



It's a girl thing: Menstruation, school attendance, spatial mobility and wider gender inequalities in Kenya



Sarah Jewitt*, Harriet Ryley¹

School of Geography, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2013

Received in revised form 10 July 2014

Keywords:

Kisumu Kenya

Education

Menstruation

Puberty

Sanitary towels

Feminist political ecology

ABSTRACT

Recent attention has been drawn to possible linkages between poor sanitation in sub-Saharan African schools and low attendance rates amongst post-pubescent girls. In particular, questions have been raised about the influence of menstruation and access to sanitary products on schoolgirl absenteeism but research on this topic is scarce. Moreover, the few detailed empirical studies that have been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa on this topic have produced contradictory results. These uncertainties coupled with theories of how concepts of pollution and taboo are used to construct or police spatial boundaries (and maintain power relations within society) provide an interesting context for examining everyday geographies of menstruation. Kisumu, Kenya provides the context for the study which utilises a feminist political ecology framework to investigate cultural and spatial limitations associated with menstruation and puberty. Drawing on schoolgirls' lived experiences, we illustrate how emotional geographies of puberty and menstruation are productive of and help to reproduce gender inequalities in mobility and access to social capital resources (especially education). At the same time we show how poverty coupled with low levels of sexual and reproductive health and rights education can exacerbate gendered bodily inequalities as girls face an increased risk of sexual exploitation when they reach puberty.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

Introduction

In 2003, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan stated that 'there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition and promote health' (cited in UNICEF, 2008). Other key benefits associated with girls' education include protection against early pregnancy and other sexual/reproductive harms including HIV/AIDS (Mason et al., 2013). Girls in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) bear a disproportionately high burden of such harms (ibid) and although girls' school enrolment ratios in the region have increased in recent years (World Bank, 2011), large inequality gaps in primary education remain (UN, 2012). Gender gaps are even more pronounced in secondary education (Mensch and Lloyd, 1998; Mutunga and Stewart, 2003; Muito, 2004; Kirk and Sommer, 2006; Sommer, 2010a; Malusu and Zani, 2014).

To explain these gaps, attention has been drawn to possible linkages between poor school-based sanitation and girls' low attendance rates. At the same time, the interdependence of the gender, education and sanitation Millennium Development Goals (Ten, 2007) has received increased interest from donors and NGOs. According to Barbara Frost (cited in Melik, 2011) without sanitation, 'you cannot achieve universal primary education, you cannot promote gender equality and empower women, you cannot reduce child mortality.'

While macro-level data are available on sanitation access and gendered school attendance, the everyday 'lived experiences' of schoolgirls with poor sanitation access are poorly understood (Sommer, 2010a). Reflecting the difficulties of obtaining information on such sensitive issues (McFarlane et al., 2013), academic research on the influence of puberty (and the risk of sexual harassment that can accompany this) and menstruation on girls' school attendance has been quite scarce (McMahon et al., 2011). Nevertheless, interest in menstruation and poor sanitary product access as possible causes of schoolgirl absenteeism has attracted attention from the media, NGOs and policy-makers following efforts to track progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (Bharadwaj and Patkar, 2004; DfID, 2005; Kirk and Sommer, 2005, 2006; Ten, 2007; UNICEF, 2008; World Bank, 2005; Oster and Thornton, 2009, 2011; Grant et al., 2010; Fehr, 2010). In response, several state and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Sarah.jewitt@nottingham.ac.uk (S. Jewitt), harriet.ryley@hotmail.com (H. Ryley).

¹ Current address: CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education), St Giles Court, 24 Castle Street, Cambridge CB3 0AJ, UK.

NGO interventions have sought to increase schoolgirls' access to sanitary products (Kirumira, 2003; Cooke, 2006; Ahmed and Yesmin, 2008; Callister, 2008; Scott et al., 2009; Njuguna et al., 2009). In Kenya, the Prime Minister allocated Sh2.6 billion for sanitary towels in 2012 as part of the Primary Schools Sanitary Towels Programme² (Capital, 2012) and several NGOs and charities have developed re-usable sanitary towels (The Village Trust, 2010; Team Kenya, 2010; Access-health Project Mwezi, 2014; K-MET, 2014; Kiwanis, 2014).

Interestingly, academic studies on the impacts of improved sanitary towel access (or menstruation more generally) on girls' school attendance have produced rather contradictory results whilst highlighting other important influences on attendance (Kirk and Sommer, 2006; Scott et al., 2009; Grant et al., 2010; Sommer, 2010a; McMahon et al., 2011; Muvea, 2011; Oster and Thornton, 2011). In SSA, poverty and embedded gender inequalities are key causes of pubescent girls 'dropping out' of school or even engaging in 'transactional sex' to obtain money to buy sanitary towels so that they can continue to attend (Kirk and Sommer, 2005, 2006; Mason et al., 2013; Malusu and Zani, 2014). Sommer (2010a, 523) argues that as girls mature, a 'collision' occurs 'in school environments that continue to be gender discriminatory' resulting in 'an unnecessary, and preventable, interruption to girls' active school participation and attendance'. To address this, the benefits of multi-sectoral initiatives that link sanitation with education on health, hygiene and girls' rights have been highlighted (Thomas, 2002; Kirk and Sommer, 2005; McMahon et al., 2011; Malusu, 2012; Mason et al., 2013). In taking such approaches forward, Sommer (2010a) emphasises the importance of 'capturing girl's lived perspectives on contextual factors impacting on their lives in a modernizing society' (ibid, 527).

