

Girls' and Women's Education and their Empowerment among Pastoral Societies

Case Study of Eritrea

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ABSTRACT

Most of the recent literature on women and development focuses on education as an important instrument in the empowerment of women as it expands their knowledge and skills. Without education it is difficult to achieve women's empowerment. This paper analyzes girls' and women's education in Eritrea in general, and among pastoral societies in particular. The study attempts to point out early marriage, lack of adequate schools in rural areas, and gender stereotypes and gender biased ideologies in Eritrea are the major barriers that hinder girls and women's access to education thus, affecting their ability to achieve empowerment. These barriers are not tackled among the pastoral society and mere imposing formal education as an automatic solution proved to be unsuccessful. Accordingly, for empowering pastoral societies, particularly women, non formal education principles are likely to be more effective than mainstream formal education. Non formal education is more flexible and responsive in sustaining livelihood strategies of pastoralists.

Key words: Sedentarisation, Inclusion, Responsiveness.

General background

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their associated targets and indicators were designed as benchmarks for monitoring progress in developing countries, and to provide a framework for sustaining development and eliminating poverty. One of these, targets Education For All (EFA) was reinforced at the World Education Forum in Dakar, 2000. The main drive to achieve EFA is through the provision of “free and compulsory primary education of good quality (UNESCO, 2005) for all children by 2015.

Accordingly, the international community recognizes that unless girls’ education improves, few of the MDGs will be achieved. Two of the goals (2 and 3) deal specifically with female education and women’s empowerment. Goal 2 states “achieve universal primary education by 2015, and goal 3 promote gender equality and empower women by eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education no later than 2015” (Global Campaign for Education, 2003).

Against such global efforts, this paper attempts to examine to what extent education serve as a means of empowerment within pastoral societies. Education as a means of empowerment as been the object of critical analysis which are beyond the scope of this paper. With specific reference to nomads, the goal of empowerment through education seems particularly appropriate, given that almost in every country where they are found; they are minorities suffering problems of under representation, social, economic and geographic marginalization (Kratli, 20001). This paper focuses on girls’ and women’s education and their empowerment as a case study of Eritrea with particular attention among the pastoral nomadic societies.

COUNTRY CONTEXT-ERITREA

Introduction

Women’s education in Eritrea and the process of their empowerment needs to be situated in a broader historical context. Accordingly this section gives a brief educational history of Eritrea before and after independence describing the policy approaches and analyzes girls’ and women’s access to education and expounds on factors that hinder their access.

Because of lack of segregated statistical data, it is difficult to give a separate picture of female’s education among the pastoral societies. Hence, it is appropriate to analyze the general situation based in national statistical figures and later on point out the key issues regarding the impact of formal education on pastoral nomadic societies in general.

A brief History of Eritrea

Eritrea is located in the Horn of Africa on the coast of the Red Sea, bordering Ethiopia in south, Sudan in north, and Djibouti in south east with a population of about 4.2 million comprising nine different ethnic groups. Eritrea was colonized by Ottoman Turks early 1500s,

Egyptians mid late to 1800s, Italians 1890-41, British 1941-52, and Ethiopian occupation 1962-91. Eritrea achieved independence in 1991 after such successive colonial regimes and a 30 year long war of liberation against Ethiopia (Muller, 2003; Smith, 2001).

Educational Experience of Eritrea under Colonialism

Under the successive colonialism the educational experience of Eritrea was extremely negative particularly for females. Stefanos (1997) noted that under both Italians and British colonialism there was no effort to educate or develop the skills of women, and the Western patriarchal conceptions of acceptable gender roles contributed to different educational opportunities for boys and girls.

While the Eritrean society is shifting from traditional to colonial education two factors remained constant. Females were generally denied access to formal schooling and educators sponsored deliberate patterns of sex differentiated roles. Education, even literacy was not considered useful for women as they perform their daily tasks. In large part Italian and British rule exacerbated Eritrean women's economic subordination and reinforced their exclusion from education (Ibid).

