parents

Across the interviews, a consistent theme emerged that indicated illiteracy among

parents constituted a key barrier to females' educational attainment in the Manya Krobo district. All 16 participants noted that due to illiteracy on the parts of most parents, they do not see the need to spend money and resources on educating their children, especially females to the tertiary level. For example, Teacher 3 who stayed and worked in one of the communities had this to say:

"For the 5 years that I have been in this area, their perception of education is different due to illiteracy. Over here, it is like your parents are farmers and traders, your ancestors were farmers, so most of the things they do are farming. The parents themselves have not received formal education so they do not see the need to spend money and resources on tertiary education (Teacher 3).

Attitude of females

The participants indicated that the attitude of females served as an obstacle to their educational attainment. They noted that majority of females in the area have been engaged in bad lifestyles such as going out with men and flirting around, drinking alcohol, as well as showing disrespect towards their parents. These bad lifestyles are distractive to their studies and they end up failing their final examinations. The views of some participants are captured below:

"In this community, you see the youth, especially females who are into some sought of bad lifestyles such as going out with men and flirting around. This does not encourage learning and is something that prevents them from focusing on their education to the tertiary level. (Opinion leader 2).

"They are very disobedient and disrespectful. They end up with a lot of boys for money. They become pregnant in the end and cannot further their education to the tertiary level." (Parent 1).

Lack of role models

All the participants (16) indicated that lack of role models for the young ones, especially females to emulate is negatively affecting educational attainment in Manya Krobo district. Parents and opinion leaders noted that the environment in which females found themselves is a key factor because rural communities in Manya Krobo do not have a lot of female teachers, nurses and other government officials with middle class values and lifestyles as role models for the young ones to emulate. The views of Opinion leader 4 and Parent 2 are captured below:

"They mostly do not have a lot of female teachers and nurses as role models to become like them, so these females do not aim at tertiary education. All they need to do is to get education to the basic level and they become fine with it". (Opinion leader 4)

"We do not have highly educated females in my community to serve as role models to motivate our children to further their education to the tertiary level". (Parent 2).

Early pregnancy

In relation to early pregnancy, participants indicated that it has been a menace in rural communities in Manya Krobo area. For example, opinion leaders voice out their frustrations regarding how early pregnancy has truncated young females' aspirations to further their education. Opinion leader 4 remarked:

"In this community, no girl gets pregnant and continues school. And with the pregnancy, they even feel ashamed in the community. There is no way they would continue school because of the pressure of motherhood".

Similarly, Teacher 1 explained,

"In my community, females who get pregnant early are not able to fend for themselves not to talk about furthering their education to the tertiary level".

Participants indicated that, when these girls become pregnant, they get married and are not able to further their education to the tertiary level.

Cultural barriers to females' educational attainment.

The data analysis yielded four themes which are puberty rite (Dipo), male preference, household chores and early marriage.

Puberty rite (Dipo)

A large number of the participants were convinced that females who have been initiated into the 'dipo rite' use it as an avenue to get pregnant since they tend to practice what they are taught as well as early marriages. In an interaction with an opinion leader in one of the communities, it was evident that 'dipo rite' is mostly done for females when they reach puberty and to prepare them for marriage. However, in recent times, society views females who have undergone this puberty rite as having the freedom to have sex. As a result, these females in several of the rural communities in Manya Krobo engage in sexual activities and do not focus on their education. Opinion leader 1 had this to say:

"Once they have performed the Dipo custom for the girl, parents do not concentrate on education of the girl. Some females also enter into boyfriend relationships, so you see them carrying babies and this messes up their lives."

Household chores

With regard to household chores, participants' responses are similar and they all agreed that it mostly happens to females who live with other people who are not

their biological parents. They engage them in a lot of household chores which affect their studies and eventually their academic performance. Teachers and opinion leaders explained that some parents engage females in a lot of household chores as well as selling activities. This eventually makes it difficult for them to study. A teacher had this to say:

"Sometimes, female day students in my school used to complain a lot about the household chores given to them and this stresses them and makes it difficult for them to study. This negatively affects their academic performance." (Teacher 2).

Male preference

Participants admitted that male preference is a key cultural factor in females' educational attainment and in most rural communities, there is a preference for educating males than females by parents. Teachers and opinion leaders indicated that traditional cultural values are prevalent in the family system and most of the rural dwellers think women can only be managed and adaptive to daily domestic activities. According to them, females would end up in the kitchen and get married; therefore, they do not need to be educated. Participants were of the view that most parents decide to take their sons to school rather than their daughters because of financial problems and the benefit they would get from their sons. The views of two participants are captured below:

"With regard to girl-child education, it is not given any preference in this community because they need their services in the home more, so they always want the girl-child to be with them." (Teacher 1)

"It is a problem in this community. You will see that most of the time, the parents push their male children to school more than their female children". (Opinion leader 4).