Using empirical data from Kisumu Kenya, this paper investigates such 'lived perspectives' in the context of how everyday geographies of menstruation and puberty reflect and re-produce inequalities in gendered school attendance and broader life chances. Rocheleau et al.'s (1996) 'open ended' approach (Elmhirst, 2011) to feminist political ecology (FPE) that treats gender as 'a critical variable in shaping resource access and control' (Rocheleau et al., 1996, 4) provides inspiration for our use of an FPE framework to examine gendered inequalities in access to social (as opposed to natural) capital resources, especially education.

Another important influence is the broader body of FPE-informed research published in *Geoforum* including Nightingale's (2011, 156) analysis of how Hindu ideas of ritual purity (and pollution) lie behind gendered spatial restrictions in Nepal and are maintained through 'everyday spatial and bodily practices' which reinforce existing power relations. Drawing on Truelove's FPE-informed analysis of the implications of inequalities in water and sanitation access for everyday lives and rights in low income areas of New Delhi, we highlight everyday 'inequalities forged on the body' (Truelove, 2011, 145) within particular spaces (schools). We also utilise Sultana's (2011) work on gendered suffering over access to uncontaminated water in Bangladesh which shows how resource struggles are not just material but 'are mediated through bodies, spaces and emotions' (163). In particular, we illustrate how 'emotional geographies' of puberty and menstruation reinforce gendered spatial relations and access to social capital resources in Kisumu, especially where girls lack access to reliable and hygienic sanitation and sanitary products. Our contribution to FPE scholarship is the analysis of local-scale empirical data on everyday geographies of menstruation/puberty to improve understandings of their influence on gendered power relations (Rocheleau, 2008)

whilst highlighting opportunities for further work on this topic. The research is important and timely as the everyday influence of menstruation and puberty on gendered mobility and wider socio-economic opportunities is understudied yet crucial for informing for sanitation, education and health policy and practice (Ten, 2007; McFarlane et al., 2013).

To provide context for the study, the following sub-section draws together work on gender/sanitation/education interlinkages and toilets as gendered spaces. Concepts of taboo/pollution/dirt surrounding menstruation and FPE-informed analyses of menstruation/puberty-related gender inequalities are then discussed along with their impacts on spatial and socio-economic mobility in SSA. This is followed by an overview of the methodological approaches used in the research. There are four main empirical sections in the paper. The first focuses on why girls sometimes miss school and the role menstruation plays in this while the second investigates how menstruation influences girls' mobility and broader access to social capital resources. The third empirical section discusses the everyday sexual exploitation of post-pubescent girls. Although this was not an issue that we set out to investigate, it came to light during fieldwork as an illustration of how poverty, gender inequality/discrimination, a lack of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) knowledge/education and cultural tolerance of gendered violence can 'collide' as girls mature. The last empirical section investigates the responses of schoolgirls and teachers to schemes promoting re-usable sanitary products.

Gender, sanitation and education interlinkages

Emphasising linkages between girls' absence from school and poor sanitation provision, several studies in SSA have highlighted important everyday challenges associated with managing menstruation in school environments. Sommer's research in Tanzania (2010a) emphasises difficulties created by a lack of access to private toilets with water supplies,³ sanitary products, painkillers for menstrual cramps, and spare clothes if leaks occur. Long school days (typically 8 h in Kenya) that increase the risk of menstrual leaks coupled with frequent harassment by boys in and around school toilet areas add to the shame and embarrassment experienced by many post-pubescent girls. Where it is difficult to change sanitary products, infection (and the odour of menstrual blood being detected by others) are likely to be higher and girls may suffer discomfort and stigmatization as a result (Muito, 2004). Given such constraints, it is unsurprising that many Kenyan girls view 'menstruation as the most significant social stressor and barrier to schooling' (McMahon et al., 2011, 2) and prefer to manage their menses at home.

In SSA more generally, these practical difficulties are often exacerbated by low levels of knowledge about both the biological process of menstruation and SRHR, compared to knowledge about the taboos (or etiquette – Laws, 1990) surrounding menstruation (Pattman and Chege, 2003; Kirk and Sommer, 2006; Allotey et al., 2011). The pan-African NGO FAWA (Foundation for African Women Educationalists) found that a 'culture of silence' surrounding menstruation in rural Uganda resulted in it being 'ignored in families, schools and communities' (FAWE-U, 2003 cited in Kirk and Sommer, 2006, 2). In Kenya girls often struggle to obtain information on menstruation and puberty due to a lack of supportive school staff or even family members to discuss these issues with (Muito, 2004; McMahon et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2013). Many girls also experience considerable pressure from family members to leave school so that they can take on a larger share of household work and ultimately get married – issues that reflect broader risks

² Funding for this program was cut by over \$1 million in the 2013–14 budget (Malusu and Zani, 2014).

³ Although it should be emphasized that many girls may not have access to such facilities in their homes either.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5074047>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5074047>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)