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Ideas for Capacity Building and Educational Empowerment of Female Children in Rural Butaleja, Uganda: Applying the Central Human Capability Approach

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Abstract. Building upon the concepts of Capability Approach, this paper discusses how these ideas can be effectively utilized within the setting of a small rural village in Uganda, Africa to empower female children to create a valuable life that affects positive social change. Colonization left a devastating blow to the socioeconomic conditions among many ethnic communities in Uganda. However, Uganda's political outlays and social constructs further deepened the inequity gap between female and male children. This paper explores ways in which female children may be given the capacity to create agency for themselves as a stepping stone towards building a life they value in Butaleja, Uganda.

Keywords: Human Capability, education and health, gender and education, Uganda, empowerment, capacity building, unfreedoms, gender inequity, rural

Uganda is by and large a rural nation, with about 85% of its population of 31 million still living in rural areas (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2009–10). Situated on the northwestern side of East Africa, Uganda is a country with many small diasporas of multi-ethnicities and communities. Statistics indicate that in Uganda, between 20% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013) and almost 40% (UNICEF, 2010) of people live in poverty (PPP) below US\$1.25 per day, and most of these are women living in rural areas. Lacking education and burdened with family duties, the female children of Uganda, particularly in rural areas, have resorted to menial labor in agricultural fields, the sex trade, or simply taking on the role of mothers. According to the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI) (2011), which measures education, health, and income, Uganda ranks 167 out of 187 similarly measured countries worldwide. While HDI reports show an 81% attendance rate for females for primary education, there is only a 17% attendance rate for lower secondary education. Recent data show that over 400,000 children are out of school in Uganda (RESULTS Educational Fund, 2013). Additionally, a Gender Equality Index of 0.517 shows high inequality, with 46.5% of the girls getting married before the age of 18 (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2008).

These data show a high need to address capacity building through education as a whole in Uganda. Yet, the real need for basic education lies deep within rural communities, areas that were often bypassed in empirical studies and developmental data collection by institutions and individual researchers. For example, the HDI report by the UNDP (2012) for Uganda has mostly taken into account urban and suburban communities, as opposed to communities in rural settings where there is the greatest need for education, especially in the case of female children. It is in these communities that female children lack access to schooling and social support and are relegated to menial work in the fields in order to support their immediate families and elders of the village.

This paper focuses on a small rural community in Butaleja that is deep within the Tororo District in Uganda, where there is no access to schooling within a ten-mile radius. Butaleja is an

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ideal place to address the question of how to advance the capability of female children through basic literacy, and how to help them overcome traditional gender inequity and become a capacity-building workforce through ownership of agency. Drawing on the philosophical work on Capability published by Sen (1992; 1999; 2002; 2006) and Nussbaum (1999; 2000; 2010), the present study argues that educating female children in Butaleja is not a simple linear process; rather, a matter of paving the pathway by gradually initiating social changes that accommodate accessible education. These changes may point toward areas of sociocultural and economic disparity that also require effective and sustainable transformation. This paper presents an idea for a locally sustainable model as a part of a future project in capacity building for female children.

The Need for Literacy Education for Female Children in Butaleja, Uganda: Country Education Profile

The British colonized Uganda, like many other developing countries, in the late nineteenth century. During this time, the emphasis was on religious education through British cultural assimilation of the local people by missionaries. As a direct result of this enculturation, the local people broke away from their own traditions, leaving a significant void within their Ugandan cultural identity. People, especially children, did not receive an education that directed them eventually to a vocation. Although an attempt was made by the British to set up a system of formal education in 1925, schools were mainly provided in the townships, and most of the attendees were boys. Being a patriarchal system, boys were considered more important and valuable. Moreover, the education that was offered did not teach skills or trades, but just enough to read religious literature and to do menial jobs. Hence, colonization by the British left Uganda without a strong middle class in the wake of its independence in 1962 (Stiglitz, 2006). Consequently, this situation translated over time into socioeconomic and political disparities within each region. The establishment of a strong middle class is an anchor for job creation (Fashoyin, Herbert, & Pinoargote, 2003). Although almost everyone in the townships speaks both Swahili and English, education in literacy and numeracy eludes female children throughout Uganda (Fashoyin, Herbert, & Pinoargote, 2003).

