

An Enquiry into the Prevalence of Gender Discrimination among the Rural Ashanti People of Ghana

Philip Osafo-Kwaako

Gender discrimination is one of the most crucial disparities in most societies. Although several communities worldwide experience some form of gender discrimination, the effects of discrimination against women are most profoundly observed in low-income economies where credit constraints are binding. In a typical third world household, significant differences may exist in parents' treatment of sons compared with daughters, while gender biases may be nonexistent in relatively wealthier European and North American households.¹

In explaining why parents may tend to invest more resources in sons than in daughters, Strauss and Thomas argue that some traditional societies require sons to take care of parents in their old age, while daughters are married off into a new marital home.² Thus, while daughters contribute their resources to their husband's families, sons stay at home and serve as effective social security providers for their aged parents. Another explanation lies in the availability of jobs and wage structures in the labor market for men and women. Empirical data suggests pro-male biases in wages in developing countries, further making sons more attractive investments.

Evidence of gender discrimination is often observed in educational outcomes of sons and daughters within the household, with sons receiving greater educational investments. However, Strauss and Thomas point to other sources of biases as evident in health outcomes of daughters when compared to sons.³ Analyses of anthropometric data, reviewed extensively by Strauss and Thomas, point to the low health and nutrition status of girls compared to boys. These biases may

have additional consequences in terms of productivity in the labor market.

However, the deprivation of women bears even more severe consequences in some societies. The United Nations Report examined sex ratios in several countries worldwide.⁴ In Europe and North America, a female-to-male ratio of 1.05 was observed, compared with a ratio of 0.96 in North Africa and 0.94 in China and Bangladesh. These results are not immediately striking because several factors—biology, society, and occupation—may affect fertility and mortality rates that determine female-to-male ratios. However, for societies with similar economic environments, the extent of gender biases present may be roughly gauged. Using female-to-male ratios of sub-Saharan Africa as a benchmark, Sen calculated that an incredible 37 million women were “missing” in India.⁵

Various methods have been employed in the past to gauge the extent of gender discrimination from empirical data. An ingenious method of studying intrahousehold allocation of resources was suggested by Deaton.⁶ Deaton examined the consumption of “adult goods,” such as tobacco and adult clothing, in the household and related it to the total number of girls in the household, while holding the number of children fixed. On controlling for other variables (such as household income), he inferred biases against girls if consumption of “adult goods” increased as the fraction of girls in the household increased. Deaton’s method has been employed by several researchers in examining empirical data from various societies, but these efforts have not yielded any conclusive results on gender imbalance even in societies where biases are rife.

Another approach was suggested by Garg and Morduch in which they examined human capital investments in the education and health of Ghanaian children. They calculated the likelihood of children enrolling in primary and secondary schools and analyzed various anthropometric estimates as health indicators using World Bank survey data from Ghana. Using bivariate analyses and regression models, Garg and Morduch examined the effects of household size and sibling composition on the education and health outcomes of children. Their findings were striking: they estimated that enrollments in secondary school would improve by 50 percent if children moved from all-brother households to all-sister households. Garg and Morduch concluded that insofar as parents prefer investing in sons rather than daughters, children would prefer to have more sisters than brothers. Hence, they coined the term sibling rivalry to describe the

latent competitive behavior existing among children in Ghanaian households.

Last summer, I traveled through parts of central Ghana to evaluate the work of Morduch and Garg, and to assess the current gender discrimination picture in Ghana. In a span of three weeks, I traveled to 11 villages in the forested Ashanti region of Ghana and interacted with over a hundred local residents. This essay will present my findings obtained from the 11 villages that span 5 districts. While the empirical data gathered for this report is not as thorough and extensive as the World Bank survey data, it will provide valuable insight into the daily lives of village residents and how these societies brace issues of gender discrimination. Recognizing that the data presented in past work on Ghana is nearly two decades old, this essay aims at describing the prevailing picture of gender imbalance in rural Ashanti and, hopefully, identifying the underlying forces driving this trend, which could shape future empirical research in this area.

Studies in Rural Ashanti Villages

Morduch and Garg present a model of gender discrimination in Ghana in which market imperfections coupled with pro-son biases lead to a disproportionate allocation of resources in favor of sons. While over 70 percent of children are enrolled in primary schools, only a small fraction of students advance to secondary schools. Results from the Morduch study suggest that a boy with three sisters (and no brothers) had a 55 percent more likelihood of advancing to secondary school relative to another boy with three brothers (and no sisters). Similarly, on measuring health indicators, a 30 percent to 40 percent improvement was observed for boys under the same hypothetical comparison.

