

Full Length Research Paper

Transforming female aspirations to real presence: The case of higher education in Cameroon

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Higher education for females is an indicator of development, democracy and gender equity, particularly necessary for a nation like Cameroon which attempts to become an emerging country by 2035. Hence, this paper is focused on ascertaining female aspirations to higher education for access and effective participation. In so doing, a study that employed a semi-structured questionnaire collected data from 977 female students about the level of schooling they aspired to attain, the underlying reasons for their choices and their prospected barriers. Simple percentages, chi-square analysis and logistic regression analysis showed that female student' aspirations for higher education were high, challenging the roles of higher education institutions. However, these high aspirations were based on the expectations that higher education participation and completion would be beneficial to the overall development of females and their integration into the world of work. Nevertheless, these aspirations were also tempered by barriers, and to this effect it is recommended that higher education school curricula be reformed to suit the needs of these female aspirers. Equally, financial constraints could be curbed through scholarships and donations from ex-student associations and university systems. Irrespective of this, constant research in this area is necessary as aspirations are complex, dynamic and contextual.

Key words: Aspirations, higher education, females, barriers, access and effective participation.

INTRODUCTION

The education of girls and women in the society is crucial for any country as it benefits the entirety of a nation and is one of the most important ways to achieve sustainable development. This explains why the education of females has been given national and international priority, expressed through research and policy initiatives, program development and advocacy. Examples of such initiatives include the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand (1990), the World Forum on Education in Dakar (2000), the Second Decade of Education for Africa: Plan of Action for 2006 to 2015 as

well as Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure "equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education including university by 2030."

Relevance of the study

Transition from high school to higher education can be very demanding as challenging decisions that can maximize one's output must be made, taking into

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consideration one's opportunities in light of one's own understanding. This challenging process can therefore shape one's aspirations in different ways based on their own understanding of the underlying process. Research in aspiration is age old, however it has its origins in experimental researches that focused on level of aspirations in the early 1930s where the focus was on ascertaining the different levels of one's ability to achieve difficult task and their intended performance (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). Nevertheless, most of these studies were carried out in the laboratory with fewer implications for the school and students but in the late 1940s, the focus was shifted to achievement motivation – viewed as an activating force or a drive to achieve good results and recognition which to some degree accounts for progress in school (Singh, 2011).

Along this line was a search for gender differences in achievement motivation suggesting inherent implications for aspirations. This has been the foundation for the comparative approaches of aspirations based on gender that has limited the understanding and specificities of higher education for females. Already, females are limited in their unique and natural roles of child bearing (which we cannot change) and the expectation of these roles can influence the decisions they make of their education. A dominant comparative approach has demanded females to be like males in access, quality of participation in terms of choice of university programs and courses, career patterns that rather raises expectation levels for these females and makes equity far reaching. This constitutes a gap and the present research attempts to fill it up by understanding the reasons why female students want to access higher education as this can help to sustain their aspirations by meeting their needs at a time when student interest is optimal in the educational system.

Historically, the education of women has been one of the most fiercely debated issues since the 19th century. This debate, along with social and political changes, has resulted generally in a significant progress and accessibility of education for girls at primary and secondary levels. However, it was only in the second half of the century that women were allowed to enter universities in the western countries. Papadópulos and Radakovich (2005) equally affirmed that, traditionally, higher education was not a space considered properly "feminine", hence it was one of the best environments to reproduce gender inequalities. In Africa, Gobina (2004) reports that generally, women at the pre-colonial time were usually relegated to roles that were associated with their female nurturing qualities whilst in the colonial period women began accessing teaching and nursing careers that was considered as an extension of their female nurturing qualities. Generally, in Africa, female access and participation in education has been historically limited with a low level of participation that was enhanced by the expectations and beliefs of the

authorities at that time. This situation continued to prevail in the absence of an informed understanding of the unique needs and desires of females that is necessary for providing them with higher education.

No doubt, Africa has experienced an expansion in the number of universities and other higher education institutions but women still remain underrepresented in Cameroon. For instance, Fonkeng and Ntembe (2009) indicated that in 2000/2001, female enrolment was 23,288 (36.15%) from an overall enrolment of 40559 in Cameroon universities. In 2001/2002, amongst a total of 71,091 students found in the state universities, only 27572 were girls (Fonkeng, 2005). Equally, analysis made in the SWAp (2006) showed that girls are less educated with a parity index of 0.64, implying two female students for three male students in accessing Cameroon state universities. In the same light, it was found that only 44% of females constitute the total enrolment of students in tertiary education (UNESCO, 2010). These statistics indicates that even though females now have access to education, their progression to higher levels of education is low.