Geographically, Uganda is rich in natural resources. However, lack of technical skills to mine these resources, coupled with underdeveloped transportation systems and internal government corruption, have added to the already worsened socioeconomic and political condition of the country (Stiglitz, 2006). The advent of modernization has also led to the eradication of subsistence farming in favor of cash crops that profit foreign economies. Families often bypassed children's education in favor of cash crop production in order to pay for food and provide support for the extended family. Unfortunately, it was and still is the girls who have been burdened with caring for the family. Often girls as young as five years old are helping their mothers—either out in the fields tilling the land or looking after the younger ones at home, so that money can be made to help support the family (Stiglitz, 2006).

The lack of the necessary education and technical skills to establish and operate local and national businesses has brought about a situation in which multinationals have set up shop in Uganda (Fashoyin, Herbert, & Pinoargote, 2003). Unfortunately, these large corporations and their multilayered tax levies, trade embargoes, and high interest rates keep Uganda on a continued “need-basis” (Stiglitz, 2006, p. 34). Turning to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

in order to reduce debt load has often crippled countries in a poor economic situation. The IMF generally “provides money only with a long list of conditions, including government spending cuts, tax increases, and high interest rates” (Stiglitz, 2006, p. 34), which further burden crippled economies. Worse for Uganda, the AIDS epidemic hit the land with brutal force, leaving a great number of young males dead or dying and the burden of supporting their families falling squarely upon the shoulders of young female children (Stiglitz, 2006), maintaining many barriers to advancement of female education. Without advancement in educational capabilities, particularly for female children especially in rural areas, capacity building will continue to be a challenge in Uganda.

Butaleja District

Cultural heritage of Butaleja people. Butaleja, a rural village district, is one of 111 districts in Uganda and is bordered by Budaka District to the north, the Mbale District to the east, the Tororo District to the southeast, the Bugiri District to the south, and the Namutumba District to the west. The population of Butaleja District in 2014 was 245,873. The town of Butaleja, where most of the government representative offices are situated, has approximately 19,519 people (Brinkhoff, 2015).

Originally a nomadic people from Egypt and Sudan, the majority of the people in Butaleja are identified as the Banyole (or *Abalya Obwoba*, “those who eat mushrooms”). The remaining population is comprised of Jopadhola, the Bagisu, the Basoga, the Iteso, the Karimojong, and the Bagwere (Oluka, 2009). The Banyole people are believed to have migrated to Uganda around 1500 BC. They speak Lunyole, one of the Bantu family languages, linguistically close to the Basamia (a Bagwe people who live on the Kenyan border). Lunyole has been listed as an “endangered minority language” by Makerere University Institute of Languages, Uganda (Nexus, 2015). This is due to the fact that Uganda has formalized English and Swahili as the official and national languages. This decision helped communication for international trade and commerce; however, domestically, it has paved the way for language erosion and cultural degradation among minority ethnic groups. Lunyole, spoken by the majority Banyole of Butaleja, is no exception.

Social construct of rural Butelaja. Culturally and traditionally, the Banyole people are an agriculturalist society, where women and girls are in charge of cultivating land for family sustenance. The meal preparation is also entirely in the hands of the female population. Banyole is strictly a patriarchal society where “women are economically dependent on the male next of kin (husband, father, uncle, or brother). Dependence on men deprives women of influence in family and community matters, and ties them to male relationships for sustenance and the survival of their children” (Haynes, 2012, para. 33). Although polygamy is on the decline, many marriages remain polygamous, which leave women at various levels of relative empowerment, struggling even within their own family. For example, the senior wife, in his absence, may have power equal to her husband over other wives. Overall however, even though women make a significant contribution in agriculture, they do not hold solid tenure rights. As a wife, a woman has, according to modern Ugandan law, 15% of the joint land rights of her husband’s estate. In the event of his death, she may lose all that, if traditional law comes into play, as is the case in most rural villages. If the wife dies, the husband inherits his wife’s property, in its entirety. Within the family framework, boys are always revered and have all the rights and privileges of

the dominant male, father, uncle, or grandfather. For example, men and boys over 12 years old are not permitted to sit in the kitchen, which is separate from the main home (Haynes, 2012).

