Promoting Women's Empowerment Through Grassroots Solidarity: A Case Study of Mothers' Associations in Benin

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Abstract

In Benin, women in general and rural women in particular are central to the development and sustenance of the household, community, and society at large. Yet, often, they lack the agency, as a result of limited education, life skills, and resources, to contribute to community development, or the structures in place (laws, religious beliefs, policies, and institutions) limit women's ability to participate in community development. As a result of their limited agency and the unequal structures in society, women in Benin have often been denied participation in decisions around education, health, economy, and agriculture. While women are key actors in all these sectors, they are often not represented sufficiently in the discussions that shape their lives. Women in Benin have collectively organized into associations to address these issues. Associations such as Mothers Associations (MAs) in Benin, have emerged with the specific purpose of improving the education of their daughters. MAs function under the umbrella of Parent Associations (PAs) to address issues of particular concern to girl students. While PAs have helped to improve basic education by putting pressure on school administrators and political leaders to address the quality of schools, these associations have been primarily male dominated, rarely identifying the specific barriers to education for girls.

My dissertation has three main objectives: to assess how MAs in Benin have collectively mobilized to enhance the quality of education for schoolgirls; to determine whether MA activities and mobilization efforts have led to women's empowerment and influence within their respective communities; and to examine whether MAs have had an impact on changing harmful social norms. Overall, the objective of this research is to examine how members of the MAs have used their collective agency to enhance gender equality within the school and community life. Through a critical feminist approach and applying a socio-ecological model, I examine the process in which African women have mobilized, collaborated, and advocated for girls' education in ways that subtly undermine the harmful relations of power that govern their position in society.

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Acronyms

Baccalaureate (BAC)
Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle (BEPC)
Catholic Relief Services (CRS)
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
Certificat d'Etudes Primaires (CEP)
Civic Action in the School of Environment (CASE)
Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)
Cours d'Initiation (CI)
Cours Elementaire 1 (CE1)
Cours Elementarire 2 (CE2)
Cours Moyen 1 (CM1)
Cours Moyen 2 (CM2)
Cours Preparatoire (CP)
Department for International Development (DFID)
Education for All (EFA)
Fast Track Initiative (FTI)
Forum for African Woman Educationalists (FAWE)
Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)
Institut National de la Statistique et de l'analyse economique (INSAE)
Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG)
International Monetary Fund (IMF)
International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO)
Millennium Development Goals (MDG)
Mothers Association (MA)
New Study Program (NSP)
Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD)
Official Development Agencies (ODA)
Organization for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD)
Parent Association (PA)
Participatory Visual Methodology (PVM)
Primary Education NGO Project (PENGOP)
Sovereign National Conference (SNC)
Structural Adjustment Program (SAP)
Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI)
United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)
United States Agency International Development (USAID)
World Bank (WB)
World Health Organization (WHO)

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Chapter One: Introduction

Notions of community participation have been prevalent in development discourse, but particularly in the field of education-for-development (Edwards, 2017). Community participation has taken on different forms and meanings depending on the context. Within the context of education in sub-Saharan Africa, community participation has been framed as the involvement of the whole community (families, parents, school institutions, community members) in the education of the child in order to enhance school effectiveness. There are various ways for communities to participate in education. For example, by ensuring children attend class prepared to learn, by providing financial and material support to the school, by frequently communicating with the school administrators, by playing a role on school governances, and in some cases by supporting teachers in class instruction. Given the salient role communities can take to enhance school effectiveness, community participation in education has been promoted in multiple ways by influential international organizations working on issues related to education —including donors, multilateral organizations, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and regional development banks (Edwards, 2017). More recently, as a strategy to improve education quality, community participation has been embedded in both the framing of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in their implementation. This new trend has received immense attention from education and development researchers, who highlight the importance of community participation in improving school quality and ensuring sustainable development (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012; Nkansah & Chapman, 2006).