Early marriage

The participants indicated that early marriage served as a hindrance to females' educational attainment in rural communities. According to the teachers and opinion leaders interviewed in this study, some females in the communities get married as early as 18 years and do not care about continuing their education. They also indicated that some of the females in the communities get married early because of money since their parents do not cater for their needs as expected. A participant who is an opinion leader disclosed that early marriage is a common practice in the community despite modernity and this is a key obstacle to females' educational attainment. His views are captured below:

"Early marriage is a major problem in this community. Girls get involved

in early marriage so they are not able to further their education to the tertiary level. When girls get married, their focus is more on satisfying their husbands, giving birth and making a home. Hence, schooling does not become a choice let alone a priority" (Opinion leader 1).

Economic barriers to females' educational attainment.

We further explored how economic obstacles influenced females' educational attainment in rural communities. The findings revealed that financial constraints, farming and trading activities, and unemployment, constituted economic barriers to females' educational attainment.

Financial constraints

With regard to financial constraints, all the participants indicated that most parents in rural communities are not able to afford the basic educational needs of their children due to poverty. For example, teachers and opinion leaders reported that:

"majority of these females would have to work to make money in order to support themselves".

Also, participants (parents) indicated that since there is financial burden on most parents in these communities, their children; mostly daughters have to stop their education in order to work to support the home and siblings. Two participants expressed their views as follows:

"Money is a big problem for us in this community. This makes it difficult for parents to afford tertiary education for their female children". (Parent 2).

"The financial support is not really there because most of the parents are peasant farmers and they cannot cope in financing tertiary education." (Opinion leader 2)

Small-scale farming and petty trading activities

In the views of participants involved in this study, small-scale farming and petty trading is an obstacle to females' educational attainment. Teachers and opinion leaders indicated that some parents engaged their female children in farming and trading activities especially on market days. They are made to sell on market days and as a result they miss school for those days. An opinion leader indicated that:

"some of these females are also not interested in education; they prefer to sell in the market to make money to care for themselves and sometimes their siblings than to go to school".

A teacher said this:

"This is a farming community, so the family is involved in these farming

activities. These females mostly go to the market with cassava dough and other items to sell.” (Teacher 1)

Another participant had this to say:

“The females take interest in trading because of the money they get from trading and their parents do not see the importance of education. The monies they get from the buying-and-selling are important to feeding the family and paying for other bills” (Opinion leader 3).

Discussion of Findings

Overall, the findings show that educational attainment of females in the context of rurality, several barriers exist at the local and organisational levels which are social, cultural and economic in nature. Our findings underscore the complex interplay between females' educational attainment and socio-cultural and economic factors in rural communities. As the present findings suggest, parental illiteracy emerged as a key social barrier to females' educational attainment aligning with the assertion of Astone and McLanahan (1991) that if the family is not educogenic, the parents may not pay much attention to the education of their children which eventually affects their levels of educational attainment. Such parents do not influence their daughter's aspiration for advanced schooling. The parents do not know the value of education and do not devote their time, money and other resources to educating their daughters and seeing to their higher educational attainment.

The present finding also gives credence to suggest that educational attainment of females in rural communities is associated with family and parental social capital aligning with the Social Capital theory (Coleman, 1988) highlighting the quality of social interaction a focal person derives from parents, relatives and community members. The finding points to the fact that, for females in rural communities to be able to attain high levels of education, their parents should show interest in their education, value their educational aspirations; and should also have quality social interaction with them. Findings from the present study are consistent with previous studies (Adanna & Agbasiere, 2020; Afzal et al., 2021; Gitali, 2018) and suggest that overall, the factors that influence educational attainment of females are associated with parental educational background including family and community social capital.