The efforts in Cameroon are dominant at the lower levels of education. Cameroon is a sub-Saharan African country, located in central Africa. The educational system of Cameroon is sub-divided into two, that is, the English and French sub-educational system. With specific reference to the English sub-educational system where this study was carried out, it is worth noting that they currently operate six (6) years of primary education and seven (7) years of secondary education (which is sub-divided into two sections, that is, secondary school – 5 years and high school – 2 years). After graduation from the high school, students can then gain entry into the tertiary level of education or higher education that constitutes of universities and other institutions of higher learning to obtain degrees or diplomas.

Over the years, the government has played a key role in forging the education of females by promoting mass education particularly at the primary level (Kritz and Gaule, 1989). Similarly, in Cameroon, the Gender Thematic Group (GTEG) also highlighted the efforts of the Ministry of National Education in 2002, some of which included, providing free public primary education, the distribution of textbooks, bursaries and other supports to female students (including scholarships for scientific and technological studies). Nonetheless, despite the fact that Cameroon as part of sub-Saharan Africa has participated in all the conferences, conventions and declarations concerning girls' education, more than half of their out-of-school population are girls and two-thirds of the illiterate population are women (FAWE, 2010).

Statement of the problem

This problem of female access and participation in

education may have persisted partly because the issue has been limited to massive enrolments in primary schools but the requirement to advance knowledge that can better sustain development in a country requires higher levels of education. Primary education is a necessary and crucial step but it is not a destination, and therefore the issue of quality and sustaining education should not be limited to only the primary level of education. No doubt, the primary level of education is not independent of the secondary and tertiary levels (Kwesiga, 2009), though we cannot afford to be redundant, we must move ahead to find out if the reforms and initiatives dominated at the primary level are precipitating access and participation at other levels. We are in a contemporary knowledge-based society and therefore higher education is as important for Africa as it is for other countries (Kwesiga, 2009). Evidences from Indabawa (2004) and Ayodele et al., (2006) indicate that women in the world constitute over 70% of the 1.3 billion world population, but their participation generally in education and particularly in higher education does not reflect the aforementioned figure.

Even more pertinent is the case of Cameroon which aims to enhance education quality by 2035 yet quantitative development of girls' school attendance has not gone beyond basic education (Traore and Fonkeng, 2011). Brookfield (2013) also reports that even though the attendance rate for primary school girls in Cameroon is 77%, there is a drastic decrease of 38% attendance rate for girls in the secondary school which reflects the probability of female attendance rate in higher education in Cameroon. These enrolments seemingly indicate that the participation of females in higher education is not very high in comparison to their population and to lower levels of education. However, it must be noted here that the issue of access should not be limited on numbers or massive enrolments but rather on the translation of these numbers to real presence in terms of participation and decision making. The issues of access must question the parameters, for example, higher education programs must be relevant to the needs of the female students particularly for African countries that still bear the bruises of imported colonial educational policies (Kwesiga, 2009).

No doubt, there are places where boys are behind but an overarching comparative approach cannot capture these realities and understanding access and participation in education from the perspectives of the individuals themselves can better help them maximize their output, otherwise massive enrolments will become non directional. Based on this premise, this paper focuses on two main issues:

i) Firstly, understanding the individual's plans with regards to access and participation in higher education programs. It is important to ascertain whether or not individual's themselves desire to access and participate in higher

education programs and institutions as well as the reason for their choices. For, if individuals must realize the benefits of higher education, then they must desire to fully participate. This desire must be weighed against different options, opportunities and barriers of the context that can spur into a decision of access and participation in higher education. In this regard, there is therefore a need for a shift from the primary focus which has dominantly been on comparing and ensuring equitable access, participation, retention and performance between males and females to understanding the needs of these individuals, their pathways and choices.

ii) Secondly and consequently, there is strong necessity for higher education institutions to be adapted to meaningfully accommodate the interest and needs of these females. To achieve this, policy issues must be adequately piloted and reforms must affect relevant changes within the system. Understanding the higher education aspirations of females therefore can inform a policy of provision in Cameroon, and this is why this paper, based on the author's own research addresses the following issues;

- i) Levels of education female students aspire to attain.
- ii) Reasons for female students' prospective level.
- iii) Barriers to female students' participation in higher education.