Although justifications of community participation in development practice aim to promote inclusivity and transformative change, the practice of community participation often obscures the gendered nature of power dynamics in communities (Fonchingong, 2006). Historically, women (specifically, rural women) have either not participated in development discourse or their participation has been in spaces that are male dominated, in which power dynamics are at play and they have not had the ability to voice their concerns (Fonchingong, 2006). However, as the prominence of civil society organizations (CSOs) in sub-Saharan Africa has expanded, so has the role of women

as participants and leaders in these organizations. Internationally, the past four decades have seen a significant evolution in the role and expectations of CSOs in generating progressive social change, to the point where they have become well-established key players; those in sub-Saharan Africa have used their evolving prominence to promote social, economic, and political development activities (Edwards, 2017). Growing evidence has revealed that women, despite often being barred from participating in public affairs, have relied on their traditional informal associations not only to organize for their own social interests, but also to challenge the conditions that are inherently biased against them (Mensah & Antoh, 2005).

Grassroots organizations, women's associations, and women's groups are not new to Africa. Women have always organized themselves outside of their family spheres for the realization of a common interest. Among these groupings are rural cooperatives and self-help groups, occupational associations, urban business enterprises, and social welfare, church, and entertainment groups (Wipper, 1995). Indeed, African women have organized into associations and utilized civic space in various ways: as a site of economic and social advancement; as a means to mobilize for national liberation; as a place to rebuild and regenerate after conflict; and as a basis for networking and transnational mobilization for the advancement of women's rights and status (Britton & Price, 2014). Members of women's associations have used their individual and collective empowerment to create safe spaces in which they can participate in civil society, raise concerns, and address a range of socio-economic needs (Purkayastha & Subramaniam, 2004).

In Benin, women in general and rural women in particular are central to the development and sustenance of the household, community, and society at large. Yet, often, they face barriers to participation. Limited access to education, to life skills training and to resources has meant limited agency for women in Benin. Their participation in community development is also often limited by systems (e.g., laws, religious beliefs, policies, institutions) (Dalhum et al, 2019). As a result of their limited agency and gender norms that position women as subordinate in society, women in Benin have often been denied participation in decisions around education, health, economy, and agriculture. Although women are key actors in all these sectors, they are

often not represented sufficiently in the discussions that shape their lives. Women in Benin have collectively organized into associations to address these issues. These associations include women's interest groups, agriculture groups, micro-credit groups, and traditional dance groups, among others. These are a means to strengthen friendship, sisterhood, trust, and loyalty among members (Asojo & Asojo, 2000). Within these organisations, members can focus on issues such as health, violence, education and the economy. One example of these groups is the Mothers Associations (MAs) in Benin, which have emerged with the specific purpose of improving the education of their daughters. MAs function under the umbrella of Parent Associations (PAs) to address issues of particular concern to girl students. Although PAs have helped to improve basic education by putting pressure on school administrators and political leaders to address the quality of schools, these associations have been primarily male dominated, rarely identifying the specific barriers to education for girls (World Education, 2015). PAs often focus on obtaining financial resources to fund equipment and to support school management, for example, but neglect the specific needs of girls (e.g., classroom participation, gender-based violence, menstrual-hygiene management). Though PAs do not deliberately set out to neglect girls, the issues that affect girls are simply not part of their reality. Since very few, if any, women attend PA meetings –much less sit as board members—the uniquely gendered needs of girls are rarely brought to the attention of PA boards.

It is for this reason that mothers have organized into their own associations to provide spaces where women can mobilize to enhance access and education outcomes for girls. The objectives of these MAs include: (a) raising public awareness of the importance of girls' education; (b) encouraging girls to enroll in school; (c) monitoring girls' school attendance; and (d) removing barriers to education for girls (World Education, 2015). As a result of their advocacy and activities, there is evidence that the quality of girls' education has improved, and retention barriers (such as, cost of school, care responsibilities) for girls have decreased (Spear & Dambekalns, 2016; World Education, 2015).