The findings also reveal that some females in rural communities get pregnant prior to adulthood and this accounts for their inability to progress in education to the tertiary level. This finding supports prior literature that young females who get pregnant mostly go through the pressure that comes with

pregnancy since they are not financially, emotionally and psychologically ready to cater for their babies and this makes it difficult for them to further their education to the tertiary level (Adanna & Agbaeiere, 2020; Ahinkorah et al., 2021; Amadi, 2013). For example, Ahinkorah et al. (2021) concluded that there is high rate of teenage pregnancy especially in rural communities which serves as barriers to females' educational attainment. Females from poor homes in rural areas are more than three times likely to get pregnant by age eighteen than those from affluent homes; and the pregnancy rate of females with no schooling is three times larger compared to those who hold some secondary education (Ahinkorah et al., 2021). The present finding further gives credence to argue that the highest prevalence of early pregnancy is concentrated in rural communities and when interacted with rural poverty, the influence of socio-economic factors on educational exclusion becomes more intense.

We also found that lack of role models in rural communities has become a social obstacle to females' educational attainment. Role models, it is significant to note, play crucial roles in shaping individuals' life (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). For instance, in rural communities in particular, identity formation of females is a dynamic process and key developmental task that begins in adolescence. During this time, females look for adults as role models. According to Arafat et al. (2021), role models can protect females against engaging in high-risk behaviours such as unprotected sexual intercourse and substance abuse. However, as our finding indicates, females in rural communities do not always have role models to boost their self-esteem, academic resilience and performance in school. Having positive role models in rural communities, it should be noted, can have significant impact on adolescents' decisions of appropriate behaviours to potentially cause positive change and boosting their aspirations for higher educational attainment.

Regarding cultural barriers to females' progression in education in rural communities, the findings show that puberty rite, household chores, male preference and early marriage serve as cultural obstacles. A key cultural barrier to female educational attainment that we found in our study is the puberty rite (dipo) among the Manya Krobo people. The "Dipo" rite according to the socio-cultural value systems and traditions of the Krobo people aims at preserving the virginity of females before marriage (Ahinkorah et al., 2021). However, Langmagne et al. (2018) indicate that the "dipo puberty rite" instead of initiating young females into adulthood and marriage; rather exposes them to early and commercialised sexual activity that tends to have negative influence on their educational aspirations and educational attainment.

Another cultural barrier to females' educational attainment identified is the preference for male education over female. This finding corroborates previous

findings (Afzal et al., 2021; Adanna & Agbasiere, 2020) that gender inequality is often endorsed by socio-cultural traditions and religion. The present finding suggests that parental attitudes towards education of their sons and daughters is a fundamental cultural matter. The preference for boys' education over girls has been an old idea; and that in some communities, most parents prefer to send their sons to school as opposed to their daughters. Our current finding suggests that in spite of modernity, some parents especially in rural communities place high value on boys' education than girls since they believe that boys would cater for the home while the girls would be married and end up in the kitchen. This is consistent with the views (Igbo & Ejue, 2016; Sultana, 2010) that some families in rural communities in SSA perceive females' education as a waste of time. The finding is further situated within the framework of the gender performance theory which states that the importance of the socialisation process for males and females tends to perpetuate injustices and inequalities (Lorber & Martin, 2012) and this is evident in rural communities in Manya Krobo as our finding suggests. The concept of gender performance within societies, especially in rural communities where certain codes of behaviours are assigned to males and females tend to influence educational attainment.

We also found early marriage serves a cultural barrier to females' educational attainment. Endogeneity of early marriage driven by socio-cultural and economic factors have been put forward to explain gender disparities in education with regard to low female educational attainment. Early marriage is used to describe the legal or customary union between two people, of who one or both spouses is below the age of eighteen. This practice, particularly in rural areas disproportionately affects young females. Our finding suggests that many of females who leave school due to early marriages do not return to school in order to resume their studies. This corroborates previous findings (Ahinkorah et al. 2021; Bior, 2019) that early marriage is an obstacle to females' educational attainment. According to Benetictom et al. (2020), early marriage is a serious human right violation since it deprives females from their future by denying them the right to decide when and with whom to marry. Early marriage has a wide-ranging negative effects on females' education and girls who marry young are more likely to suffer from psychological disadvantage such as lack of self-esteem and depression. The outcome of the study further gives credence to argue that in rural communities, females are predominantly seen as a source of wealth and they may be forced into early marriages rather than attending school because their parents believe that marriage gives quicker financial rewards than education. It seems suggestible that families and communities see females as having little importance outside their roles as wives; while boys are given preference in the belief that; they will look after their

parents. This observation aligns with the gender performance theory (Lorber & Martin, 2012) that social inequality in societies is often endorsed by socio-cultural values and traditions which also underscores the patriarchal norms in rural communities that see females or daughters as the property of fathers and husbands. Females occupy a lower status in rural communities and early marriage is one of the key factors that explains why married girls are rarely found in schools.