Under Ethiopian occupation education system in Eritrea was damaged more by the policies and ideologies Ethiopian rulers implemented notably by the so called "assimilation policy" (David, 2004). By this policy Eritrean children had to adapt to Ethiopian culture and language with the subtle intention of making Ethiopians out of Eritreans. As a result most families and community members did not encourage their children and were not willing to send them to school. Most importantly girls' education was limited to urban areas. In remote rural primary schools there were hardly any female students because of security issues; that girls were the main victims of rape and sexual harassment from Ethiopian soldiers.

Education in Liberated Areas during the Independence War

Education was viewed by the freedom fighters as a core element in the national liberation struggle. Broadly, it followed a strategy of "social demand approach" that gives emphasis on political, social, and cultural development which implies freeing people from constraints in their lives. The objective of both formal and non-formal learning was at consciousness raising and building skills. The strategy for education was linked to a large social vision that is egalitarian, responsive to the interests of peasants, workers, female independence oriented to self reliance, and able to mobilize effectively all human and material resources. Females were the most benefited from this approach (Stefanos, 1997; Muller, 2004), and as a consequence women played a pivotal role in the war for independence.

Women's status after Independence of Eritrea

Women played a central role in Eritrea's independence war, constituting more than 30 percent of the 95,000-strong liberation army and playing a wide range of non-traditional roles (Connell, 2005). Indeed female participation was extensive and significant in the struggle for independence and much was said and done to improve gender relations within the nationalist movement (Hidru, 2003).

However, women's post-independence participation in public life presents a mixed record, as conservative social values have reasserted themselves and destructive traditional practices such as female circumcision, child marriage, and virginity testing have become increasingly common (Connell, 2005). This fact supports the argument of Hudru (2003) where he said the EPLF used female power without necessarily altering traditional views of their role in society. The study of Stefanos (1997:676) reveals same views where she stated:

There are more indication of bitterness, charges of bad faith, and evidence of alienation and demoralization. Ironically, many [women] look back on the liberation war as "a better time for women's rights and empowerment". It is evident that there is a resurgence of male reaction against women's gains during the liberation struggle and that Eritrean leaders either minimize this phenomenon or do not regard challenging it as a major priority.

This reflects that Eritrean patriarchal society rejected the gains made by women during the war and the government did nothing to preserve them. The following pages attempt to point out the prevailing government policy and gender ideologies in various ethnic groups that influence girls' and women's education and their eventual empowerment in Eritrean society.

Education Policy in Eritrea after Independence 1991

The present educational policy in Eritrea follows "man power planning approach" in contrast to "social demand approach" that has been practiced in the liberated areas since 1970 to 1991. While the "man power approach" has an instrumentalist or utilitarian view of education that promotes building up "human capital" for the benefit of "the nation" at the expense of individual aspiration of education (MoE, 1999; Muller, 2004).

Due to this policy that centers strictly on perceived human resources needs of the country, the role of education in the development of personal identity and new forms of "agency" on an individual level has been largely ignored, and the focus is to produce a high level technical work force to serve "the country" (Ibid). This is the overall policy approach of the government, and to what extent this approach benefits pastoral communities is the logical question.

Girls and Women's Access to Education in Eritrea

Eritrea is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society, whose mainly rural population is divided roughly equally into Christians and Muslims. The population consists of nine ethnic groups: Tigrinya, Tigre, Bilen, Hidareb, Nara, Kunama, Afar, Saho, and Rashaida. Each ethnic group has its own language making nine languages named after the ethnic names with the exception of Rashaida who speak Arabic.

Table 1. Eritrean population by ethnicity, location, mode of life and religion

Ethnic group	Administrative region (Zoba)	Mode of life	Population percentage	Religion
Tigrinya	Zoba Maakel and Debub	Sedentary farmers and urban dwellers	48%	Christians
Tigre	Zoba S. Keyih Bahri, Gash Barka and Anseba	Pastoral nomads with small urban dwellers	35%	Muslims
Afar	D. Keyih Bahri	Mostly pastoral nomads with small urban settlers	4%	Muslims
Saho	Zoba Debub	Sedentary farmers	3%	Muslims
Kunama	Gash Barka	Sedentary farmers and nomads	3%	Christians Muslims Animists
Nara	Zoba Gash Barka	Pastoral Nomads	2%	Muslims
Bilen	Zoba Anseba	Sedentary farmers	2%	Christians Muslims
Hidareb	Zoba Gash Barka	Pastoral nomads	2%	Muslims
Rashaida	Zoba S. Keyih Bahri	Nomads	1%	Muslims
	Total		100%	

