Inferiorisation: The Human Rights Analysis of Being a Female in School

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Abstract

This paper examines the constitutive role of schooling in (re)producing patterns of sex-based gender interactions and identities that usually draw gender contours in wider society. Using the relational theory of human rights, this paper explored the characteristics of 'being female' in a Ghanaian Basic School by examining how school practices tend to sediment and promote male-female gender-authority based power relations in school. *The* research study was an in-depth case study of a rural basic (primary) school in the Central Region of Ghana. Purposive sampling was the main technique employed. The sample was composed of seven males and eight female schoolchildren aged between 9 and 15 years who had been in the school from primary class 1. Employing an ethnographic style approach, data were collected from schools through interviews and observations. Sequential interviews were also conducted with teachers. School and classroom activities were regularly observed during the fieldwork. *The* paper discussed how being female became gendered entry points for expressing power using data from interviews and school observation. It highlights how school practices encouraged sex-based dimorphic presentations that positioned girls as subjects to be watched during morning assembly and weaklings to be protected by boys. All the texts, from policies, interview transcripts to observation notes, were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). *The* analysis examined how the corporeal dimensions of belonging together are implicated in the (re)production of stereotypic inferiorisation of females within the wider society instead of challenging and reconstructing them. We argued that females experience inferiorisation, as femaleness is associated with being short, being watched and exhibited in the performance of service functions. We call attention to the role of schools to halt in the reproduction of ideologies of female subordination. We suggested that educational institutions should be re-organised as agent of social change that is more beneficial - more proactive in challenging gender stratifications rather than reproducing them.

Keywords

Femaleness, Human Rights, Inferiorisation, Relational Theory, Sex-Based Gender, School

1. Introduction

This paper briefly discussed findings from an ethnographic research about male-female gender-authority based power relations in school. It departs from simple analysis that focuses on gender parity index as "key axes through which efforts for development may be realized" [1] (p. 45). On such grounds, this research is grounded in the relational theory of human rights. The application of relational theory in this study is that girls' status in school is dependent on what is ascribed to them by other members of the school. Therefore, girls will have rights and be treated fairly within school when members of the school respect and recognise those rights. From a membership categorisation analysis perspective, other school members are responsible for ensuring that conditions are created for girls to enjoy their rights. Thus creating safe spaces for girls within school imposes a duty on teachers to

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create the conditions necessary for the protection, promotion and preservation of those rights. The value of relational theory here is that it is either the choice or interest that makes it possible for suspects' to enjoy their rights. Similarly, the teachers' and boys' choices or interests in ensuring the protection of girls' rights will determine how girls are treated within school. The analytical utility of applying relational theory is that other members of the school are responsible for strengthening respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, tolerance, equality and peace among individuals, within societies and among nations [2]. Such education requires the adoption of a human right-based approach to education, which promotes human right education, ensuring that all the components and processes of education- including curricula, materials, methods and training are conducive to the learning of human rights. This will ensure that the human rights are respected and practiced by all members of the school community and all citizens in general [2].

From that perspective, the paper highlights the nature of sex-based gender cartographies and their implications for the construction and enactment of students' identities within institutions. It builds on some previous gender research in Ghana which highlights contradictions in the performance of traditional male-female gender stereotypes as an important discursive resource in everyday school life [3]; and [4]. Also, it benefitted from some classical works including [5], [6], [7] and [8] which pointed to gender stereotypic education as an important aspect of the beginning of schooling in Ghana. As a reminder, those writers suggested, for example, that colonial education provided different kinds of training - needle work or sewing for girls while carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing, shoemaking were organised for boys. Given that background, we examined the international literature to understand existing knowledge on gender identities within schooling to inform our own research.