In response to the Morduch findings, I investigated the gender discrimination picture in rural Ghana in four main areas. First, I examined the levels of education of boys and girls within the Ashanti household. Did parents attach equal importance to the education of their daughters as to their sons? The second area of investigation was in the health outcomes of children in the household. Did parents attend to the health needs of their sons and daughters differently? Third, I examined the allocation of food within the household. Are there any systematic biases in the quantities allotted to boys versus girls? Fourth, I probed into the existence of gender roles for boys and girls within the household.

The results presented in this essay were obtained from interviewing 85 randomly selected households in the villages visited. A household

is defined by a group of people living together and sharing meals. More importantly, the household must have an identifiable head(s) who is largely responsible for the welfare of the children specifically with regards to their healthcare and educational expenses. In most cases, the head of the household was interviewed, but in few instances where the head was absent, an elder member of the household was selected as respondent. The interview questions were designed using econometric guidelines of the World Bank. These guidelines are specified in the Living Standards Measurement Surveys (LSMS), which is used in assessing various facets of poverty in developing nations.

Ghana, with a population of about 18 million, is located on the coast of West Africa, and is bounded by Togo and the Ivory Coast on its sides, with Burkina Faso to the north. A total of 20 rural Ashanti villages were identified—villages considerably removed from the urban regions of Ghana—of which 11 were randomly selected for study. The villages selected were Ananekrom, Hwidiem and Nyinamponase (from Asante Akyem North District), Morso and Bompata (from Asante Akyem South District), Bomfa, Dwease and Boama-Dumasi (from Ejisu-Juabeng District), Dadease (from Sekyere East District), and Pramso and Abofum (from the Bosumtwi District).

A final word of caution is appropriate here. The following discussion is based on rural villages in Ashanti. I estimate that about a third of the population live in urban centers with bustling commercial activity, another third reside in smaller towns, and a final third live in rural villages in the countryside.

Level of Education of Children in Household

The most crucial element of this study was the investigation of parents' attitudes toward the education of their sons and daughters. Conclusions from the Morduch and Garg report suggest that, to the extent that education is viewed as an investment and that parents face binding financial constraints, they will favor their sons over their daughters. Sons have a higher earning potential and are also more likely to take care of them in their old age.

Ashanti parents recognize the enormous expenses incurred in completely educating a child, ranging from tuition fees to other expenses on stationery and school uniforms. Indeed, as Garg and Morduch revealed, parents consider education a significant investment. However, Ashanti parents are also adopting a shrewd

approach to performing such investments. They realize that success at school is based on one's intellect and not simply on gender. Parents often observe the academic transcripts of their children at home as well as their level of motivation about school. The astute investor always seeks the highest return on his capital and that often requires choosing the most viable investment instrument. Today most Ashanti parents realize that the best educational investment for their last penny should be put in their "smartest child" and not necessarily "a son."

The educational system in Ghana consists of nine years of basic primary education and three additional years of secondary education prior to enrollment in universities. An exam is written after nine years of primary education to select students for secondary school. Enrollment rates in rural Ashanti are high for children at the start of primary education with no noticeable difference in the enrollment rates of boys and girls (about 89 percent girls and 91 percent boys).

However, further down the educational path, the costs of staying in school, both in real terms and in opportunity costs, become significant. Prior to attending secondary school, a marked decline in enrollment rates is observed for both boys and girls. Many students fail the exam taken at the end of primary school, with only about 5 percent of students advancing to secondary school. The majority of students drop out of school to pursue jobs as local artisans, farmers, or petty traders.

The cost of enrolling in secondary school in Ghana, mostly boarding schools, is often very expensive for rural households. If two children—a boy and a girl—in the household completed primary school and financial resources of the household could pay for only one child in secondary school, which child's education would be financed? Parents interviewed were asked this question. The majority of parents responded that their decision would rest on the past academic performance and enthusiasm of both children, with the academically stronger child being chosen. Their decisions were based on merit, not gender.

The interesting observation here is that in the hypothetical case where the academic performance of both males and females were at par, 98 percent of parents chose to invest in the education of their sons rather than their daughters. Most of these parents argued that given this extreme choice, they feared to invest in the education of their daughters. Past incidences in their communities suggested that adolescent girls seldom graduated from secondary school. The cul-

tural emphasis on marriage and motherhood often distracted young girls from enrolling or completing secondary school.

Health Outcomes of Children in Household

The disparities in the health outcomes of boys and girls have also received significant attention from scholars in the social science community. The need to examine potential biases in the health of boys and girls becomes striking when one estimates its consequences on mortality rates. For instance, according to an estimation made by Sen, over 37 million women were “missing” in India.⁵

In rural Ashanti, parents utilize one of three main modes of treatment in times of illness. With the onset of illness, most parents will first rush to the pharmacy shop and attempt to cure the illness with over-the-counter medication. If the sick child does not recover after a few days, (s)he is rushed to the hospital for more thorough medical assistance. However, a small fraction of the rural population still relies on traditional African herbal medicine to cure diseases.