Source: www.Eri24.com

As shown in table 1 above, the majority are Tigrinya (48%) who are Christians and sedentary farmers and urban dwellers concentrated on the central highlands plateau and southern regions. The second major ethnic group is Tigre (35%) speaking Muslims. They are mainly agro-pastoral nomads living in the western lowlands and the coastal plains of northern region. The other ethnic groups are considered minority their population percentage, location, mode of life and religion is summarize in table 1 above.

In Eritrea, over the last fourteen years, there has been a remarkable increase in enrolment. From 1991/92 to 2002/03, students' population increased considerably from 208,168 to 431,508 (MoE, 2004). However, the increase is mainly in primary level while considering females' secondary education and its importance towards their empowerment, females' participation is very low in secondary level. This paper focuses on secondary level where females' education opportunity remains significantly lower than males and the gap is very wide as shown in table 2 below. The Gross Enrolment Ratio(GER¹) of males increased by more than half from 12.9 per cent to 30.1 per cent, while that of female's remained constant almost at 13 per cent for eight years and slightly increased by 3 per cent in 1999/00.

Table 2. Secondary Level: Gross Enrolment Ratio during the period 1991/92 –2002/02.

Year	Population 14 -17 Years Age			Enrolment in Secondary Level			Gross Enrolment Ratio %		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1991/92	210,515	110,133	100,382	27,627	14,281	13,346	13.1	12.9	13.3
1992/93	217,998	114,293	103,705	31,531	17,141	14,390	14.4	15.1	13.8
1993/94	225,344	118,144	107,200	32,756	19,432	13,324	14.5	16.4	12.4
1994/95	232,603	121,753	110,850	36,728	22,097	14,631	15.7	18.1	13.2
1995/96	239,805	125,167	114,638	39,188	23,713	15,475	16.3	18.9	13.5
1996/97	246,964	128,427	118,537	40,594	24,262	16,332	16.4	18.8	13.7
1997/98	253,097	131,066	122,031	41,615	25,198	16,417	16.4	19.2	13.4
1998/99	268,460	138,652	129,808	47,533	29,777	17,756	17.1	21.4	13.6
1999/00	272,871	139,459	133,412	59,626	37,533	22,093	21.8	26.9	16.5
2000/01	282,140	144,338	137,802	63,951	40,355	23,596	22.7	27.9	17.1
2001/02	292,355	149,903	142,452	70,183	45,129	25,054	24.1	30.1	17.5

Source: Eritrea: Essential Education Indicators 2001/02

It is evident that the country, in secondary education is not doing enough to achieve the goal of gender equality between boys and girls. The key question is why is the gender inequality in secondary education so wide? Reasons for this huge gap can be attributed to several factors. In particular the burdens of household chores, cultural prejudices, restriction in mobility, early marriage, and lack of adequate secondary schools are the major ones as discussed below.

Early Marriage

One of the barriers to achieving equality in education for girls and boys is early marriage, or the marriage of school-age girls. Eritrean society values marriage more than education of the girls. Males have a say in when and who they marry and what they do once they are married, while females do not have the chance to make these decisions. It is parents who arrange and decide the marriages of their daughters.

This leads to girls to drop out of school, often without life skills and negotiating power. Husbands are often older men, who expect their wives to follow tradition, stay home and undertake household and child-care duties. For this they target the younger girls and even they do not choose the older well educated girls because it is difficult to control educated girls. Those girls, who marry young, inevitably have children early, and have many children, because their knowledge of contraception is poor and their power to negotiate its use is weak. Children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to have a good start to their education, do well in class or continue beyond the minimum schooling. Their daughters especially are likely to drop out, marry young and the cycle begins again.