The central research question that guided the results that are discussed in this paper was: What does it mean to be a female in a Ghanaian Basic School? The research that informed this paper was conducted in a rural school in Ghana. The qualitative approach involving single case study design was adopted. The data were collected from a particular rural school using interaction methods. The main research instruments used were interviews and observations. The research school was a state funded school that was implementing free compulsory universal basic education programme. Students were not required to pay tuition fees because Government was expected to provide textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. Teachers were employees of the state. The school implemented a national standardised delivered curriculum. Every activity in the school was regulated by a timetable that detailed activities

and subjects that teachers were supposed to teach each day, and the times allocated to each activity. The main school policy text was the headteachers handbook produced by the Ghana Education Service. The school had the following gender characteristics.

Table 1. Gender Parity Index (GPI) by Class enrolments.

Classes	Girls	Boys	Gender Parity Index
KG 1	22	28	0.7
KG 2	16	12	1.3
P1	14	11	1.3
P2	15	11	1.4
P3	14	16	0.9
P4	16	14	1.1
P5	17	15	1.1
P6	16	16	1
Totals	136	117	1.2
%	54	46	100

Source: Field data from class register, November 2016

Table 1 shows that the overall GPI in the school is 1.2 which is far more in favour of girls than the national GPI of 0.95. The data shows that KG2 and P1 have GPI of 1.3 and P2 has as high as 1.4 in favour of girls.

Additionally, the school has more females, (8) representing 69% of the total population of teachers than males (4) teachers representing 31%. Four female teachers (two each), teach in the KG1 and KG2. Unlike many rural schools, the majority of teachers in the study school were trained professionals. Eight (8) teachers representing 69% of teachers were trained professional teachers whereas four (4) representing 31% were untrained (non-professional teachers). Five (5) out of the eight (8) trained teachers are females, while three (3) are males. This means that there are more female teachers than male teachers in the school. It also means that there are more trained female teachers than trained male teachers in the school.

2. Literature on Sex-Based Gender Identities in Schooling

[9], in particular, argues that "an integral part of the strategies that underlies and permeates" school discourses are the silences and absences of discussions of the ways in which the institution reproduces gender constructions in society (p. 27). The idea is that arrangements of institutions and the broader panoptical modes of surveillance embodied in the architecture of schools shows that the organisers took gender permanently into account.

In addressing the reproduction of gender violence in schools, [10] wrote that "schools reflect wider society" and cites the example that "the same forms of violence which women

suffer throughout their lives - physical, sexual and psychological - are present in the lives of girls in and around schools" (p. 1). Also, research by [11] under the international cliché about 'safe schools for girls' suggests that pathological identities are reproduced through the institution of schooling. The corollary has been helpful gender analyses that have contributed much to understanding EFA goals [12].

However, the literature is replete with discussion of identities that criticize traditional sex-based gendered analyses as essentialising [13]; [14]; [15]. Butler's work on gender trouble provides ontological critique of sex-gender categories and presents the strong case that recognizes difference across many spatial scales and time. [16] cites subversion, regulation and embodiment of gender to show how the sexualised cartographies can no longer used as a stable point of departure in the analysis of gendered identities. Following on [16], the considerable amount of work on what [17] called 'borderwork' undertaken in schooling showed that male-female "borders are regularly challenged and transgressed" [18] (p. 119). Also, [19] ethnographic work in Britain argues that where sexuality is concerned "students are not rendered totally powerless." The study suggested that, masculinity has, institutional basis and can be experienced as "fun, empowering and pleasurable" (p. 130). [20] notes that gender is a "reiteration produced through institutional organisation and discourse, epistemologies and practices" (pp. 120-121). From ethnographic observations of gender practices amongst elementary school children (aged 9-10 years) in North America, [17] recognised that boys and girls do not perpetually engage in the enactment if opposite 'sex roles'. Thorne advised that analysis of gender in school should focus upon the variety of situated relationships between students in classrooms, playgrounds and school corridors. [17] argues that gender boundaries may be demarcated through dress, jokes and a host of discursive cultural activity. [17] used the term 'border crossing' to make the point that gender difference can be re-shaped, devaluated and unmade. [21] adds a further argument that gender, even in its most elaborate forms is always an "accomplishment" and not fixed. From a longitudinal study of Australian schools and students, [22] suggested that young people's subjective approach to gender is a generative account of being in the world. They argued that gender in young peoples' school experiences can only be made sense of when situated in the context of the variety of relationships (including teacher-student and student-student relationships) they engage in (see also [18] p. 117).