MAs are not new to West Africa. They exist under different names (associations des mères d'élèves, club de mamans, groupe de mamans) and work to support girls'

education – some as independent entities (e.g. in Burkina Faso), others as directly linked to the PAs (e.g. in Benin). Regardless of their title, generally, the purpose of MAs is to launch initiatives to improve the school environment and educational opportunities in their localities. While they generally focus on enhancing the inequalities experienced by girls, many of their initiatives target all children. Despite the great strides made by MAs, to date there is limited empirical evidence concerning whether the work MAs have done to improve girls' education has led to the empowerment of the members of the MA in other realms of society. As such, I designed an in-depth qualitative analysis of two case study MAs to maximize understanding of how the mobilization and advocacy efforts of MAs in the realm of the school environment could lead to the empowerment of the members in other realms of society.

Research Objectives

There is growing interest from the international development community in engaging with women's associations as collectives that can support the aim of achieving gender equality. This growing interest has led CSOs to fund and support women's associations to implement development projects. Although there has been increasing emphasis on incorporating women's associations in development discourse, there has been a lack of field-based research, especially with respect to Benin, that uses the voices of women as the primary source of data in order to explore the extent to which grassroots women's associations can empower rural women. This study seeks to fill the gaps in the literature as it relates to Benin, to the experiences of rural women, and to women as members of grassroots associations. It seeks to further identify the impact of women collectively organizing to achieve gender equality.

Specifically, the dissertation has three main objectives: to assess how MAs in Benin have collectively mobilized to enhance the quality of education for schoolgirls; to determine whether MA activities and mobilization efforts have led to women's empowerment and influence within their respective communities; and to examine whether MAs have had an impact on changing harmful social norms that position women as subordinate to men and places them in the private sphere, therefore limiting their meaningful participation in the community. Overall, the objective of this research is

to examine how members of the MAs have used their collective agency to enhance gender equality within the school and community life. Through a critical feminist approach and applying a socio-ecological model, I examine the process in which African women have mobilized, collaborated, and advocated for girls' education in ways that subtly undermine the harmful relations of power that govern their position in society.

Rationale for the Study

I came to my research topic through my experience living in Benin between 2008-2009 and in 2015, as well as the findings that came out of my Masters' thesis. While working in the education sector of Benin between 2008 and 2009, I observed the subtle manner in which various practices and structures in Benin's wider society reinforced gender inequalities in the classroom. I wanted to better understand how different actors can bridge the spheres of theory, policy, and practice to address these inequalities. As such, I pursued an undergraduate degree in international development studies and a Masters' degree in interdisciplinary studies (development studies, women's studies, and education). My Masters' thesis focused on understanding the barriers to education for girls in a rural community in Ghana. Specifically, it explored the gendered dimension of the classroom experience and how the classroom reproduced a culture of domesticity for girls, and a culture of violence (Rouhani, 2015).

Although many national policies existed to support girls' education, these policies did not translate to transformed action at the level of the school or the community. This piqued my interest in exploring the complex relationships that exist between global commitments, national processes, and local community engagement as it relates to educational practices. I wanted to further understand whether community-based groups can bridge the gap between policy and practice. After data collection was done for my masters' thesis in 2015, I travelled to Benin to visit colleagues, and it was during this trip that I was introduced to the work of MAs in Benin and how they function collaboratively to address gender inequalities. This introduction to the work of these local women's groups piqued my interest in further understanding the role of women's mobilization and its impact on women's empowerment.

Research questions:

To address the objectives of this study, my research project was guided by four specific research questions:

1. How do MAs in Benin mobilize to enhance the prospects of gender equality in (a) education and (b) community life?
2. How do the lived experiences of members of the MA influence their activities for girls' education?
3. What are the strategies MAs select to navigate gender inequalities embedded in community life?
4. Has the participation of MAs in school activities had an impact on their members' empowerment in other realms of their lives?