A key to preventing early marriage is educating everyone involved in the practice of early marriage. Parents and the community should be made aware of the rights of girls, to value their contributions and not be seen as an economic burden or asset. Research on early

marriage indicates that educating girls and their communities is the key to empowering girls and women. Policy makers throughout the world have recognized the need for the education of girls to address this problem. The national education policy should promote specifically procedures for married young girls to continue their education. There must be a campaign for a national policy on education for married and pregnant and young mothers and for those in pastoralist areas. National law should be set out on gender equality and early marriage. Married girls and pregnant young mothers should be allowed to return to school, and this should be explicitly known to the society by law. If education is to empower women changes should be introduced in the traditional way of schooling. Non formal education should be incorporated offering counseling service and lessons on life skills, reproductive health, so that marriage and childcare becomes a choice not an obstacle to empowerment.

Cultural Prejudices

Cultural stereotype prejudices are major barriers for girl's education. For example, families are reluctant to allow their daughter to live with their relative in towns. Those girls who try to break the barrier and stay in the towns by any means looking for education are despised by the community and considered as "defiant", "disobedient" and "morally corrupt" (Stefanos,1997). Such girls are not appreciated for marriage by their communities and fear of discrimination girls are obliged to drop out of school.

Lack of Secondary Schools near to Girls

Another issue why female's education in rural areas in Eritrea terminates at primary level is due to the lack of adequate secondary schools at each region. At present there are 40 secondary schools in Eritrea distributed in six administrative regions of the country called locally Zoba. As shown in the table below, of these schools five (12.5%) are located in Zoba Anseba, four (10%) in Gash Bark, one (1.5%) in Debubawi Keyih Bahri, five (12.5%) in Semienawi Keyih Bahri, seventeen (42.5%) in Maakel, and eight (20%) in Debub.

Table 3. Secondary level: Gross Enrollment ratio by region 2001/02

Region (Zoba)	# of secondary schools	Secondary school population	Gross enrolment	GER Ratio	Deviation from national Ratio
Anseba	5	41,550	6,853	16.49	-7.52
Gash Barka	4	68,636	5,121	7.46	-16.55
Deb-Keyih Bahri	1	6,252	750	12.00	-12.01
Sem-Keyih Bahri	5	49,219	3,445	7.00	-17.01
Maakel (Central)	17	52,920	31,419	59.37	35.36
Debub(South)	8	73,777	22,595	30.63	6.62
Total	40	292,351	70,183	24.01	

Source: Eritrea: Essential Education Indicators 2001/02

As shown in the table above, obviously the secondary schools are not distributed equally in the six regions. This means that educational opportunities are not equitably distributed. Out of forty secondary schools, 17(42.5%) are concentrated in Zoba Maakel (Central) and other 8(20%) are in Debub. Zoba Maakel was the first to be urbanized being the population sedentary and most of them Christians, considered more receptive by missionaries and colonizers, resulted in the early opening of many secondary schools and with more and better facilities than the others. While the other peripheral regions mostly populated by Muslims nomadic pastorals, did not get equal opportunity of opening schools. These peripheral regions were also the battle areas during the 30 year war and difficult to open schools. As indicated in table 3 below the population of secondary school age students in most regions is not less than the population of Zoba Maakel which has seventeen secondary schools.

The government of Eritrea is trying to open new secondary schools after independence but these efforts are not bearing adequate success. For example, as shown in table 3 the students' population who would go for secondary school in Gash Bark is 68,636. But those who have the chance to be enrolled are only 5,121. The same applies to the remaining regions of Anseba, Gash Barka, Semienawi Keyi Bahri, and Debubawi Keyih Bahri which are far from achieving the national gross enrolment. The communities of these regions are mostly pastoral nomads. Factors of mobility, sparse population, harsh environmental conditions and remoteness are the major obstacles for provision of formal education. Reaching them has been a major challenge and all school age children remain outside the formal education system. In particular in the pastoral communities girls make up most of the out of school children. Consequently, women of the nomads has been portrayed as excluded, disempowered and disadvantage. Before discussing these key issues it is essential to have a brief definition of empowerment.

What is Empowerment?

