

# Phenomenological Experiences of the Girl Child in Accessing Technical Education in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

Female enrolment in Technical Education in Ghana has been low in recent times. Regardless of this, some females have made a decision to attain Technical Education. The study examined the experiences of the Girl Child in accessing Technical Education in Ghana. The study employed a phenomenological design using a qualitative approach. The study was conducted in one of the Technical Education Institutions in Ghana. The study sampled 8 female students and 2 female coordinators of Women in Technical Education (WITED). The students were conveniently selected whereas the coordinators were purposefully selected. An interview guide was used to collect data from the respondents. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data gathered. It was discovered that the attitudes of family and friends towards Female Technical Education were negative. Also, female students were found to be harassed by male teachers and students. The study found that the institution did not have facilities like a place of convenience for the available female students. It was concluded that even though Technical Education is very important to national development, females are not encouraged by family and friends to enrol in Technical Education programmes. It was recommended that teachers, media, and all stakeholders are encouraged to educate the general public, especially parents, on the need for Female Technical Education. This education should also focus on diluting all misconceptions held by the public.

**Keywords:** *Technical education, Girl child, Experiences, Female students, Technical institutions.*

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### Highlights of this paper

- Continuously decreasing female enrolment in Technical Education in Ghana has been of grave concern to stakeholders.
- The few females who have mastered the courage to enrol in Technical Education face some challenges.
- The study examined the experiences of the Girl Child in accessing Technical Education in Ghana.
- It was discovered that the attitudes of family and friends towards Female Technical Education were negative.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Formal Education in Ghana, for some time now, has had different goals. Initially, it was for the spreading of the gospel, and then to train translators and medium for commerce, and later to train elite groups to run the British Colony. The schools were initially set up by the early colonial merchants and missionaries in the castles. Besides reading, writing and numerical skills, workshops were set up for students to acquire practical skills such as carpentry, masonry, blacksmith, shoemaking, among others. Sewing was also taught for girls (Isahaku, 2009). Unfortunately, development in these areas (practical skills) was not given much attention and not formalised as compared to the grammar related studies.

Ghana has since independence made significant progress in its educational reform. The education landscape in Ghana today is the result of major educational policy initiatives adopted by past and present governments. Ghanaian governmental effort to reform the education system began with the Education Act of 1961. This Act declared primary education compulsory and free, and deemed that any parent not sending their child to school could be fined (Oduro, 2000). Although school was now technically free, students were still required to pay a registration fee and to buy their own books, uniform, and supplies. The Act did, however, dramatically increase enrollment rates. Enrollment in primary schools more than doubled between 1960/1 and 1964/5 (Oduro, 2000). The gender gap decreased in primary school years, changing from 36.16% of primary students being female in 1960 to 44.43% in 1968. The gender gap remained large in secondary schools, with 22.04% of secondary students being female in 1960 to 25.88% of secondary students being female in 1968.

Unfortunately, the 1970s and 1980s saw the decline of Ghana's education system due to political instability and corruption (Eyiah, 2010). The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education Programme (FCUBE) of 1996 which was mandated by the 1992 Constitution was designed to address some of the shortcomings of the previous educational reforms including the 1987/88 reform. This change opened up education to more students, especially students from poor, rural communities (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2007). However again, the funding did not cover books, pens, supplies, or uniforms. Thus, buying the items continued to be a problem for impoverished children and inhibits enrollment.

The specific needs of female students came into focus in 1997 with the formation of the Girls Education Unit (GEU). Since its inception, the GEU has worked to create female scholarships for promising students, revised textbooks to be more gender-sensitive, trained women on income-generating activities created a Girls Education Week, put on Empowerment Camps, and focused on partnerships with the private sector to meet the needs of female students. To address the continuing problem of low female enrollment in higher education, GEU created an action plan that includes steps such as promoting female role models, improving the safety of schools, and building female sanitary units.

The GEU have also made some effort in providing education on improving reproductive health knowledge, providing food programs, providing incentives for female teachers, ensuring flexibility in school schedules,

mobilising the community towards an attitude change on female education, and ensuring that schools are cost-effective and affordable for students (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2007). Ghana Education Trust Fund - GET Fund Act 2000 (Act 581), in the year 2000, was established by an Act of Parliament with the objective of providing finance to supplement the provision of education at all levels by Government (Ghana Education Trust Act, 2000).

