The key objective of this research effort in four African countries, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Mauritania, was to understand and explain the practices that are favorable to success for girls, and the underlying circumstances. The research revealed that the problems and success of girls’ schooling are part of a whole dynamic in which the community plays a role. Indeed, the community represents an area of critical support to girls’ education because it gathers together the players whose joint action is significant.

This article analyzes the role of the community as a success factor for girls in school. The parents’ associations (Association des Parents d’Elèves-APE) and the mothers’ associations (Association des Mères d’Elèves-AME) are part of the analysis insofar as they are an integral part of the community space.

**The Impact of the Community on Girls’ Education**

The awareness-raising campaigns undertaken in African countries over the course of the last decade provoked a new awareness among communities, both urban and rural. Their efforts to ensure academic success for girls vary from one place to another. Girls’ schooling shows the best results in communities where there is good cohesion and high participation in activities related to education in general, and girls’ education in particular. This type of community participates in building classrooms, supporting the management of school cantines, supplying equipment and participating in the maintenance of school buildings.

In Guinea, these types of communities have participated in building a library at the urban middle-school of Samoe, building rural primary schools in Léolouma, Dalaba, Mamou, Boffa, Kankan and Mandiana, and have helped resolve issues of salaries and housing for contractual teachers in Mandiana.

In Burkina Faso, the material and/or financial support given by the community to the school enables the school administration to provide students with minimum materials such as academic texts and chalk, as well as sports equipment and reading books. Sometimes, additional classrooms are built by the community to meet the increasing demand for schooling.

In the Dogosso schools in Mali, community efforts are remarkable. Thanks to widespread mobilization, communities are very active at the school level. With the help of an international NGO, the community of Koubéwel-Koundia opened its own community school and pays teachers’ salaries. The community helps the school director enroll girls, monitor equality between girls and boys and facilitate the use of the Dogon language in the classrooms. The community pays taxes, of which part is withheld to cover the needs of
The study reveals the role of APEs to be one of the fundamental elements in girls’ education. Also, the innovation of AMEs in Burkina Faso attracted the attention of the research team. While AMEs are a relatively recent initiative, APEs are becoming increasingly active and are taking on a larger role. These two types of associations undertake praiseworthy actions to support children’s schooling.

**The Parents’ Associations (APEs)**

Through their many activities in and around the school, APEs have become real players in the development of education within African civil society. As such, they are considered real participants by the public authorities, and by national and international organizations. APEs are active in different ways and their actions often take the following concrete forms:

- Participation in the construction of classrooms and/or supply of construction materials;
- Maintenance and rehabilitation of school equipment and infrastructures;
- Contribution to the financing of school cantines;
- Coordination and resolution of problems that arise between the school administration and parents;
- Organization and monitoring of evening classes;
- Search for exterior financing to develop the school;
- Awareness-raising among parents as to the advantages of girls’ education;
- Monitoring of the transparency of school tests.

The example of APEs in Irelli and Madougou in Mali is particularly noteworthy. In addition to traditional assistance, APEs play a role that extends beyond the school. Each time a young girl passes the entrance exam for the seventh or tenth grade, and has to leave her parents to continue her studies elsewhere, the APE finds housing for her. In Irelli, APE members even visit the girl students.

**An exemplary APE**

*In Mali, in the Bandiagara region, the APE contributes to the financing of the Goundaka school cantine through operations to supply grains. The APE participates in awareness-raising campaigns in the community and is responsible for the operation of the cantine. Each week, two women cook for and monitor the children (the ones who live the furthest away board at the school). The APE also started a special fund to help girls from the poorest families. Thus, for years, five girls have received free school materials and clothes as well as gifts at the end of the year. The mother of one of the students recognized that the support of the APE was determinant in her daughter’s continuation of her studies. This support arrived just in time since the family had serious problems following the death of the father.*

**The Associations of Students’ Mothers (AMEs)**

In Burkina Faso, an association of students’ mothers (AME) was created in 1992, in the region of Sissili, by a small group of women who wanted to participate and contribute more to the education of their children. According to these mothers, belonging to the APE did not allow them to fully contribute since APEs, which are typically led by men, did not sufficiently integrate women in their activities. The initiative proved to be effective in involving more women in the development of school activities and in girls’ schooling. AMEs have the following objectives:

- Increase the rates of enrollment and success of students, girls in particular;
- Improve the access and retention of all students;
- Enable more young girls to finish their studies;
• Prepare girls’ integration into their environment while giving them the skills to manage their lives;
• Enable women to work together in order to ensure their full participation in the education of their children, particularly of their daughters.

AMEs have changed the parents-school relation, as well as parents’ mentality towards girls’ education. Far from being in conflict with the APEs, they play a complementary role and have enabled more women to participate in school meetings.

Conclusion

When faced with the budgetary limitations of public authorities, part of the cost of children's education often rests on the shoulders of civil society. The joint efforts of the community, APEs and AMEs to improve girls’ enrollment rates demonstrate another facet of community participation and creates a positive synergy for the education of young Africans. Previous research had demonstrated the importance of the role of mothers in girls’ academic success, and so it is not very surprising that the AMEs have such an impact.

Thus, the community, APEs and AMEs are the "engine" for human and economic development. It is, therefore, essential, to increase their participation in decision-making concerning girls’ education as, ultimately, they have the power to decide if, according to their own systems of evaluation, they should send their children to school or not.

This analysis was drawn from a study directed by Aminata Maiga-Touré in four Francophone African countries. A condensed version of this experience was provided in Findings 164, August 2000. For more information, please contact Aminata Maiga-Toure, Rm. J9-010, World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington DC 20433. Tel. no.: (202) 458-2854, e-mail address: Amaiga@worldbank.org