METHODS

Research design

A correlation research design was adopted as the study sought to predict students' prospective level of education, reasons and the prospective barriers they think they might face in attaining these aspirations in order to ascertain the likelihood of access and effective participation.

Sample

A multistage sampling procedure that included proportionate stratified random sampling, simple random sampling and opportunity sampling was used to choose a sample of 977 female students. These students were aged between 17 - 22 years, selected from 46 high schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. The interest of selecting these level of students was because the study was more interested in concrete aspirations that are relatively stable over time as research suggests that younger students tend to have more idealistic aspirations, whereas older ones have more concrete ideas about higher education, their barriers and opportunities (Kao and Tienda, 1998). Also, results from a study conducted by Dupriez et al. (2012) confirmed that 15-year-olds have moved beyond an idealized vision of educational aspirations. As high school completion is further away, younger students can afford to be more optimistic about their future opportunities, while older teenagers are more aware of the barriers to their educational and occupational success and thus more likely to lower their aspirations to meet their expectations.

Table 1. Plan to continue education.

| Parameter | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Yes | 960 | 98.3 |
| No | 17 | 1.7 |
| Total | 977 | 100.0 |

Instrument

These female students responded to a semi structured questionnaire containing 27 items of both open and close ended items that specifically assessed the levels of education that female students aspire to attain, reasons for different prospective levels and their perceived barriers to access and participation in higher education. The questionnaire mostly employed the ordinal scale of measurement as most of the data needed was categorized and ranked using two to five-point questions.

Validity and reliability of the instrument

After the construction of the questionnaire, it was submitted to an expert supervisor. Corrections were effected and the questionnaire was then administered to a pilot group that included a total of thirty (30) students, with ten (10) students each from three (3) different schools that were not considered part of the original study. Through careful observation and an analysis of the results, the questionnaire was again corrected and reviewed with an expert supervisor, a statistician and a lecturer interested in female education. With this, a content validity index was computed using the following formula as seen below:

$$CVI = \text{No. of judges that declared item valid} / \text{Total no. of judges}$$

$$CVI = 3/3$$

$$CVI = 1$$

To this extent, the instrument was considered valid as its inter judge coefficient was greater than 0.7. For a reliability check, an analysis of the pilot test results indicated a need for some corrections as further shown;

Questions number/issue: Questions 26 and 27

Problem: Initially not considered but surfaced in the remarks.

Strategies: A question probing for factors that can stop students from continuing education and another on factors that can motivate students to continue education was added.

Questions number/issue: Formatting

Problem: Questionnaire perceived as too long.

Strategies: Formatting was improved and the questionnaire was brought down from 6 to 4 pages.

These different readjustments were made to the questionnaire and a reliability test was performed to assess the internal consistency of

responses using Cronbach Alpha reliability analysis. The coefficient was high with a score of 0.697 indicating that the internal consistency assumption was not violated.

Procedure of data collection

An informed consent was obtained from each school to be visited and once there, approval was sought from the principals and vice principals in order to gain direct access to the students. Upon approval, the questionnaire was delivered to the students in their classrooms wherein they filled with pens and individually. Students were monitored and encouraged to answer all the questions where necessary.

Method of data analysis

The Chi-square, Spearman rho correlation test was used to compare proportions for significant differences, and logistic regression analysis was used to assess the predictive power of the variables. Data was presented using frequency tables and figures and all statistics were presented at the 95% confidence level (CL) along with an alpha coefficient of 0.05.

RESULTS

The level of education that female students aspire to attain

An analysis of students' plans to further their education beyond the present level (high school-secondary education), revealed the following as presented in Table 1.

Almost all the female students sampled planned to continue with education after Advanced Level Certificate with a proportion of 960 (98.3%) as against 17 (1.7%) for those who would not like to continue. When these findings were subjected to the logistic regression model the following was revealed as seen in Table 2.