In Ghana, and elsewhere, there is lots of literature explaining that schools cannot be ignored as part of the gender order and they are not immune to being used as institutions for the regulation and (re)production of gender identities ([3]; [4];

[23]; [11]; [24]). [18] view the modern institution of schooling "as sites where particular technologies for gender production are in occurrence". They maintain that schools are masculine spaces "connected to a web of local and global flows" in which gender formations "is subject to state governmentality" (p. 97-98). They argued that there are direct relationships between school and the nation state that does not allow students to challenge the popular culture that is trans-imposed on them through schooling.

The literature from some African writers - [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], and [31], among others - help map out the history and contemporary understandings of femaleness in Africa. Their writings have provided criticisms of mainstream feminists' assumptions of gender problems in Africa and what [32] would describe as Western perceptions of African women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [30], in particular, provided in-depth anti-colonial critique of views that position African women as nothing more than victims of oppressive cultural practices. She suggests that such analysis ignores, for example, missionary and colonial heritages that have reduced African women to the margins of society by encouraging their subordination in all spheres of society. [30] argued that, gender dynamics in Africa "exists, albeit in concatenation with the reality of separate and hierarchical sexes imposed during the colonial period". [30] further argued that, "the emergence of women as an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations" was "one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state" (p. 123). [30] again asserts that colonization was a twofold process of "inferiorisation and gender subordination" of women. She asserts that African males accepted the established Western gender norms and colluded with the inferiorisation of females in all aspects of life including schools where "the exclusion of women" became natural and immutable [30] (p. 123). [33] suggests sex-gender categories were introduced in colonised societies "by the West as a tool of domination that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories" (p. 8). These gendered practices inscribed through official curriculum organisation makes it possible for students to acquire gendered behaviours including modes of dressing, and of inspecting that people dress-up properly, for example.

Studies suggest students try to resist, challenge and overturn their gender positions in ways that produce gender power between students and teachers but, entrenched hidden curriculum practices provide spaces where ideas about gender learning are processed, contested and culturally re-imagined [23]; [18]. One argument is that the institution of schooling has a gender regime where students must learn to speak and act in ways becoming of adulthood. Acting like an adult, [18] explained, includes "above all, an embodied

display of knowledge". This involves "holding oneself differently and speaking in a dignified, measured tone that is distinguishable from 'childish' idle chatter". Maturation is measured by "competent performance" of "adult masculinity or femininity substantiated through the enactment of … bodily iterations" (p. 92). These actions require children to practice and ceaselessly rehearse what we may consider in [34] terms to be a whole way of life. This suggests the construction of 'normals' to which all must aspire. As [13] argued, these 'normals' become the accepted standards of competent performance and a set of formal prohibitions that produce an incitement to discourse. In that sense, reproduction of gender is cast as the responsibility that both teachers and students have to the state.

3. Methodology

The research study from which the data and analysis of this paper has been drawn was an in-depth case study of a rural basic (primary) school in the Central Region of Ghana. Several research scholars including [35] and [36] consider that case studies are particularistic, descriptive and heuristic and are particular to a certain context and have a more human face than other research methods, as it is strong on reality and context which enables 'thick' description. Hence, gaining the pupils' descriptions on inferiorisation as a tag on females was a crucial part of this study. Thick description in this context denotes a commitment to catch the diversity, variability, creativity, individuality, uniqueness and spontaneity of social interactions ([37]; [38]).