Organization of the Thesis

The study is divided into nine chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two delves into the existing literature on themes related to women's associations, such as the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment through the rise of gender mainstreaming. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first provides a global overview of the current debates around gender equality in development praxis and then narrows the debates to the African context. This is followed by conceptualizing the notion of empowerment and outlining the various definitions that exist in the scholarly literature. The second part focuses on the rise of CSOs and their approach to mainstreaming gender equality, with a focus on enhancing community participation. Chapter Three presents my theoretical lens made up of three approaches: critical feminist theory, intersectionality, and the social-ecological model and how they form my analytical framework.

In Chapter Four, I describe the Beninese context. I outline the current status of women in the country, a brief history of the evolution of education in Benin (during pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times) and the gender disparities that exist in the education system. Following a presentation of the current situation for girls' education in Benin, I introduce MAs in Benin and their work in promoting girls' education, and outline

the two-case-study context. Chapter Five explains the study's research design and methodology, which entailed participant observation, semi-structured individual interviews, extensive fieldnotes, and digital storytelling. It also included ethics considerations, data analysis methods, and my positionality. Chapter Six and Seven provide the results of data collection related to the MAs (Nokou and Sokossa respectively) and how their efforts have contributed to their empowerment in wider community. The chapters begin with the village and school context, focusing on the overall social context, the administrative structures, and the leading institutions in each case study. This provides the context for understanding the structures in place that govern both covertly and overtly the efforts of each MA. Chapter Nine discusses key lessons learned on how the activities of the MAs have led to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment, all of which have enhanced their individual empowerment and served as a basis of their collective empowerment. This chapter outlines how members of the MA have built an alliance within the community, and how they use their alliance to make gradual changes in harmful gender norms. Chapter 10 provides my final thoughts and concludes my dissertation by underscoring the implications of the findings for gender and development researchers, CSOs, and international development actors that work with women's associations.

Chapter Two: Gender Equality and Empowerment in Development Praxis

Over the past several decades, global education commitments have shaped the efforts and investments made in the education sector by governments, donors, and other international partners, leading to tremendous improvements in access to education. Around the world, there are more schools, more trained teachers, more textbooks, more toilets, and more girls and boys in school than ever before (UNESCO, 2020). Yet many barriers remain for the millions of children that still seek to get into school and, for those in school, to learn. As this new era of global commitment to development and to education begins, the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education 2030 Framework for Action provide both a more ambitious vision and a more contemporary focus for the efforts of the global community. This new vision, with an emphasis on enhancing quality education, has given rise to various approaches to gender equality. This literature review provides a brief overview of the scholarship on gender equality and development praxis, the rise of gender mainstreaming as a development approach, the role of CSOs in applying gender mainstreaming, the impact of gender mainstreaming on empowerment, and the role of women's associations in sub-Saharan Africa.

Part One: Global Overview of Gender Equality and Development Praxis

2.1 Gender Equality in Development: A brief review of scholarship

The advent of feminist movements around the world which, among their other purposes, have sought to redress inequalities experienced by women based on their gender, has led to an increase in scholarship that theorizes gender relations and highlights women's struggle against gender-based oppression. Throughout the world, women have been treated unequally and less value has traditionally been placed on their lives than on those of men. Global feminist analyses of the subordination,

discrimination against, and marginalization of women have shed light on how systemic societal structures institutionalize male physical, social, and economic power over women (Smithes, 2013). For example, women have often been denied access to public services and activities (education, commerce, politics) because societal norms and patriarchal structures have positioned them as solely responsible for the domestic sphere of family (mothering, homemaking, caring, nursing) (Abramovitz, 2017). Within the household, women and girls face discrimination in the sharing of resources – such as food and medical treatment – and this often leads to higher rates of malnutrition and mortality indicators for women (Haddad, Hoddinott, & Alderman, 1997; World Health Organization [WHO], 2009). In the labour market, unequal pay and occupational exclusion or segregation into low-skilled jobs and poorly paid work have restricted women's earnings in comparison to those of men of similar education levels (Gerecke, 2013). In the wider arena, women's lack of representation and voice in decision-making bodies in community forums and state institutions has contributed to the perpetuation of gender discrimination in public services, such as education and health care, and through legal statutes and traditional *mores*.