Vocational and Technical Education is perceived as one of the crucial elements in enhancing economic productivity. This was highlighted by Min (1995) who stated that the economic effectiveness of a country depends on the skills of its workforce. The skills and competencies of the workforce, in turn, are dependent upon the quality of the country's education and training systems (Min, 1995). The unemployment situation which has currently become a burden on us as a country has its root cause from the bookish nature of our current educational system which puts much emphasis on classical learning.

This assertion is supported by the Principal of the Kumasi Technical Institute (KTI) Dr. Abeiku Apprey who recently called on the government to boost Technical and Vocational Education in the country as it holds the key to national economic development. To him, this area of education trains the youth to acquire basic skills relevant for employment and wealth creation in this era of globalization. This concern has also been shared by Prof. K.T. Djan-Fordjour, Rector of Sunyani Polytechnic who indicated that “high-skilled manpower required to boost productivity, underpin economic advancement and create opportunities for individuals in the economic development of Ghana is increasingly dwindling — largely because of insufficient support for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the country”.

The development in education, so far, shows that formal education has focused so much on grammar related studies but not on technology education especially among female students (Ndede, 2002). In view of that, the Science Technology and Mathematics Innovative Education (STMIE) clinic was instituted to address the gender imbalance and misconceptions about girls' participation in Science, Technology and Mathematics education. It still, however, appears that females lag behind in Technical Education. This critical paper, therefore, focuses on assessing the challenges facing the Girl Child in Technical Education in the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolis.

There is a persistent lack of gender equality in the participation of girls in Technical Education in Ghana. There have been policies to encourage Girl Child Education in general and much progress has been made. There have also been policies to encourage Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and significant strides have been made. Prof. J. Anamuah-Mensah, former Vice-Chancellor, University of Education, Winneba stated that:

*“We are aware of the acute lack of technical manpower with relevant skills in the economy even though this is a requirement for economic growth. We need to develop this base first through a well-designed technical/vocational education and training system. At the moment, the small and medium scale businesses at Kokompe, fitting shops and many other areas provide a home for technical training for certain groups of people with limited theoretical background and therefore have limited impact. Few middle-level technicians are trained in formal educational institutions. There is a need, therefore, to train more qualified middle-level personnel with appropriate skills to propel the economy forward. The backbone (link) to the development of this resource is education and specifically, technical and vocational training which is offered through the school system” (p. 3).*

What is considerably lacking is the link to encourage the girl child in TVET and also to put appropriate policies in place to enable them to practice technological professions. Ghana has a number of Technical Education Institutes and despite the presence of these institutions and other technical training centres, female enrolment into these technical schools is not encouraging and thus, have received very little attention. This is evident as the

enrolment of female students in some notable technical institutions keeps on reducing for some years now (Ankomah, 2016).

A number of studies have attempted bringing to the attention of stakeholders the challenges or barriers to female education in Ghana (Akplu and Amankrah, 2008; Lambert *et al.*, 2012). Lambert *et al.* (2012) for example, indicated that poverty, harassment, and a cultural mindset that devalues female education were the three main obstacles to female education in Ghana. Basow (1986) also indicated that children during their childhood stages are indoctrinated with male stereotyped activities. Akyeampong (2007) also was of the view that limited access to schools and lack of facilities in the existing ones were the challenges to female education in Ghana. These studies only focused on female education in general. It appears, however, that little is known in the area of challenges to female participation in Technical Education in Ghana. Hence, the need for a study. The objective of the study is to assess the experiences of the girl child in accessing Technical Education in Ghana. Specifically, the study sought to identify; (a) personal experiences of the girl child in assessing Technical Education, (b) institutional obstacles to girl child Technical Education.

This study provides the status of female Technical Education by enlightening stakeholders on the challenges as well as the need to encourage female enrolment in Technical Education. This paper will be significant to Directorate of Education as it seeks to address the gender imbalance of participation in technical education in Ghana. It is significant to stakeholders since it addresses the inequity in employment opportunities which is currently heavily weighted in favour of men in the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolis.