- i) Those who would not like to stop for a job immediately after Advanced Level are most likely to aspire for higher education ($P < 0.001$).
- ii) When students plan to attain higher level of schooling, there is an increased likelihood that they will aspire for higher education ($P < 0.001$).

Specifically, an analysis of students' prospective access at specific levels of education revealed the following as indicated in Table 3.

Equally, as far as the specific level of schooling was concerned, Table 3 shows that 17 (1.7%) of the female students would like to end at the Advanced Level, 75 (7.7%) at Bachelor's Degree, 421 (43.1%) at Master's Degree, 418 (42.8%) at Doctorate Degree (PhD) and 46 (4.7%) had other plans which included obtaining HNDs, Vocational Trainings and so on. Cumulatively, a very significant ($\chi^2 = 1005.94$; $df = 1$; $P < 0.001$) majority 839

Table 2. Logistic Regression Model depicting the likelihood of females attaining Higher Education levels.

| Predictors of aspiration for higher education | Log Likelihood Ratio Score | df | Sig. |
|---|----------------------------|----|-------|
| Will not stop for job immediately after A/Ls | 120.840 | 1 | 0.000 |
| Level of education one plans to attain. | 39.544 | 1 | 0.000 |

Table 3. Plans to obtain specific qualifications.

| Level of schooling female students plan to attain | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|--------------------|
| Advanced Level | 17 | 1.7 | 1.7 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 75 | 7.7 | 9.4 |
| Master's Degree | 421 | 43.1 | 52.5 |
| Doctorate Degree (PhD) | 418 | 42.8 | 95.3 |
| Others (HND, Vocational Trainings, etc.) | 46 | 4.7 | 100.0 |
| Total | 977 | 100.0 | - |

(85.9%) would like to attain Masters and PhD level.

Reasons for prospective plans to access higher levels of education

Students equally highlighted reasons that stimulated their desire to further their education. They emphasized the most on the need to have a job 222 (22.7%), followed by the need to achieve self-actualization 196 (20.1%), to have a better life 173 (17.7%), to acquire more knowledge 151 (15.5%) amongst others. On the other hand, those who never wanted to further their education, revealed that this was because of lack of finance 10 (1.0%), the need to work earlier to sustain family 6 (0.6%), had to follow plans set by parents 1 (0.1%), the need to travel abroad 1 (0.1%) as seen in Table 4. These reasons are equally illustrated on Figure 1.

Further analysis into the reasons why students aspire for education at specific levels revealed the following as seen in Table 5.

The findings revealed that those students who aspired to reach only Advanced Level gave as main reason the lack of finance 11 (64.7%), while those who would like to go beyond the Advanced Level to pursue Master's 30 (40.0%), PhD 193 (45.8%) or HNDs and vocational trainings 163 (39%) gave as main reason the need to acquire knowledge that can earn them a high income job as indicated in Table 4. This indicates that the economic benefits of education is highly valued and can serve as the basis for accessing higher education.

DISCUSSION

Levels of education female students aspire to attain

The findings of the study suggested that most of the

female students in the South West Region of Cameroon plan to continue with their education beyond the Advanced Level with a majority of them desiring to attain Master's and PhD degrees. This indicates that female aspirations for higher education is very high which consequently places a higher demand for higher education as they seek to request for places in institutions of higher education. However, these findings are in contrast to that of Brookfield (2013) which showed that the education of girls in Ngaoundere, Cameroon is not highly valued even by females themselves. This difference may be as a result of cultural differences in these two areas in Cameroon as the Adamawa Region, where Ngaoundere is located is markedly Muslim, traditionally dominated by the belief that education makes a wife disobedient and arrogant, for example, hence, the education of the girl is undermined compared to the South West Region of Cameroon (where this study was carried out) with emerging and liberal beliefs about education for females, that allows the girl child to dream of a future that is dependent on education.