The study further explored the economic barriers to females' educational attainment. The findings show poverty and financial constraints, and females' involvement in farming and trading activities serve as barriers to their educational attainment in rural communities. This corroborates previous findings (Dunga & Mafini, 2019; Latif et al., 2020; Muhammad et al., 2021) that parents' financial background in the form of low income, or parental poverty affect educational attainment of their children. According to Agyeman (1986), poverty negatively affects the chances of success of a child in school. For example, a child who is constantly hungry will find it difficult to give full attention to a lesson in the classroom. The present finding suggests that the economic or financial background of parents may play a role in the declining number of females in tertiary institutions in rural communities since parents are not able to afford the basic necessities required for their daughters' education. Rural poverty, it is significant to note serves as a major barrier to females' access to education. Many households in rural communities suffer from poverty thereby limiting their options to acquire the resources needed for education; especially for their daughters at the tertiary level. The present finding is consistent with earlier findings (Amadi, 2013; Arafat et al., 2021) that when parents face financial hardship, they are unable to fund their children's education especially at the tertiary level. The findings of the present study suggest that tertiary education in Ghana is seen as expensive and most parents in rural areas cannot afford it due to poverty.

The finding of the study also indicates that a key economic barrier to females' educational attainment is the involvement of females in small scale farming and petty trading. Females are usually absent from school due to work especially on market days. This finding aligns with the findings of Mahmud et al. (2016) that involvement of females in farming and trading activities result in poor academic performance and this serves as a barrier to their educational attainment. Our finding further corroborates the earlier findings of Owoaje et al. (2011) that engagement of females in farming and trading activities in rural communities is a significant predictor of poor school attendance.

Limitations of the Study

Even though, the present study makes significant contribution to literature by

providing country specific qualitative data on socio-cultural and economic barriers to females' educational attainment, there are some limitations worth noting. First, reliance on self-reported data from the participants may introduce bias. Second, we understand that the qualitative approach, while providing depth, limits generalisability of the findings. The study only focused on the barriers to females' educational attainment in the Manya Krobo district, which may not fully represent Ghana's diverse socio-cultural and economic background. Also, given that contextual factors influence the conceptualisation of educational attainment, this may affect the generalisability of the findings to other parts of Ghana and globally. Future research could expand the sample size and include more districts to improve representativeness. Mixed-methods studies could combine qualitative depth with quantitative data for a broader understanding. However, the findings lay a foundation for future research in similar and other cultural contexts for policy and practice.

Conclusion and Implications

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore how socio-cultural and economic factors serve as barriers to females' educational attainment in a rural district in Ghana. Findings from the study are consistent with previous studies and suggest that, overall, socio-cultural and economic barriers are critical issues that shed light on the complex challenges females in rural communities face as they strive for educational attainment. To situate the findings from the study within the context of social norm and gender performance theories, we argue that in rural communities, there are restrictive attitudes and myths attached to female education compared to their male counterparts. Females often perform domestic work roles such as cleaning, cooking and taking care of families and face discrimination in facilities they need. Based on the findings of this study, we conclude that educational attainment encompasses a broader context of socio-cultural norms and economic circumstances. Within rural communities in Manya Krobo, the unique socio-cultural and economic factors pose distinct challenges to education. Socio-cultural barriers, driven by traditional gender roles, cultural norms, and stigmas, along with economic barriers, including poverty and limited resources, have a profound influence on female educational prospects. In addition, patriarchal approaches as well as discrimination against females by parents have become one of the most significant hindrances in the Manya Krobo areas to females' educational attainment.

The present study contributes to literature with regard to educational attainment because it offers a framework to understand and address the complexities of socio-cultural and economic challenges that females in rural

communities encounter. Considering the numerous socio-cultural and economic factors that constrain females in pursuing higher education in the Manya Krobo areas, the findings of the present study have the following implications. In the first place, there is the need for advocacy for equitable access to quality education and gender empowerment within rural communities through concerted efforts from stakeholders in education. This is necessary to enable females participate in higher education in more equitable manner with their male counterparts for all to contribute to socio-economic development. We therefore recommend the implementation of local-level awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives to transform negative perceptions surrounding females' education in the Manya Krobo areas. In this regard, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection should design programmes and strategies to address socio-cultural obstacles in the Manya Krobo areas that affect the educational attainment of females. Lastly, the District Assembly in partnership with Non-Governmental Organisations and stakeholders in education and community development should collaborate to offer scholarships to females who are in need of financial support to enable them pursue higher education.

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