The systematic subordination of women by both overarching and localized structures has pushed women's groups around the world to mobilize and, among other initiatives, to lobby government bodies, development agencies, and civil society groups to ensure that women's needs and interests are not overlooked or made marginal in the development of economic and social policy (Unterhalter, 2010). As a result of their consistent efforts, the notion of gender mainstreaming, with its promise of gender equality, empowerment, and transformation, has emerged as a central pillar for development planning (Parpart, 2014; Moser, 1993). Gender mainstreaming is a strategy for institutionalizing gender concerns within development organizations and their development projects. The term "gender mainstreaming" is concerned with changes to mainstream policies and resource allocations to achieve gender equality (Tiessen, 2005). Rao and Kelleher (2005) state that "gender mainstreaming is grounded in feminist theoretical frameworks, and its appeal to […] gender activists [is] its promise of transformation" (p. 59). Gender mainstreaming has been a topic of much debate in development discourse since the United Nations (UN) Conference on Women took

place in Beijing in 1995, in which the document *The Beijing Platform for Action* was created to address and support the goal of mainstreaming gender equality (Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Tiessen 2007). This document encourages "governments [to] enact legislation for the purpose of promoting equality between women and men [and] urges that gender analysis first be carried out and the effects of all programs and projects be examined for their potential impact on [them]" (Tiessen, 2007, p.13). Indeed, a gender mainstreaming approach has become part of the core lexicon of development praxis. However, the term itself is highly contested, with various definitions emerging over time. An often-quoted definition, adopted by the Economic and Social Council of the UN, of gender mainstreaming is:

> the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (UN, 1997, p. 28, cited in Unterhalter, 2010).

However, a transformative gender mainstreaming approach goes beyond the targeting of women as victims of poverty, to include them as active members and empowered individuals in their communities (Tiessen and Tuckey, 2015). As such, gender mainstreaming involves both the integration of women into existing systems as active participants, and changes to the existing systems to reduce gender inequalities stemming from women's disadvantaged position in society. Gender mainstreaming has been adopted by development agencies to address the root causes of gender inequality. Although many donor organizations, UN agencies, and NGOs have adopted the language of gender mainstreaming, much of the programming has focused on

integrating women into existing systems rather than making transformative changes to the systems that are inherently biased towards women. This literature review will examine the discourse on gender mainstreaming in development as it relates to approaches to education and women's organizations.

2.1.1 Towards achieving gender equality in education

Girls, boys, women and men are deeply affected by entrenched gender roles that shape expectations of them in all spheres of society (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). Nowhere is this more evident than in the education sector throughout the Global South, which is characterized by extensive gender inequalities (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007). Tremendous progress has been made since 2000 to boost girls' enrolment in primary school; however, 131 million girls worldwide remain out of school and continue to face barriers to education at multiple levels (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). These barriers include school-related gender-based violence, early/forced marriage, teenage pregnancy, the opportunity cost of female labour, distance to school, school infrastructure, and the widespread perception that girls' education is of little value (Colclough et al., 2000; Musindarwezo, 2018; Parkes, 2012). Although overcoming barriers of access is necessary for achieving gender equality in education, it is not sufficient in and of itself to ensure gender equality through education. Without the implementation of systematic and sustainable solutions that ensure gender equality strategies are integrated in all educational domains (classroom, pedagogy, infrastructure, community, policy), education will remain an instrument that reproduces inequalities, rather than engendering equality. In other words, although larger numbers of children will enter school, many of them will quickly drop out again, and of those who stay, only some will learn in ways that will help them thrive (Global Partnership for Education, 2019).

2.1.2 Global frameworks on gender equality and education

Over the past several decades, there has been growing global concern about the lack of rapid progress in girls' participation in formal education. A large body of scholarly literature has addressed gender inequality in the developed world, and suggestions for

reducing the gender gap are well documented (Asimengo-Boahene, 2006). In response to the endemic gender inequalities that persist in education, international organizations such as the UN and other development partners have initiated and campaigned for a number of education programmes and have promoted girls and women's participation in education (UNICEF, 2016).