Reasons for female students' prospective level

Female students want to attend higher education institutions the most because they were of the view that higher education attendance will earn them a job, help them to be self-actualized, earn better life, acquire more knowledge, techniques and skills. One's expectation of a good is key to their consumption and therefore in this case, students' expectation of higher education has the potential of influencing actual access and effective participation. This indicates that if females must benefit from accessing and participating in higher education, the system must strive to meet with these expectations. These expectations have a spillover effect in these

Table 4. A code-grounded-quotation table for perceived reasons for higher education plans.

| Category | Code | Code description | Grounding | | Quotation |
|-----------------|---|---|-----------|---|---|
| | | | n | % | |
| Yes | Job | To have a job | 222 | 22.7 | <i>'So as to obtain a job'</i> <i>'Because I want to be professionalized in order to have a well-qualified job so as to help my family and myself.'</i> |
| | Achieve | To achieve self-actualization, curbing gender role difference | 196 | 20.1 | <i>'In order to specialized in what I want to become in future'</i> <i>'I want to attain my goal in life which does not end only at Advanced Level'</i> <i>'If a man can be a president and women as well like in other countries why not also in Cameroon'</i> |
| | Better life | To have a better life and status | 173 | 17.7 | <i>'Because I want to acquire more knowledge and have a better place in the society today'</i> <i>'So that I can have a good mastery of life.'</i> |
| | Skills | To acquire more knowledge, techniques and skills | 151 | 15.5 | <i>'To further my education and know more before going either to teach others'</i> |
| | Certificate | To have certificates | 63 | 6.4 | <i>'I want to acquire a higher certificate'</i> <i>'Because Advanced Level will lose its value so I want a higher certificate'</i> |
| | Family status | To improve on family status | 61 | 6.2 | <i>'I would like to continue because I have younger ones so going further in education will enable me to help them '</i> |
| | Education | Education is important and fulfilling | 41 | 4.2 | <i>'I see it as necessity because in order for me to become responsible tomorrow I need to continue with my education'</i> |
| | Development | To contribute to the development of the society | 21 | 2.1 | <i>'I want to be able to improve on the society'</i> <i>'I want to make Cameroon better'</i> |
| | Unsure | Not sure of what to do later | 10 | 1.0 | <i>'I don't know'</i> |
| | Income | To earn higher income | 5 | 0.5 | <i>'I want to have a well-paid job'</i> |
| Satisfy parents | To make parents proud | 5 | 0.5 | <i>'To make my parents happy with me'</i> <i>'To make my parents proud'</i> <i>'...and also to repay my parents for their kindness'</i> | |
| Role model | Serving as role model, to inspire other girls | 4 | 0.4 | <i>'Because I want to show an example of a good woman'</i> | |

Table 4. Contd.

| | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|--|----|-----|--|
| | Parent's plan | Parents' plan | 3 | 0.3 | <i>'parent' plan</i> <i>'It is my parents that plan that I should continue education'</i> |
| | Marriage | To have a husband | 3 | 0.3 | <i>'To increase my chance to have a husband'</i> <i>'Some men love educated women'</i> |
| | Travel | Travel abroad | 1 | 0.1 | <i>'To travel abroad'</i> |
| | Financial difficulties | No finance to further education | 20 | 1.0 | <i>'My parents have no money.'</i> <i>'My parents are all dead and there is no one to sponsor.'</i> <i>'Financial difficulties.'</i> |
| No | Early family responsibilities | Need to work earlier to sustain family | 6 | 0.6 | <i>'I want to work first.'</i> <i>'My family depends on me so I need to work.'</i> |
| | Travel | Travel abroad | 1 | 0.1 | <i>'I want to go and look for a job abroad.'</i> |
| | Parents' desire | Parents' plan | 1 | 0.1 | <i>'My parents want me to end here so I can get married.'</i> |
| | - | Total | - | - | - |