Current Situation of Girls in Butaleja

Patriarchy persists and permeates every aspect of daily life in Butaleja; and even the reduction of the male population due to civil wars and diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, has had no bearing on male dominance. Girls are still relegated to domestic and agricultural work, where they continue to endure social and economic hardship, not to mention a lack of political agency. In education, boys get preference over girls because all decisions lie with men. In a sample survey of 4,246 parents and guardians conducted from all regions of Uganda, decisions about girls' education in rural households were found to lie with the father or the dominant male (39.9%). "An estimated 2,400 female children of school age in Butaleja have, as a result, been left out of the Universal Primary Education program" (Bikala, 2010). This adds to the beleaguering problem of child neglect that is rampant throughout Butaleja; "most children are neglected by their parents or forced to work in the fields instead of going to school" (Bikala, 2010). One high-ranking Butaleja district officer states that this "large number of neglected children accounts for the rise in beggars on the streets of Butaleja town" (Bikala, 2010). She further attests that a "huge percentage of girls [are] forced to withdraw from school and enter into early marriages" (Bikala, 2010). "She urges the district administration, the central government, and civic leaders to do more to educate people on the importance of education" (Bikala, 2010) to the well-being of society. "She wants parents who deliberately deny their children education" to face consequences for neglect by punishment. (Bikala, 2010).

Capability Model and Female Child Education

Unfortunately, educating female children in Butaleja is not as simple as getting the government to do more in educating people about education or punishing the parents for deliberately denying education for their children (Bikala, 2010). The present study is based on the idea that education is at the core of any social change.

This paper draws on the theoretical arguments of a model that argues that the end result of development should be developing people's capability. *Capability* refers to the opportunity to accomplish and function within a lifestyle that a person perceives as valuable (Sen, 1997). When people have capability, their agency is enhanced. *Agency* is the ability to act on behalf of what you value and have reason to value (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). To sum up, for women and girls, especially in the rural context, one of the most empowering factors is to have agency—(a) agency in making decisions with regards to women's own bodies and (b) informed decision-making with regards to family matters—this is the true essence of capability in capacity building. Uninterrupted access and equitable education for female children, from kindergarten to the highest level of achievement based on ability: (a) provide an awareness of personal freedoms, (b) develop personal agency and choice, and (c) promote the ability to choose a life that is meaningful and of value to the child as she grows into adulthood. Nussbaum (1999; 2000) argues that when women and girls are provided the right opportunities to develop capabilities, they ultimately contribute to their local economies in a more meaningful way, and thus help build community capacity.

According to Sen (1999), capability is tied to five distinctive rights or freedoms that a person must have in order to advance: political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. These freedoms are not only distinct, but interrelated and instrumental. They are instrumental in that they ultimately promote overall freedom. In the present case, freedoms allow female children to lead the kind of lives that they value. In order to live a life that is valued, dignity in human beings must be put in the forefront (DeJong, 2004). To this end, the capability approach also calls for removal of all forms of injustice and inequality (including gender inequality), which Sen (1999) calls *unfreedoms*. Unfreedoms halt or impede the development of freedom that otherwise would help build capacity within people. Therefore, “development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedoms: poverty, as well as tyranny; poor economic opportunities, as well as systematic social deprivation; neglect of public facilities, as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states” (Sen, 1999, p. 3).

Capability theorists argue that by giving women and young female children the security that they need through education, they can potentially overcome “poverty deprivation and live a life that they have reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 74). The contribution of education as a capability to social development has many merits, such as empowering people to improve their quality of life (Sen, 1999). This is especially the case for equal participation of women, socially and politically. Education has intrinsic importance: the capability to read and write can deeply influence one’s quality of life (Sen, 2002). For example, being able to read and write means being able to make informed decisions with regards to health, nutrition, shelter, reproductive issues, political choice and participation, and uncensored speech. These are all aspects of what Sen (1999, p. 36) refers to as “substantive freedoms” that are of intrinsic importance in education.