The current global agenda marks a new era with a strong consensus on the importance of gender equality, and education as an important vehicle for advancing gender equality. At the 1990 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, world leaders reaffirmed the right of all children to basic education and committed themselves to undertaking the necessary steps to achieve the goals of EFA. The initiative encouraged all leaders to strive toward primary education for every child and a massive reduction of adult illiteracy by the year 2000. The EFA Framework for Action, reiterated in Dakar, Senegal (2000) states that "gender-based discrimination remains one of the most intractable constraints to realizing the right to education. Without overcoming this obstacle, Education for All cannot be achieved" (Dakar, 2000). The strong connection between gender equality and education was elaborated in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), where education was identified as one of twelve critical areas of concern. Although the global landscape has changed since 1990, gender issues remain a key component of the global agenda. In 2002 we witnessed the promulgation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), of which goal 2 and goal 3 asserted the achievement of universal primary education and progress towards gender equality and empowerment respectively by the year 2015 (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2000). As a result of these global commitments, most countries adopted national strategies for mainstreaming gender in all development initiatives (Tiessen, 2005).

Global reports published at the end of the MDGs implementation cycle in 2015 revealed that generally much had been accomplished in the goals related to education and gender (UNESCO, 2015a). Net primary-school enrolment in developing regions reached 91% in 2015, up from 83% in 2000, and the literacy rate among youth aged 15 to 24 had improved globally from 83% in 1990 to 89% in 2010 (UN, 2015). The number

of out-of-school children of primary-school age worldwide had fallen by almost half, and in most countries considerable progress towards achieving gender parity, or near-parity, at primary and even secondary school levels had been achieved in 2013. Nevertheless, women represented an estimated two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults (UNESCO, 2014), and there were still marked gender inequalities in transitions to secondary education (UNESCO, 2014).

In 2015, we entered a new era of global commitment to development and to education with the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education 2030 Framework for Action. These commitments provide both a more ambitious vision and a more contemporary focus for the efforts of the global community. This new vision, with an emphasis on enhancing quality education, recognizes the significant role education plays in–among many other laudable objectives–tackling harmful gender norms, gender stereotypes, and unequal power relationships. In an attempt to address the issue of quality education and enhance gender equality through education, in 2015 came the launch of the World Education Forum in Incheon, Korea, where representatives issued a declaration reaffirming the vision of the framework for action. The Incheon declaration articulates a continued vision of achieving inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). This vision explicitly recognizes the importance of "gender equality in achieving the right to education for all" (UNESCO, 2015). The 2030 SDGs confirm and amplify the strong connection between gender equality and education; SDG Target 4.5 specifically calls for the elimination of gender disparities in education and equal access for all.

The broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the centrality and mutual dependency of education and gender equality and demonstrates the vision of an education that transforms the lives of individuals, communities and societies, leaving no one behind (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). As a result of the current global agenda, supported by numerous international development commitments, gender equality has become a prominent area of research development and has led development agencies to implement gender-mainstreaming approaches that facilitate gender equality in and through education. The three dominant approaches to gender mainstreaming are gender-sensitive programming, gender-responsive

programming, and gender-transformative programming. In fact, gender-sensitive, gender-responsive, and gender-transformative approaches are often conflated, confused, and co-opted to signify progress without a deeper understanding of their conceptual underpinnings. A concern for critical feminist scholars with regards to girls' education is that current policies, practices, and research use these terms interchangeably – thereby limiting our understanding of larger structural or systemic facets of gender injustice (Epstein & Morrell, 2012). The next section will outline each term's approach to gender equality and education.