Using an ethnographic style approach, data were collected through interviews and observations between May 2016 and January 2017. Over the 8-month period of data collection, sequential interviews were conducted with teachers and a critical case sample [39] of fifteen students purposively selected from primary classes 4, 5 and 6 (usually aged between 9 and 12 years). Purposive sampling was the main technique employed. The sample was composed of seven males and eight female students aged between 9 and 15 years who had been in the school from primary class 1. These students were selected because they were more able to express themselves and because previous research findings concluded that students in those grade levels most frequently describe school as either 'uninteresting or useless' [40]. A less formalised approach was used in which incidental and episodic interviews took place during the fieldwork. These were helpful in crosschecking the sample of students' comments with the views and on the actions of other students, the teachers and the head teacher in the school. School and classroom activities were regularly observed during the fieldwork and they were integral to the researchers'

familiarity and the ethnographic style of the research. All the texts, from policies, interview transcripts to observation notes, were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as delineated by [41], to gain a deep understanding of institutional relations and the social dynamics of the hidden curriculum within the school.

In the following section we present the main findings of the study. We focus on the students' perspectives on their experiences of being female, which highlights the power of the hidden curriculum and their sense of inferiorisation. We discussed their perspectives with the extant literature.

4. Findings and Discussion on the Characteristics of Being a Female in School

We became interested in male-female identities following our observations in the school that all girls stand in front during morning assembly. Although students were required to line up according to the rule of *shortest in front*, we observed that all girls had to line up first such that the shortest boy followed the tallest girl. This suggests, as [3] argued, that gender issues are prevalent in primary schooling in Ghana. [23] discussed gender role stratifications in which girls swept and boys cleaning the blackboard. However, there is little evidence of research discussing this form of gender segregation where all girls in each class are treated as if they were shorter than the shortest boys. Some students perspectives on the social assumption that all girls were shorter than the shortest boy are represented in the comments below.

Sir, I am short and I can't see if I stand behind the girls. When they say 'stretch your arms' my arms will pain me because my hand can't reach the tall girls' shoulder (Student 13, Male).

Me, I don't care because it is the boys who will suffer. As for us we line up according to our height. They will suffer at the back. The only thing is that you have to dress properly so that the boys will not see your body and laugh at you (Student 6, Female).

How can you say 'shortest in front' and then the tall girl will be in front of the shortest boy? I don't know why because the short boys cannot see anything. I think they suffer. Sometimes when they say 'straighten up your lines' or when they say 'arms forward stretched' then you see that the short boys are suffering. (Student 10, Female) [Group interview with students].

Implied in the comments is the presence of group identities of 'we' and 'them' among students. This highlights the role

of school in the arts of gender segregation and in drawing social categories that perpetrated sex-based gender tensions in the wider world. The researchers argue that, this arrangement where boys are positioned behind girls brings masculinity to school [42]. For us this practice of positioning girls in front of boys cynically requires them to become self-disciplined – dress properly - in order that boys will not laugh at them. The emphasis on 'being seen' arguably underlines the importance of public performance of girls' femininity and validation of heterosexual masculinity [16]. For us, that form of 'being seen', which requires dressing properly constituted sufficient justification for harassing girls because, being girl also includes being a subject to be observed by males. I will further argue that this highlights the role of schools in spatial distributions and how the corporeal dimensions of belonging together are implicated in the processes of becoming particular sorts of persons [43]. This further highlights the role of schools in gender reproductions and 'us' and 'them' categories that usually draw gender contours in wider society.

We sought teacher perspectives on the practice of gender segregation of boys and girls because we did not find any policy or literature explaining why girls should line-up in front before boys. Also, this segregation happens only when students gather for morning assembly. A female teacher (Teacher 2) we spoke to on the practice, explained:

It may look discriminatory but I don't think it is relevant. I don't know who started it or who introduced it but we all went through it. If you want to look at it carefully then it affects boys more, especially the shorter ones who line-up behind the taller girls. Besides, it has always been like that. I don't think it is anything significant. (One-on-One discussion, December 1, 2016)

Three things may be argued from her comments. First, she did not see the arrangement as posing much problem. In her view, the practice looks discriminatory but it is neither relevant nor anything significant to bother about. Second, the practice is age-old and its origins are unknown. Third, the practice affects boys and not girls. This illuminates [16] views about sex-based gender performances and the point of [18] that schools play a formative role in the reproduction of sex-gender relations. Importantly though, it highlights how the informal curricula implemented in school becomes complicit in the reproduction of gender identities.