Hence, from a capability perspective, implementing curricula that enhance basic language literacy skills from a primary level of schooling helps to create a transformative female generation: one that will help set a pathway in capacity building in the form of equal participation, especially in decision making with regards to personal health and well-being. This pathway will extend to the greater society, closing the existing gender gap in decision-making. Moreover, “female literacy can enhance women’s voices in family affairs and reduce gender inequality in other fields” (Sen, 2002, p. 1).

In times of rapid globalization, any approach to understanding women’s issues is complex. In many areas of developing nations, women face various obstacles to fully participating as equal citizens. In an interview with Scott Horton (2012) on her book, *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum stated, “education begins where one is, with a rich grasp of the local context, but ramifies out to include the whole chain of human interactions” (para. 8). In many developing nations, where female children and women are kept from being educated, it is the lives of young women “who are burdened and impoverished by over-frequent bearing and rearing of children” (Sen, 2002, p. 2). This is true in many parts of South Asia and Africa where value systems reflect germs of patriarchal hegemony that have remained intact since the colonial era (Enyegue, Makki, & Giroux, 2009).

Educational systems need to understand their societies—“their tensions and contradictions” (Anrove, 2012, p. 6). It this understanding of the dichotomies—guided by

knowledge of the country, familiarity with its history and the unique qualities of particular societies—that enable unfreedoms, such as patriarchal barriers, to be addressed in order to find mutual solutions beneficial to all parties involved. All human beings can think, learn, and contribute, but this human capability can be fully realized only if humans feel secure (Sen, 1999). In order for people to feel secure, they need to be free of oppression (Freire, 2011) and to become partners in education in a society where becoming educated is not a privilege but a basic human right. Being educated means that people are given the opportunity to become empowered and thus to make informed decisions regarding social, economic, and political situations that are important in their lives (Sen, 1999). Research supports the view that, in the developing world, economic support of women is usually the better investment (Kasente, 2003).

Sen (2002) believes that the contribution of basic education, the ability to read and write, is an important step toward influencing quality of life. He sees female literacy as a means of giving agency to women to voice their opinion on family matters, which in turn reduces gender inequality in various fields. Sen (1999) calls this “the human capability” that promotes capacity in people to function in a life style that they perceive as valuable.

Beginning with education as a means to choosing how to participate in the economy (local or global), female children in particular are given a reason to value their lives. Education becomes a means to create agency in the social and political arenas, which in turn becomes the means to choosing how to participate in the economy.

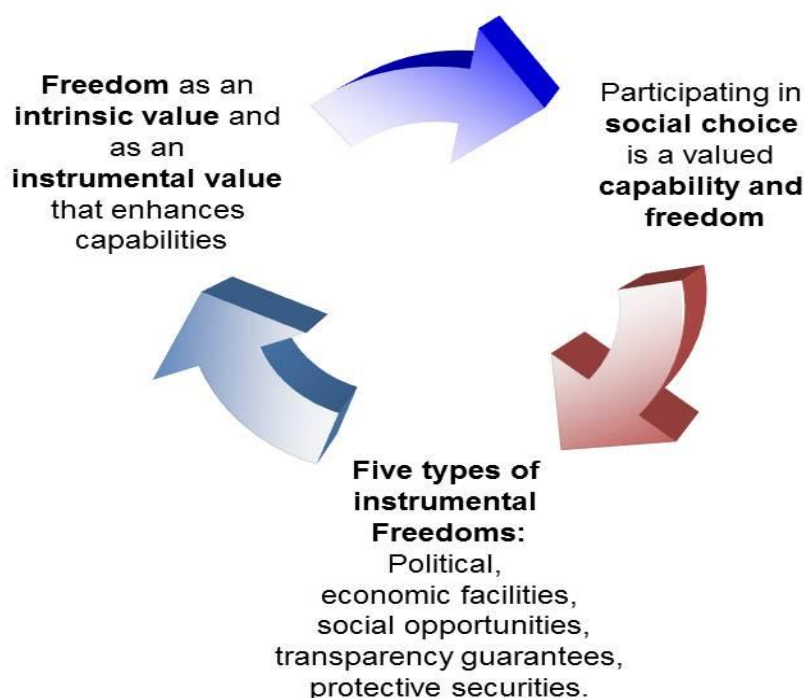


Figure 1. Freedoms in society strengthened by the education of female children. Adapted from R. de Silva, 2015.