Despite economic hardships in the country, parents seek all means possible to pay for health-care bills of their children—both sons and daughters—in times of illness. Ask a rural Ghanaian parent how she combats a typical bout of malaria affecting her son. You will hear a very vivid description of the various challenges she overcomes in caring for the sick son. Ask about the sick daughter, and you will hear an equally moving story. Parents interviewed argued that the value and essence of life were too dear to be trampled upon by parochial views undermining the dignity of women. Thus, despite the high costs of medical services, parents take loans, use up their savings, or take temporary jobs, e.g., working as a farm laborer, in order to pay the medical bills of their sons and daughters.

In addition to interviewing rural folk on their healthcare delivery modes, five visits were also made to health centers to interview personnel on their observations of parents' attitudes toward catering to the health needs of their children. Health personnel complained about parents' slow response in bringing their sick children to the hospital. However, as far as which children obtained preferential treatment from parents, health personnel had not noticed any discernible differences. Parents often tried over-the-counter medication, and if this was unsuccessful, they were quick to bring both their sons and daughters to the health centers for expert care.

Allocation of Food within the Household

The consequences of food allocation within the household have also received significant attention from development economists for two main reasons. First, a well-balanced diet is needed to provide nourishment and ensure the good health of children in the household. Second, development theories on poverty and malnutrition indicate that an individual's work capacity is directly influenced by the amount of calories consumed.¹ Disparities in food allocation within the household may thus provide insights into gender discriminatory practices.

A typical meal in a rural Ashanti home consists of a starchy component—obtained from local staples such as yams, plantains, and cassava—soup consisting of a fine blend of local vegetables and spices, and occasionally some meat. Within the household, the family seldom dines together at a dinner table. Traditionally, the entire family ate together from a common bowl. Today, the prevalent practice is to divide the meal, while still in the kitchen, into portions for each member of the household.

Food is often apportioned unequally among siblings. However, the criteria for allocating portions was not based on gender but rather on the age of the child, which often determined the child's consumption capacity. Eighty-seven percent of households interviewed allocated food portions on a descending scale, with older siblings receiving more. A few households shared food equally among children or gave more to kids. Thus, with a few exceptions in which families ate together as a group, the majority of Ashanti households were sensitive to the age rather than the gender of children in the household when allotting food portions.

In most cases, when mothers were interviewed on food allocation within the household, their greatest concern was satisfying the need of each child as much as possible. Maintaining harmony within the household was a constant challenge, and any unfair sharing of food within the home was likely to spark discord. However, apportioning more food to older siblings in the household was not disputed as Ashanti's maintain a firm respect for elders.

Gender Roles Still Prevalent within Rural Ashanti Households

The final part of this study focused on the Ashanti's notion of gender roles within the household. The demarcation of roles for boys and girls within the household ultimately shapes

the Ashanti's perception of gender differences within the society at large. What roles would we observe for boys and girls if we lived in a rural Ashanti home for a week?

The young girl rises early to clean the house and to draw water into the family's water reservoir for household use. She then prepares breakfast and departs for school. On returning from school, the young girl rushes to the kitchen to assist the mother in cooking dinner and performing household chores before retiring to bed. In contrast, the young boy in the household wakes up to a very quiet morning. Occasional household chores may include tidying up the home before he departs for school. On returning from school, he lounges at home or goes out to play with friends. Occasionally, the young boy in the household may be sent on an errand or be required to pound *fufu*—a local dish of pounded yams and cassava.

In instances where the family has a small business, both sons and daughters often assist in these jobs. The son is likely to assist in the father's business, for example, in carpentry or weaving, while daughters mostly assist their mothers in selling farm produce or cooked food in the local market. During the family's farming activities over the weekend, boys tend to be slightly more productive. In most families, the husband and young sons perform the physically demanding tasks on the farm—including clearing the land and lifting heavy shrubs. Mothers and daughters assist in farm work but have a relatively lighter task—mostly planting food crops and harvesting food for household consumption.

Gender roles within the household appear to be firmly held notions. When parents discussed the assignments of tasks within the home, they were quick to emphasize the existence of "a man's duties" and "a woman's duties," and to defend the distinction firmly. Interestingly, however, in households where parents had only sons or only daughters, they broke these separating lines completely, with sons taking up all the household chores, cooking expertly while attending to their farm duties. Similarly, girls also performed the few so-called "men's duties."

Discussion

The findings of this essay indicate that the prevailing picture of gender discrimination in rural Ashanti is significantly different from the dismal tone expressed in the work of Morduch and Garg using data from nearly two decades ago. In the postcolonial era, most Ashanti parents have adopted new ways of grooming their children to adapt to a changing socioeconomic environment

in Ghana. As several respondents indicated, "times are rapidly changing." Three main factors may be attributed to this rapidly changing pattern of gender biases in Ghana.