When we asked the headteacher about the practice of male-female segregation during morning assembly, she responded,

I don't really know. It was the practice when we all attended school in those days and I never asked why. I think it is something that reflects male dominance but I never heard anyone questioning it… It has been there since my school

days in 1960s and, I think, maybe before then. Maybe we have to find out if it relates to how some Christian churches, remember they brought schooling here, separate women from men in the church… Maybe you researchers can help us understand why we have some of these practices in our school system, their effects and why policy makers don't seem to care about them (One-on-One discussion with Headteacher, December 1, 2016)

Although her comments indicate that the practice is age-old, the headteacher could not tell the exact basis or origins of the practice. Her assumption is that it might reflect the perpetuation of male social dominance. She also thinks that the origins of the practice may be traced to some Christian culture. [1] Recalling my days as a school child in two Ghanaian Basic schools, and as a teacher in the four different Ghanaian Basic schools we noticed that segregation during morning assembly is nearly universal in both public and private schools. One thing that might be interrogated is whether this is also related to the distinction in the missionary school system where [4] and [6] noted that girls and boys studied different subjects. Whatever the origins, however, this sex-based gender segregation in school highlights what [16] (p. 140) would describe as a "sedimentation that over time produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as a natural configuration of bodies into two sexes existing in a binary relation to one another."

When we asked a male teacher (Teacher 3) who is also the assistant headteacher, he explained:

Master, this is a serious issue you have raised. I personally never thought of it. But I can recollect those days when I was standing behind tall girls. It was difficult. We need to think about some of these things… I am surprised that none of us seem to analyse it that it affects short boys. I don't know who introduced this thing and why but I think it needs to change. Is it uniformity or what? Maybe it is just our male dominance that men should be behind women and protect them or something that I don't know. (One-on-One discussion, December 1, 2016)

His comments also indicate that his main instinct attributes the practice to the perpetration of male dominance. The point that can be argued is that this institutionalised female subordination makes school girls subjects of surveillance by male students and teachers. This epitomises social reproduction of maleness and femaleness, which [33] and [30] argued were transported to Africa by colonialism. As discussed in earlier, these writers assert that one important

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[1] Where there is gender stratification between males and females. Highly seen in those days whereby males and females sit separately in the church, although some churches still practice that.

act of colonialism was the inferiorisation of women in all situations. The works of [44], [45], [46], and [47] explained how it was necessary to reduce colonized women of the Americas, Asia and Africa to equal the "characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive" [33] (p. 13).

Writing about Africa, and using the case of the Yoruba in Nigeria, [30] (p. 156) argued that, the gender dynamics in Africa today "exists, albeit in concatenation with the reality of separate and hierarchical sexes imposed during the colonial period". [30] (p. 123) noted that "The creation of "women" as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state." [30] further argued that one indelible mark of colonialism is "the emergence of women as an identifiable category, defined by their anatomy and subordinated to men in all situations". [30] Oyewùmí further asserts that "For females, colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorisation and gender subordination." In the post-colonial period, African males accepted the established Western gender norms and colluded with the inferiorisation of females. [21] would call this the 'crystallising' of geological metaphors which centre on the primacy of heterosexual desire established over time and therefore perceived as natural and immutable. This sounds plausible given that there is hardly any explanation for the segregation in school.

In the case study school, sex-based gender discriminations did not change when girls are appointed as prefects, which support [16] point that male-female body distinctions still matter in the analysis of social interactions. In the research school, the girl prefects were less visible unless a teacher specifically asked students to call, "the Office Girl" or the "Girl's Prefect". In such circumstances, we noticed that the 'Girl' was used both as a qualifier such as in "Office Girl" or to serve a restraining function such as in "Girl's Prefect". Girl prefects were used more in service areas. They were sent to buy food, clean-up and keep teachers' chairs or wash dishes. They provided water in bowls for teachers to wash their hands. The Office Girls cleaned the headteacher's office. Girl section leaders were more active in engaging students to sweep the compound and classrooms. The boy prefects usually acted as the dominant *inspectors* in supervising the performance of morning duties; wrote names and commanded the morning assembly. So, among the prefects, the girls resigned to more docile roles while boys pre-dominated. We observed the predominance of boys more when teachers asked students to call prefects. The students would normally call the boy prefects. This also highlights [30] point that "The very process by which females were categorized and reduced to "women" made them ineligible for leadership roles" (p. 123).