## **2. METHODS**

The study employed a phenomenological design using a qualitative approach. This design was used in order to provide a detailed account and the realities pertaining to experiences of the girl child in accessing Technical Education in a selected Technical Education Institute. The study covered 8 female students and 2 coordinators of Women in Technical Education (WITED). The selection of 8 participants for the study was based on Creswell (2012) assertion that qualitative studies do not focus on sample size. Creswell explained that this is because the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new participant. The researcher believes that considering time constraint, it was appropriate to select only 8 participants. The institution had only two female coordinators and thus, both were allowed to participate in the study. The respondents aged from 17 to 18 years and were in their first and second year of study. The students were conveniently selected whereas the coordinators were purposefully selected. An interview guide was used to collect data from the respondents.

The unstructured interview was used which allowed the researcher to probe into the responses provided by the respondents and also gave participants the freedom to express their ideas about a variety of issues relating to the topic of study. Permission was sought from the Head of the institution to gain entry into the research field. The students who were selected were assured of confidentiality and their consent was sought. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data gathered. In the analysis, pseudonyms were given to the students to hide their identity.

## **3. RESULTS**

### *3.1. Personal Experiences of the Girl Child in Assessing Technical Education*

The study discovered that while most of the female students opted to enter technical education, few of them, however, stated that they did not opt for that. One of these students stated that: *"I did not opt for technical education. I had preferred catering. My father and my teachers convinced me to come here. But I am happy anyway"* (Student B). Others,

however, asserted like: *"It was my own will to have technical education. I made that decision in primary 6. I believe that technical education gives you practical skills, unlike secondary school. I am happy being on the programme"* (Student C).

It was found that these female students were discouraged by friends and family members. In some cases, the mother and father were not in support of their technical education. Most reasons given by these people who discouraged the females from entering technical education were that it is for males. As a result, some of them did not have an interest and were shy to go to school. One of the female students indicated that:

*"It was not easy for me to convince my family and friends.....My mum and dad had wanted me to go to SHS. My family members felt I should not go into technical education but I felt SHS does not equip students with practical knowledge. I like technical education even though it is for men"* (Student A).

This particular (student A), even believes that technical education is for males. In another interview, the student said:

*"A lot of people discouraged. This work is for male only. As a lady, you do not have to do a technical course. After all, you will get married after school. They feel that as a female, I have to do something better. The community I am coming from do not accept females to go into technical education.....My siblings often discourage me. My sister, for example, told me I have to stop this technical education. She is a nurse and she feels I have to go into female professions"* (Student D).

Another student said: *"I get a lot discouragement from friends. The job is for men. It is all about metal! metal! metal!. .... They tell me am beautiful and do not deserve to go to technical education"* (Student E).

It was surprising to find out that some male students within the institution discouraged the female students in their class. She started that: *"I am mostly discouraged by friends. They feel I have to go into the female profession. My classmates even do not think the course is for females"* (Student G).

These misconceptions held by the family, friends and the society at large, to some extent, discourage the females from entering into Technical Education. The students, again, raised concerns about the washroom facilities stating that the school does not have separate washrooms for male and female students. The students reported that they felt uncomfortable using the same washroom with the males. One of the students pointed out that: *"The school do not have urinal for females. Most times I do not urinate when I come to school. I have to keep it to myself. I go home when I have to use the washroom"* (Student C). Another student uttered that: The school do not have a female urinal and so most do not urinate when in school. *"I wait when I close and get home before I urinate"* (Student E).

The study indicated that the female students were sometimes bullied and harassed by the male students, sometimes. This was because the ratio of male to female was around 35:1. The teachers, as well as the male students, made romantic advances towards them. The students expressed this issue. The students voiced that: *"Some of the male teachers and students always make romantic advances to us"*.

In an interview, one of the female students stated that more practical work should be done to equip and prepare the students for the job market even though the programme was intended to be practical. She raised these concerns in relation to the unemployment condition in the country. She said: *"I feel the practical work are not enough for us to be effectively equipped and prepared for the job market"*.