First, family heads responsible for making key decisions within the households are more informed today. There is a new generation of fathers and patriarchs who have had some basic level of education and who recognize its value to both their sons and daughters. Of the 86 Ashanti households surveyed, the father of the house had on average eight years of formal education, while the mother had six. More importantly, this new generation of parents realize that academic excellence is not determined exclusively by one's gender, but is dependent on several factors including one's innate intellect and one's level of academic enthusiasm.

Second, with the development of large urban cities in Ghana, the structure of rural Ashanti societies is changing. In the past, young girls got married and left the parent's household to a new marital home, sometimes in another village significantly removed from the parent's home. Most sons, however, stayed at home upon getting married and took care of their aged parents. Today, a village-urban drift is posing a strong force that is changing the very structure of Ashanti rural societies. Most sons, upon graduating from school, leave for the "big cities" to acquire a skill in local craftsmanship, to find a job, or simply to enjoy the thrills of urban life. Young girls are often less adventurous, although a few make it to the "big cities." Thus, to parents, the traditional paradigm of sons staying at home to provide assistance in their old age is not necessarily true today. In fact, most sons and daughters are away from home when the parents are old, which weakens the case for sons as better caretakers of their aged parents. Indeed, as one respondent passionately argued, in instances where both sons and daughters moved to urban centers, daughters were more inclined to visit their villages and to take care of their aged parents.

Third, in the past decade, women activists and government officials in Ghana have employed extensive educational policies aimed at educating rural folk on the advantages of educating their daughters, discouraging gender discriminatory practices and seeking a more equitable treatment of women. They have employed the mass media extensively. Television and radio programs targeted at rural folk have addressed gender imbalances. Occasionally, in the course of interviewing, I encountered a respondent who excitedly alluded to lessons from past radio or television shows that discussed gender imbalances. The

Acknowledgments

This project was funded by the MIT Kelly-Douglas Fellowship Committee, Office of the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences. Thanks also to the District Coordinating Council of Asante Akyem North, Ashanti Region Ghana, for their assistance. I am also indebted to my colleagues in the MIT African Students' Association for their insightful remarks.

Recommended Reading

1. www.worldbank.org/gender. Advancing Gender Inequality

References

1. Ray D. *Development Economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
2. Strauss J and Thomas D. "Human Resources: Empirical Modeling of Household and Family Decisions." In: Srinivasan T and Behrman J, eds. *Handbook of Development Economics*, Vol. 3A, North Holland: Elsevier Science, 1995:1883-2023.
3. Strauss J and Thomas D. "Health, Nutrition, and Economic Development." *Journal of Economic Literature* 1998;36:766-817.
4. United Nations Report. Geneva: United Nations Secretariat, 1996.
5. Sen A. "Missing Women." *British Medical Journal* 1989;304:587-588.
6. Deaton A. "Looking for Boy-Girl Discrimination in Household Expenditure Data." *World Bank Economic Review* 1989;3:1-15.

government of Ghana has also taken an aggressive stand on ensuring equitable treatment of women recently by creating a new state department devoted solely to women affairs. In addition, scholarship programs have been established particularly for young girls wishing to pursue further education.

The biggest challenge to empowering young girls in rural Ashanti, however, lies in educating young girls about the benefits of school. The stumbling block is not the parents' ignorance on the value of education—parents are aware of the immense benefits of education to their daughters. Rather, young girls in rural Ashanti are preoccupied with traditional thoughts of marriage at a young age. Many young girls have no interest in pursuing secondary education and the few who enroll sometimes get pregnant and married before graduating. The traditional practice of male domination appears to have its remnants here, where girls, despite having equal opportunities, are often nonchalant about schooling and defer the duties of building a career and earning money to their husbands.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that parents' pro-son biases are driving the current gender imbalance picture in Ghana. Other factors such as lack of enthusiasm about schooling, alarming teenage pregnancy rates, and cultural pressures toward womanhood are implicated causes and must be tackled from a policy viewpoint. The views of parents, as revealed in this essay, have been largely corrected, and most will make merit-based choices about the education of their children. Policymakers must now turn their attention to creating incentives for young girls at school and lessen their focus on heads of households.

In conclusion, the trend of gender imbalance in rural Ashanti is rapidly changing. The models and data of Morduch and Garg need to be reexamined thoroughly in presenting the current Ghanaian picture, which looks more encouraging than the dismal tone of the Morduch article. A close examination of the demographics of the country reveals that less than 30 percent of the population resides in the rural countryside. In urban and suburban areas, the trend is significantly different. The notions of gender discrimination are significantly weaker and within wealthier households, gender imbalances are uncommon. ■