



Does living in a community with more educated mothers enhance children's school attendance? Evidence from Sierra Leone



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ABSTRACT

In Sierra Leone girls are 23.4% less likely to attend secondary education than boys. This difference between sexes increases the gender gap in educational attainment since women's education is positively associated with children's educational wellbeing. This paper investigates the relationship between children's school attendance, their mothers' level of education, as well as the overall level of women's education at the community level in Sierra Leone using multilevel statistical modelling techniques and the country's 2008 Demographic and Health Survey data. The findings suggest that, regardless of a child's own mother's education, an increase in the proportion of mothers with secondary or higher education in a community by 10% improves the probability of attending junior secondary school significantly by 8%; a 50% increase improves the likelihood of attending school by 45%. There was no significant relationship between the proportion of better educated mothers in a community and primary school attendance. However, relative to children whose mothers had no formal education, children whose mothers had attained primary, secondary or higher education were 7%, 14% and 22% more likely to attend primary school respectively. Future policies should seek to promote girls' education at post-primary education and develop community based programmes to enable the diffusion and transmission of educational messages.

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1. Background

The association between children's school attendance and women's education in low and middle income countries has been rarely explored. Yet women's education has long been a focus of pledges by the international community. In 1990, the Education for All (EFA) agenda placed an emphasis on girls' education through its policy of universal primary education and equal gender parity (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1990). The equal gender principles championed in the EFA agenda were reaffirmed in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development and in 2000 at the World Education Forum. Three of the goals established at the World Education Forum (i.e. goals 2, 4, and 5) highlighted the need to improve girls' and women's education. Goal 5 was the most emphatic on this issue promising to eliminate 'gender disparities

in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieve gender equality in education by 2015 ...' (UNESCO, 2000, p. 36). These goals were recommitted as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), signified by MDG 2 – achieve universal primary education, and MDG 3 – promote gender equality and empower women. Since 1990, therefore, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of girls participating in education (Knodel and Jones, 1996; UNESCO, 2011). In spite of these developments, many countries, particularly those in West and Central Africa, continue to have low gender parity ratios suggesting that there is an under-representation of girls in the education system (Grant and Behrman, 2010; Kazeem et al., 2010). As a result, girls and women in these countries lag behind in the benefits of education such as improved health outcomes and economic prosperity. Using the case of a post-conflict state, Sierra Leone, this paper critically evaluates the relationship between mothers' education and children's schooling, and in particular explores how children's schooling is influenced by the overall level of women's education in the community.

Education confers onto women many advantages not least that which they are subsequently able to transmit to their offspring.

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The most commonly cited advantage is economic. To the extent that education is closely linked to occupation and earnings, women with higher levels of education are significantly more likely than less educated women to have a higher earning power. With this advantage, they are able to enhance their own well-being through better health and nutrition, for instance. A higher earning power also increases women's economic independence and henceforth autonomy within the household which, in turn, enhances their capacity to undertake or participate in household decisions (Heaton et al., 2005; Woldemicael and Tenkorang, 2010). This increase in autonomy introduces another advantage of education. When women are no longer restricted by their dependence on male leadership, they are better placed to pursue their own ambitions and control their own lives. Arguably, a more pervasive influence of education is in a cultural shift in traditional values (such as early marriage and childbearing as well as female exclusion from public life) and the positioning of the child in the family (the intergenerational flow of wealth) (Caldwell, 1980).

There is reason to believe that the advantages which are conferred onto women through educational achievement can be transmitted to their children (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Rosenzweig and Wolpin, 1994). That is to say, children who have educated mothers are expected to be significantly more likely than those whose mothers are not educated to: (1) attend school (2) have longer years of schooling and (3) have higher levels of educational achievements (Plug, 2004; Sacerdote, 2002). This is not unexpected as more educated mothers are better able to meet the costs of education as they are more likely to have resources at their disposal to make such investments (Paxton and Schady, 2007). Educated mothers are also more likely to send their children to school and to encourage their children to remain in school and achieve highly because of the values and socialisation which they themselves were exposed to in school (Andrabi et al., 2012; Tramonte and Willms, 2010). The independence and empowerment granted to women through high educational attainment also means that educated mothers are more likely than less educated mothers to send their children to school even in environments where the status of women is low (Bommier and Lambert, 2000; World Bank, 2005). Being more independent, mothers with higher levels of education will have a greater ability to: (1) argue in favour of sending a child to school and (2) invest in a child's education independently of their partners' or household contribution, thereby overcoming any barriers to children's educational participation. Women with lower attainments are unlikely to possess these qualities which enable them to challenge household opposition to education; they are also less likely to have access to the resources that would enable them to sponsor schooling even if they did have a desire to make such an investment.