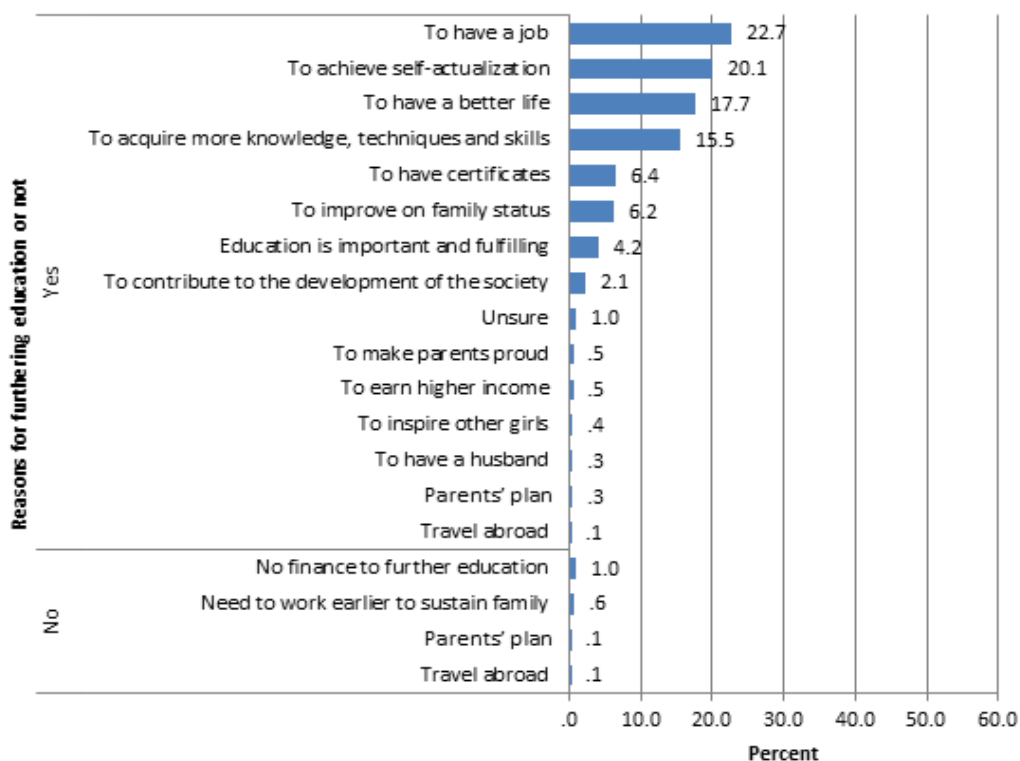


Figure 1. Reasons for prospected education plans.

Table 5. Reasons for desiring specific levels of education.

| Reasons | stats | Prospected level of school attainment | | | | | Total |
|---|-------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------|-------|
| | | Advanced level | Bachelor's degree | Master's degree | Doctorate degree (PhD) | Others | |
| Lack of finance | n | 11 | 5 | 15 | 0 | 1 | 32 |
| | % | 64.7 | 6.7 | 3.6 | 0.0 | 2.2 | 3.3 |
| To improve on family status | n | 1 | 0 | 17 | 16 | 1 | 35 |
| | % | 5.9 | 0.0 | 4.0 | 3.8 | 2.2 | 3.6 |
| To acquire a higher certificate | n | 0 | 1 | 12 | 16 | 0 | 29 |
| | % | 0.0 | 1.3 | 2.9 | 3.8 | 0.0 | 3.0 |
| Unsure of parents' plans | n | 0 | 2 | 17 | 8 | 5 | 32 |
| | % | 0.0 | 2.7 | 4.0 | 1.9 | 10.9 | 3.3 |
| Increased opportunity in the job market | n | 0 | 1 | 7 | 17 | 2 | 27 |
| | % | 0.0 | 1.3 | 1.7 | 4.1 | 4.3 | 2.8 |
| Level parents can afford | n | 0 | 4 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 20 |
| | % | 0.0 | 5.3 | 2.4 | 1.0 | 4.3 | 2.0 |
| To be like role models | n | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| | % | 5.9 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 0.4 |
| To end education and travel abroad | n | 1 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| | % | 5.9 | 1.3 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.7 |
| Depends on luck and chance | n | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| | % | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 2.2 | 0.2 |
| God's will | n | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | % | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 2.2 | 0.2% |
| Desired level | n | 0 | 5 | 19 | 3 | 0 | 27 |
| | % | 0.0 | 6.7 | 4.5 | 0.7 | 0.0 | 2.8 |
| Knowledge to earn a high income job | n | 3 | 30 | 193 | 163 | 18 | 407 |
| | % | 17.6 | 40.0 | 45.8 | 39.0 | 39.1 | 41.7 |
| Stop to enable siblings continue | n | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | % | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.1 |

Table 5. Contd.