The concept "empowerment" means gaining "power" to make decision on issues that affect one's life. In the context of development, empowerment is about bringing people who are outside the decision making process into it. This means ensuring full access to political structures of decision- making bodies and control over the distribution of resources (Rowlands, 1999). Similarly, Kabeer (1999:436) defined empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability." According to Kabeer, empowerment is "the ability to make choices" and to be disempowered implies to be denied choice. The disempowering factors could be the combination of social, cultural, economic, political, and historical process. For example, where women lack the capacity or competence to participate in decision making, their disempowerment may be explained by the cultural rules, customs, and policies that foster gender biased inequalities that prevent girls from being educated and acquire such capabilities (Garba, 1999).

Therefore, women's empowerment can be understood as a process whereby women, individually and collectively, increase their own self-reliance to assert their independent right, to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their subordination, and develop awareness of the existing discrimination and inequality between women and men and how it affects their lives. It also deals with how power structures, processes and relationships produce and reinforce gender inequality and at the same time

how to gain the self confidence, capacities and resources required to challenge gender inequalities (Kabeer, 1999; Longwe, 1998).

Girl's and Women's Education and Empowerment

The concept of women's empowerment emerged against the traditional way of viewing women in society. To be empowered women need to extend their views, acquire capability and skills to make choices, improve rational thinking and flexibility, and increase political awareness to challenge oppressive structures. Empowerment requires gaining power within society, making decisions and working independently. Education is seen as directly associated with levels of gaining power and decision making and working independently, and those who cannot take up education are forced to remain managed by others (Kabeer, 1999; Kwesiga, 2002).

Conversely, Kratli (2001:4) argued that "the analysis of the causes of marginalization of pastoral nomads is reduced to a tautology: nomads are disempowered by not being empowered by education". The root causes of social, economic, and political dimension of past and present factors of contributing to the disempowerment have not tackled. Kratli views that the policies and systems that are directed to address the issue of "inclusion" of "educationally disadvantaged" nomads children into national education system should adopt three fundamental approaches: (a) the integration of nomad children within their own households' economy; (b) the causes of their school or under-enrolment; (c) the causes of the marginalization of the nomads at social , economic and political level. By failing to do so inclusion may do more harm than good resulting in the further marginalization and disempowerment (Ibid).

With rare exceptions education has been perceived as an effective instrument for transforming pastoralists into, (i) settled farmers or wage laborers, (ii) modern livestock producers and/or (iii) loyal citizens. The commonly held assumption is that education will bring an improvement of standard of living of pastoralists. For the last six decades the core pastoralists' development theoretical assumption was that nomadic pastoralism was an *evolutionary*, environmentally *destructive*, economically *irrational*, and culturally *backward*. The only way pastoralists could develop was by stopping being pastoralists and transform them to "*sedentarisation*". However, as cited by Kratli (2000) extensive research evidence proved against such traditional assumptions from different disciplines. Nonetheless many governments and policy makers are insisting education for sedentarisation of pastoral nomads: (i) by imposing standard system designed for sedentary people and therefore making it necessary for the nomads to stay near settlements, if they want their children to go to school; (ii) by accustoming nomad children to a sedentary lifestyle in boarding schools; (iii) by ignoring nomadic culture and inculcating in the children the values and world views of sedentary society (Ibid).

Another issue is that pastoralists are usually isolated minorities living in territories remotes from central government, difficult to control and often across insecure international borders. Living in these conditions, nomadic people have a long tradition of autonomy and self government that is often perceived by central governments as a challenge to their authority and a threat to national order. For all these reasons the provision of education is

often seen as a good opportunity for state propaganda aimed at building social unity beyond ethnic differences and traditional enmity, or gaining political loyalty.

According to a study by UNICEF on the challenge of implementing the Convention on the Rights of the children, educational programmes for nomads have failed primarily because decision makers have sought to use education as a tool for transforming nomadic population in to sedentary ones' or for the purposes of state building (Dall, 1993). The way forward seems a shift from imposing formal education to promoting non-formal education also known as popular educational.