### *3.2. Institutional Challenges in Educating Female Students in Technical Education*

The study found that even though the female students were allowed to participate in the school organised programmes such as sports, beauty pageants, debates and students' leadership, the institution had some challenges in educating these female students. It was revealed that there weren't any scholarship package (whether full or partial) to motivate and encourage females to apply to the institution. One of the coordinators made it clear that:

*“.....the school do not have financial or scholarship package to motivate females into the technical programme. They pay their fees just like the male students and as well pay all charges which every student is supposed to pay. There have been instances where some female students were not allowed to write examinations because they have not paid their fees”.*

The information gathered revealed that the institution also had problems with facilities such as urinal and washrooms for female students. It was found that the female students who wanted to ease themselves or use the urinal had to use the male restroom which creates a lot of problems for the females. Most of the female students were found to either keep urine till they get home. In an interview with one of the coordinators, she indicated that:

*“The institution does not have a place of convenience for the female students and as a result uses the male urinal. The urinal is an open one and also behind a storey building. As a result, someone can be seen when urinating by people standing at the top floor of the building. Due to this, the female students do not use the urinal and decide to keep the urine. This is bad and brings diseases or illness to them”.*

Upon investigation, it was discovered that the institution, for some years, seems not to be concerned about low female enrolment in the institution until recently that some strategies have been documented to promote female enrolment. In an interview, one of the coordinators asserted that:

*“The school is not much concerned about the low female enrolment. Formerly, the school did not have a female coordinator to address the needs of the female students. It is just recently that the school officially appointed female coordinators.....I believe that now that the school have a coordinator, plans are now being put in place to visit various basic schools and also to talk to parents and students during PTA meetings and educate them on the need for female technical education. The churches will also be a point of call as well as other important social gathering”*

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Non-availability of financial support or scholarship for girls, non-existence of separate washrooms for females and institutional disregard on low female enrolment were the institutional challenges found. These institutional challenges found are likely to deter female students and to discourage parents from considering technical education as an educational option. This finding was validated by Murgor (2013) who stated that TVET institutions which have the following facilities attracted more female students: separate washrooms, safe and tolerable environment, additional transportation, female trainers and teachers.

In Ghana, Technical Institutions greatly contribute to the continuous decline in Female Education, especially in technology. Professor Anamuah Mensah was emphatic that due to the lack of appropriate equipment and facilities, the products of the institution will not be abreast with modern trends. With the rapid technological development, being employed will be difficult for students who are not abreast with these new technologies. This issue was addressed by one of the students who stated that more practical work should be done. Technical Institutions, to some extent, have failed in their quest to provide the practical and hands-on skill to their students. This is evident as significant facilities which promote teaching and learning are found to be lacking in this institution (Anamuah-Mensah, 2004).

The misconception of society and parents have been found to be a significant obstacle to female technical education in Ghana. Females are discouraged by societal views on Technical Education. This is seen as soon as the child is born into the family and society. Children are indoctrinated with some gender beliefs and ideologies (Basow, 1986). For example, females are made to cook whereas males go for farming. Some of these beliefs are implicit in nature but still have some implications for education. This becomes worse as the child grows. Parents already tell their children the kind of profession to go into. Even in contemporary time, females are encouraged to go into

secretarial related jobs whereas males are advised to go into science and technology-related jobs. These impressions are created by the children even before tertiary education. It is of the essence to understand that these factors have led greatly to the low female involvement in Technical Education in Ghana.

The study also found that harassment was a challenge the female students faced in assessing Technical Education. This was clearly stated by most of the respondents that romantic advances were made by both the male teachers and students. The increased number of males in Technical education (Anamuah-Mensah, 2004) serves as a threat to female students as they felt insecure. They are, therefore, bullied and harassed. This was confirmed by Lambert *et al.* (2012) who stated that harassment is one of the main obstacles to female education in Ghana.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that even though Technical Education is very important to national development, females are not encouraged by family and friends to enrol in Technical Education programmes. This is because of the obstacles found in the Technical Institutions as well as the society in improving female technical education. The government, teachers, parents, stakeholders and the society at large have a negative attitude to female technical education and consequently undermines the potentials of females who enrol in these programmes. It is, however, likely that Female Technical Education will be promoted if members within the various societies change their attitude toward the programmes.

### 5.1. Implications for Theory and Practice

Based on the emerging issues discussed, it is important for the existing technical institutions in connection with the government to provide female facilities such as washrooms to promote female technical education. Technical institutions in Ghana should do well to bridge the gap between theory and practice by inculcating practical skills and knowledge to their students. The Technical Institutions as well should regularly embark on an industrial tour. This is to increase the employability of Technical Education students and encourage females to enrol. Teachers, media, and all stakeholders are encouraged to educate the general public, especially parents, on the need for Female Technical Education. This education should also focus on diluting all misconceptions held by the public.

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