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| I am intelligent and hardworking | n | 0 | 1 | 3 | 8 | 0 | 12 |
| | % | 0.0 | 1.3 | 0.7 | 1.9 | 0.0 | 1.2 |
| Education is important | n | 0 | 2 | 6 | 21 | 0 | 29 |
| | % | 0.0 | 2.7 | 1.4 | 5.0 | 0.0 | 3.0 |
| To have a better life | n | 0 | 4 | 34 | 51 | 5 | 94 |
| | % | 0.0 | 5.3 | 8.1 | 12.2 | 10.9 | 9.6 |
| To achieve dreams | n | 0 | 7 | 38 | 66 | 9 | 120 |
| | % | 0.0 | 9.3 | 9.0 | 15.8 | 19.6 | 12.3 |
| Bookwork will become tedious and boring | n | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| | % | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.2 |
| To gain respect and recognition in the society | n | 0 | 3 | 23 | 32 | 1 | 59 |
| | % | 0.0 | 4.0 | 5.5 | 7.7 | 2.2 | 6.0 |
| To have a good husband and marriage | n | 0 | 7 | 8 | 1 | 0 | 16 |
| | % | 0.0 | 9.3 | 1.9 | 0.2 | 0.0 | 1.6 |
| Its parents' dream, so I want to make them proud | n | 0 | 2 | 9 | 9 | 0 | 20 |
| | % | 0.0 | 2.7 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 0.0 | 2.0 |
| Total | n | 17 | 75 | 421 | 418 | 46 | 977 |
| | % | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

females completing their studies, getting a job and their overall fit into the society. If these expectations are not understood and ways sorted to meet them, then the issue of females lagging in education will be persistent. It is not about just asking them to enroll or making sure a mass of them enroll but they should be able to be given opportunities that will meet their individual expectations.

However, the finding confirms that of Tafere (2014) assertion that students formulate aspirations regardless of prevailing constraints or what educational policy stipulates or by the available job opportunities. It equally supports that of Eloundou-Enyegue et al. (2004) which indicated that there was still an increased demand of access to higher education institutions in Cameroon despite high unemployment rates of graduates, with the

hope of an economic turn-around in the future.

Barriers to access and participation in higher education

It is worth noting that Irrespective of the majority of students who desired higher education, a significant few did not want to continue with their education and they had reasons for this choice. It is equally necessary to understand these reasons that pose as barriers to higher education for females. For a dominant number of students in this group, they never wanted to continue with their education because of significant financial difficulties and other reasons such as wanting to work before thinking about

school continuation. Financial constraints made it difficult for them to pay fees, buy text books and other essential learning materials. This is further supported by the fact that parents' socio-economic status particularly their ability to afford the expenses of higher education significantly predicted higher education aspirations. This finding supports that of Hall (2001), Cammish and Brock (1994), Graham-Browne (1991) and Nejema (1993) who revealed that the constraint of cost militates against the access of girls to schools as well as the findings of Odaga and Heneveld (1995), and Brookfield (2013) which showed that financial constraints were a major barrier of female education in sub Saharan-Africa.

Conclusion

In this study, the desired level of education, the reasons for these aspirations and barriers to these aspirations of 1007 high school female students in the south West Region of Cameroon were examined. After statistical analysis, it was concluded that female students in the South West Region of Cameroon aspire for very high levels of education, particularly, they prospected earning Master's and PhD degrees in the light of high unemployment rates of graduates in the country. This consequently places high demands on the educational system, particularly to meet the expectations of these females. Though barriers still persist, it is however possible that outcome would vary over the years as aspirations are complex, dynamic and contextual. Regardless of this, the findings of this study point to the need for higher education provision that would bring about actual access and effective participation for overall development.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Programs provision must be tailored towards equipping graduates to meet their expectations, for example, to fit into the job market and or become self-reliant.
2. The interest of females to attain higher education levels must be sustained.
3. Financial barriers must be curbed to enable higher education access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. While the school system takes the lead, parents and guardians should fuel females interest in higher education by discussing with them about their plans, how to navigate through and achieve their plans, for example, exposing them to career options, role models and other channels that illuminate the benefits of higher education

to females.

2. Higher education institutions must help females meet their educational expectations by connecting them to programs wherein, they can pursue their passion through activities such as mentorship and networking with other women who are meeting their aspirations.
3. There is need for increased awareness and access to work study, paid internships, loans and grants in higher education institutions that can help curb financial problems of females desiring higher education.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. The aspirations of female students based on different social class can be investigated.
2. A follow-up study to find out if students attained their aspirations to continue their schooling at undergraduate level and post graduate levels can be carried out to ascertain if there were more barriers or not that further militated against female access to higher education institutions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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