Non-formal Education and Endogenous Empowerment

Under the pressure of growing studies and the push for decentralization of education some government have turned to innovative partnerships and collaboration with international development agencies for opting for non formal education programmes focusing on providing a services enhancing the life and survival of pastoral society as such rather than trying to transform them into something else. The core message of these alternative programmes is the concept of *responsiveness*. Education provision is understood as a two way process responding to situations on the ground through continuous interaction with the recipients (Pastoral nomads). These programmes recognize that current education system are mostly *unresponsive* to the needs and living condition of children from marginal or disadvantaged communities as well as to their changing context and to the potential of existing community resources for the educational process. Consequently, the main concern together with providing immediate responsive services is to try to move formal systems toward more responsive structures.

Currently, the dominant approach seems shift from "technical formal education" to creating opportunities for broader *livelihood strategies* such as *resources access, conflict management, political action*, communication between the literate and non-literate within the pastoral nomadic communities as well as between local and scientific knowledge . Usually this approach is known as '*endogenous empowerment*'. Karl(1995) offers a useful framework for identifying enabling condition for endogenous empowerment, describing four stage in the empowerment process with respect to women: (i)Awareness raising; (ii) capacity building and skills development; (iii) participation and greater control in decision making; and (iv) action for change.

Non formal education is built on the above three main components, participation, consciousness raising, and collective social action and it can accommodate reproductive and productive types of training by emphasizing emancipation. Participation is central to non formal education approaches. Within this approach, girls and women education in pastoral communities could be undertaken through workshops and seminars designed to encourage discussion, question and answer sessions, and case study analyses to raise awareness. Similarly, programmes of skills development and capacity building must begin with a proper assessment of what skills and capacities women already have what they lack and the relative importance of the skills to be imparted. Needs assessments would be ensure that only identified gaps are filled. Failure to undertake these may result in duplication of existing skills and capacities.

As Kratli (2001) noted participation of women in decision making and taking action to change discriminatory traditional and cultural norms are the most challenging areas in pastoral communities. Generally, pastoralists' "empowerment" within the national context requires a rather radical change in the culture of mainstream society, the culture that creates the condition of disempowerment in the first place. Pastoralists' empowerment both of males and females will not be achieved by formal education programmes designed to change nomads in order to maintain the hegemonic culture (Ibid).

It is important to distinguish between education that empowers and education that tends to focus on the acquisition of the technical skills of reading and writing. While the importance of these skills should not be denied, it is important to take into account that in the case of women such domesticating literacy appears to reinforce their domestic role against any change in social relations both in family and outside. Therefore, literacy can empower women if it enables them to gain access to information and knowledge that has been denied to them. It is essential to note that in the process of empowerment the first step is to identify the social and structural gender inequalities existing within the nomadic societies and devise appropriate policy interventions. For girls' and women's education to be effective it is important to identify and overcome gender discriminations that perpetuate gender inequality within the household sphere, the labour market, the community and state policies that hinder girls' and women's advancement in education.

Conclusion

There is a growing recognition for the need to link more successful practice of education and issues of nomadic pastoral culture, and society, particularly the relationship between culture and local knowledge. At present formal education often undermines the livelihood strategies of pastoral nomads without providing alternative for those who wish to remain in pastoral livelihood systems. An effective educational system for nomadic pastoralists would be an education strategy that recognizes:

- The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values of pastoral livelihood systems are appropriate and technically adapted to their environment.
- Be based on indigenous or local expert knowledge.
- Recognized that pastoral children may need to be equipped for life in other livelihood systems but do not assume this is the main objective of schooling.

As summary of the ideas cited above it could be said that if education is to empower women it has to look critically at the context that surround them and become a means where by girls and women being to question their own beliefs about themselves. In other words education needs to encourage girls to develop self confidence and a positive self image in order to appreciate their won capacities and potentialities. To do so awareness programmes could be undertaken by the various organization, based in the principles applied in non formal education programmes.

Recommendation

Governments and non governmental organization need to devices non formal education programs for pastoral nomads. This is because non formal education is highly flexible in structure and content and responsive to the changing needs of pastoral livelihoods.

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¹ GER is the ration of the number of people in school of any age to population of school age of children