The idea that mothers' education affects children's schooling is not novel in educational research. In developed countries, studies have demonstrated the significant correlation and causal effect of mother's education on children's learning outcomes and attainment (Haveman and Wolfe, 1995). In low and middle income countries also, there is general consensus that having educated mothers, net of individual and other household factors, is correlated with children's school participation (Huisman and Smits, 2009; Moyi, 2012). However, studies in low and middle income countries have typically used mothers' education as a proxy for socio-economic status. This approach assumes that mothers' education affects children's schooling purely through economic contributions. While the level of education is associated with wealth and earnings, it is not simply through being able to afford the costs of education that mothers with high educational attainments can influence the educational trajectories of their children.

The relevance of the economic interpretation of high educational attainment in the sub-Saharan context is arguably more

applicable to fathers' education. This is because in such societies it is still commonplace to have male-headed households who are the primary breadwinners. Therefore, even when children have educated mothers, the predominant economic investment to education comes from the father (Booth, 2003; Timaeus and Boler, 2007). Studies on orphanhood have confirmed this observation such that paternal orphanhood is closely related to reduced household earnings and household poverty, which in turn results either in the postponement of school enrolment or the withdrawal of children from school (Case and Ardington, 2006). Such evidence is not intended to contravene the argument that mothers' education does have an economic influence on children's schooling. Rather, it is to highlight that the economic interpretation accorded to mothers' education in educational studies may hold a lower tenability in the African setting and, in fact, it may be through the values, knowledge, and modern ethics imparted through formal education that mothers' education affects children's school attendance in low income countries. If this position is assumed, as is the case in the present paper, the relationship between mothers' education and children's school attendance may be conceptualised as also operating at the community level so that the knowledge, favourable attitudes and progressive behaviours of mothers who have attained secondary or higher education do not simply benefit the offspring of these mothers but also benefits children who live in close proximity.

This paper argues that children who live among women with high educational attainment are likely to have a higher probability of attending school than those living in communities with low levels of women's education. This relationship can be conceptualised as operating through a process of social learning and influence, a theory adapted from health research (McNay et al., 2003; Moursund and Kravdal, 2003). Through this process, women with low levels of education are able to observe and learn the tastes and behaviour of more educated women and promote schooling for their children. They are able to acquire information and knowledge, for instance, about the school entry age, the benefits of education or the structure and policies of the education system from more educated women. The result is that children who live in close proximity to women with high educational attainment will have an enhanced probability of attending school even when their own mothers have low levels of education. Based on this hypothesis, the following research question is explored in the present paper:

Does living in a community with higher mothers' education enhance a child's likelihood of attending school after controlling for mothers' education and other socio-economic factors?

Sierra Leone is used as a case study for this research. The country is in West Africa and has a small population of less than five million. It has one of the lowest human development index (180 out of 187 according to the 2011 Human Development Index). The country has a poor health record with 970 maternal deaths per 100,000 births and an under-five mortality rate of 192 deaths per 1000 live births (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2011). Universal primary education was introduced in Sierra Leone in 2001 through the Free Primary Education policy which abolished fees and promised to provide free textbooks and learning materials for primary schools. The 2004 Education Act made it mandatory for all children aged 6–14 years to attend and complete basic education – primary and junior secondary school (JSS). Though these Acts made provisions for compulsory attendance, they did not remove the costs of sending children to school as households continued to pay for registration and educational materials (Government of Sierra Leone, 2007).

The rationale behind the choice of Sierra Leone as a case study is twofold. Firstly, the country has a low level of female educational attainment (Government of Sierra Leone, 2009, p. 2). About 25% of

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