The positioning of girls (females) in front of boys equally highlights the ways in which gender identities are constructed within what [16] would described as the constraints of the 'heterosexual matrix'. This heterosexual matrix refers to social relations and pathological gender relations that are cyclically entrenched through sex-based (hetero-) 'normalised' identities [48]. [33] traced the basis of this to [30] concept of "anafemales"[2] (which rejects the analysis of problems of women through a gender lens but through cognitive needs of capitalism and the naturalizing of the identities and relations of coloniality). As [33] and [30] argued, pre-colonial societies did not marginalize women. [33] argued, however, that "the gender system introduced was one thoroughly informed through the coloniality of power" and were pivotal "in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making, collective authority, and economies" (p. 12). [33] further asserts that "the imposition of this gender system was as constitutive of the coloniality of power as the coloniality of power was constitutive of it." [33] argued, "inferiorisation of females extended very widely from exclusion from leadership roles to loss of property over land and other important economic domains."

Given these arguments, we suggest that the gender subordination of girls is one attribute of the institution of schooling in Ghana. Over the years, the practice has sedimented and has become normalised. As such, being female has become synonymous with being short, being watched and exhibited in the performance of service functions. This does not mean that females suffer more than males. What it highlights is the point by [18] (pp. 97-98) that the modern institution of schooling is a site where particular technologies (connected to a web of local and global flows) for gender production is in occurrence" and, in which, gender formation "is subject to state governmentality". As discussed earlier with reference to caning, boys (males) also received severer punishment than girls. Therefore, the main point is that it calls attention to the role of schools in the reproduction of ideologies of control in order that the institution can be re-organised to be an agent of social change that is more beneficial - more proactive in challenging gender stratifications than reproducing them.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

There is a great degree of constitutive role of schooling in producing patterns of gender-based violence and

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2 This is Oyweumi's term for biological female, the "ana" referring to "anatomical". Hence, "anafemale" meaning "anatomical female". See Oyewumi - The invention of women (pp. 33-34).

discrimination. Gender subordination of girls is one attribute of the institution of schooling in Ghana. The practice has become normalised. The identity of being a female was constituted and understood as a state of being docile subjects of male domination. In schools females are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct themselves based upon the roles assigned to their sex by society. Girls are generally expected to behave typically in feminine ways and be polite, accommodating, whilst boys are generally expected to be strong, aggressive, and bold.

It showed how male dominance was projected within school practices to the extent that being male became an entry point for expressing power. The tallest girl was literally understood to be shorter than the shortest boy. Girls mainly performed service functions of sweeping, cleaning and tidying offices and classrooms.

Sex-based dimorphic presentations were presented in which girls were positioned as subjects to be watched during morning assembly and weaklings to be protected by boys. In this way schools sedimented and promoted gender stereotypes within the wider society instead of challenging or reconstructing how the corporeal dimensions of belonging together are implicated in the reproduction of 'us' and 'them' categories that usually draw gender contours in wider society.

The findings are revealing, the traditional attitudes whereby females remain subordinated to males, or less worthy, or having stereotypical roles perpetuate pervasive violence, coercion and abuse of human rights. The effect of this on the mental and physical integrity of females can deprive them of equal knowledge, exercise and enjoyment of their rights and fundamental freedoms.

Measures have to be put in place to gender mainstreamed our educational sector to the extent that, there will not be segregation whereby males are task to perform roles in schools that females cannot perform. We call attention to the role of schools to halt in the reproduction of ideologies of female subordination but should rather embrace and promote gender equality in education. We suggested that educational institutions should be re-organised as agent of social change that is more beneficial - more proactive in challenging gender stratifications than reproducing them.

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