For the socially and economically deprived, a major means to substantive freedom is education. When people are allowed to think for themselves about what is important to them and support values that are important to their well being, their motivation to be empowered educationally becomes paramount. This study posits that when educational focus is developed and made meaningful and relevant within the local cultural context from an early stage—as suggested here for rural Butaleja female children—children will more likely be empowered. They will become stakeholders of knowledge that will in time contribute towards building capability and capacity, as shown by Sen’s capability model (Sen, 1999). Figure 1 above (de Silva, 2015) describes the concept of freedom as both an instrumental and intrinsic value that allows social choice and capability, based on Sen’s five types of instrumental freedoms (Sen, 1999).

How Capability Model Concepts Can Be Implemented in Butaleja to Serve as an Impetus

In rural Butaleja, Uganda, the author will be working within a very small local area where much of the power base lies within the rural village. The author has outlined several approaches of best practices that enhance educational capabilities, which have been proven effective in rural developing nations in Africa and Asia, and which are expected to be effective. As the capability approach itself states, capacities of families and communities cannot be enhanced with just one method. Best practices are multifaceted, promoting capabilities and agency, while combating unfreedoms.

Any human services personnel working in developing countries must partner with local agents. In this case, the village is the primary functioning governmental body, making it crucial to partner with and receive approval from local governmental agents in Butaleja. As an initial step, dialogs with these key constituents can be promoted to discuss potential solutions and barriers. Given that Butaleja is predominantly a patriarchal society, both men and women need to be invited to engage in a meaningful dialog to promote female education. These dialogs can be used as an initial means to identify action steps. They can also serve as venues to identifying household barriers and local solutions.

These dialogs can lead to creating more substantial solutions—including partnering with various local community constituents, such as human service workers, local political supporters, faith leaders, non-profits, women’s groups, and children—to conduct targeted awareness campaigns about education of female children. Awareness campaigns can be used to inform the community and single families that educating female children offers them mutual benefits. Therefore, using the language of “value” rather than “rights” may offer a location to begin this process. Female children’s voices can be a powerful tool to propel value changes through targeted campaigns. Malala Yousafzai, a female child from Pakistan who moved the world with her advocacy for education for female children is a good example (Winthrop, Matsui, & Jamil, 2013). Participation by children builds leadership and promotes self-agency.

Multidisciplinary community groups can also help build community capacity to serve a cause. Butaleja does not have its own school—the nearest school is 10 miles away—and, as in many rural communities, the existing schools do not have sufficient resources to adequately house children. Community groups can be important conduits to build school capacities. For

example, community members can work with developmental agencies and government bodies to build a new satellite school or to build additional classrooms in existing schools. Costs can be reduced if community members provide labor for construction. Additionally, teams of community members can work together to find local solutions for transportation to school.

On the other hand, it is also important to build professional capacity for teachers to retain students. With teacher aids and teacher support mechanisms provided through local NGOs or through the education ministry, teachers could identify the most vulnerable students. Foreign NGOs whose value systems resonate with the needs of the community can also be harnessed to train local teachers who are willing to embody and work within curricula that are meaningful and relevant to the Butelaja community. Partner NGOs and workers would be ideal resources to help build both teacher and student capacity.

These partnerships and teacher aid systems can also be used to build classroom programs for students who need additional help and to prevent dropout rates. Retention of education is dependent on what learning material is covered. Children are more likely to enjoy material they can connect to. From a community perspective, institutionalizing teaching curricula that are seen by families and communities as relevant (with direct potential to financial gain), may be more accepted than curricula that are purely academic and foreign. Culturally rich pedagogy that encompasses rich descriptions steeped in traditional storytelling and that values human interactions and cultural beliefs may be useful as a way to reintroduce historical perspectives into valuing cultural heritage (Beck, 2016). To this end, implementation of a curriculum that includes the Lunyole language from the kindergarten level onward would also help deepen cultural values in children. Appropriate reading books that are embedded with culturally and linguistically relevant and meaningful text is key (Coyne, 2015). However, it is also important that female children can identify with the cultural contexts. The introduction of storybooks with female roles is important to promote gender equity in education. A viable solution is to partner with NGOs, schools, and community leaders to create local curricula and texts.

In addition to cultural textbooks, education that leads to vocational enhancement is more likely to be viewed by families as beneficial. Reintroducing and interweaving traditional methods—such as beekeeping, crop rotational farming, fish farming, or growing vegetable gardens—into daily academic rigor would further enhance and create meaning within the educational and cultural context of the community. Connecting various methods of local vocational skills with reading, writing, and arithmetic serves not only to promote worthy life skills but also to increase a balance of power through knowledge and understanding. Partnership with local professionals is a low-cost viable solution to this end.

In addition to education and vocational skill development, schools are also places where children build character. Leadership programs for girls can be initiated within schools, where teachers can select students as leaders. For example, mentorship programs can be initiated so that older female children can mentor and serve as role models for younger ones. Such programs are mutually beneficial for all participants as they build capability and agency. Additionally, through school projects, female children can be encouraged to engage and take leadership in community activities. Furthermore, similar to Photovoice (a photo elicitation methodology) projects in the west, local artistic methods can be introduced, where girls are able “articulate their thoughts on

the role of their educational experiences, as well as challenging their marginalization” (Shah, 2015, p. 55) on their home fronts and in the greater community. Using exhibition and art formats, girls in Butaleja can also be encouraged to participate in a dialog with brothers, parents, teachers and community, as a safe place for interaction (Shah, 2015). This type of methodology embedded into curricula is ideal for opening up a safe place for the elementary school children to begin creating agency for themselves as they develop.

At present, many families do not send female children to school, due to financial constraints. While primary education is free in Uganda, secondary education is not. It is important to create positive incentives for female children to continue school. For example, working with NGOs and local and central governmental agencies to create conditional grants as incentives to send girls to school may be necessary. Additionally, in Uganda as in many other African countries, microfinance lending groups are popular among the rural poor. Financial incentives for sending female children to school, such as educational grants with a reduction in interest, can be written into loan agreements. They may yield very positive results.

Additionally, social development programs (including the microfinance groups mentioned above) can be used to further help female children and their families. Social workers can take on the role of helping schools by identifying the most vulnerable families. Working with schools and other partnering agencies, they can help remove barriers and build each family’s capacity to send their children to school. They can also further serve as agents of change by advocating for female child education.

Conclusion

The present study is based on the idea that education is a key element of any social change, and that focusing on education for female children is especially important. This study proposed a viable initial implementation plan based on a capability model that would utilize local resources, build capacity, and enhance women’s and children’s agency. As mentioned earlier in the paper, “Education begins where one is, with a rich grasp of the local context, but ramifies out to include the whole chain of human interactions” (Horton, 2012) in order for meaningful learning to happen. Application of Sen’s HCA in the rural village of Butaleja, as an initial step toward a much larger project, would not mean another import of a western model, but rather a model that nurtures human values that are important within the local cultural and social context.

A commonly known fact is that educated women do not plan to rear illiterate children (Ware, 1984). Access to basic literacy skills for female children, to begin with, would likely mean that, as they mature, they gain greater freedom to determine their own development priorities and improve the quality of their lives. This in turn allows women to improve public services by possibly navigating away from foreign economic dependency for basic needs. The goal is in establishing a socioeconomic system that gives women the agency to create a life they deem valuable, through a meaningful system that could be easily sustainable. Future research is required to address the means to finalize and apply the model and develop locally sustainable systems within each diaspora in East Africa.

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