2.1.3 Unpacking Central Gender Mainstreaming Approaches to Education

Gender-Sensitive Programming

According to the Interagency Gender Working Group (IGWG), a "gender-sensitive" approach identifies and acknowledges the existing gender differences between women and men, but works around them to achieve project objectives. In other words, a gender-sensitive approach accommodates gender inequalities by implementing projects that do not target these inequalities. These projects tend to address practical gender needs, such as immediate necessities (water, shelter, food, income and health care). The focus of these projects is to respond to inadequate living conditions within society, without focusing on how the conditions are exacerbated by gender. Similarly, the World Health Organization's Gender Mainstreaming Manual frames a gender-sensitive approach as one that considers gender norms, roles, and relations, but does not address the inequalities generated as a result of the unequal norms, roles, and relations. As such, a program objective that includes gender, but fails to implement activities that integrate gender issues, would be framed as gender-sensitive. For example, an HIV programme that explicitly acknowledges that women may not have the status, rights and decision-making power to practice safer sex and adopt safer infant-feeding practices, but fails to address this issue, is framed as a gender-sensitive project (WHO, 2009). Therefore, gender-sensitive approaches are often aware of gender inequalities, but do not set out targeted outcomes or indicators to change the inequalities (WHO, 2009). Although this approach may result in short-term

benefits and realization of outcomes, it does not attempt to reduce gender inequality or address the gender systems that contribute to the differences and inequalities.

In education contexts, a gender-sensitive approach focuses on enhancing enrolment and ensuring gender parity in the classroom. Examples of gender-sensitive indicators in education programming include ratio of girls to boys in primary school, number of school-feeding programmes, and percentage of girls under the age of fifteen who become pregnant. This perspective governs most national and international gender and education outcomes, as they measure gender parity in primary school enrolment, retention, and completion rates (Aikman et al., 2011).

Gender-Responsive Programming

Gender-responsive programming refers to programmes where gender norms, roles and inequalities have been considered, and measures taken to actively reduce them. As such, the starting point for a gender-responsive program is being gender-sensitive. However, gender-responsive programmes go beyond raising sensitivity and awareness; they also implement activities that address the identified gender inequalities. A gender-responsive program begins with a detailed analysis that identifies the key gender inequalities and then sets out targeted interventions to address these inequalities. According to the Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans, developed by the GPE and the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) with support from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), for a policy or programme to be framed as gender-responsive, it must: a) consider the gender norms, roles, and relations that maintain inequalities, and b) actively take measures to reduce the harmful effects of gender norms, roles and relations (GPE and UNGEI, 2017). Similarly, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) defines gender-responsive programming as taking action to correct gender bias and discrimination so as to ensure gender equality (2005).

Accordingly, FAWE developed the Teacher's Handbook on Gender Responsive Pedagogy (2005) as a practical guide for making teaching and learning processes gender-responsive. Within this guide, a gender-responsive approach is a holistic approach that meets the following criteria: (a) gender sensitization among parents,

community leaders, and teachers to support girls' education; (b) training for teachers on the skills to make teaching and learning responsive to the specific needs of girls and boys; and (c) adequate infrastructure to meet the specific needs of girls and boys, such as clean water and sanitation to enhance menstruation management (FAWE, 2005). A gender-responsive school is supported by gender-responsive pedagogy, which includes removing stereotypes in curricula, textbooks, teacher training, and classroom practices (GPE, 2017).

Gender-Transformative Programming

Gender-transformative programming has gained increasing attention in development discourse and practice as academics, practitioners, donors, and international institutions have acknowledged that without confronting issues of power and social justice— that is, transforming the political, social and structural dimensions of gender inequality—gender injustice will continue to exacerbate poverty and hinder social development (Kabeer and Natali, 2013; Cavalcanti and Tavares, 2016). In a report produced by the NGO, CARE, gender-transformative approaches are described as a tactic "to move beyond individual self-improvement among women and toward transforming the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities" (Hillenbrand et al., 2014, p. 5). This method involves the participation of groups to critically examine, challenge, and question gender norms and power relations that influence existing gender gaps and strive towards a more inclusive world (Hillenbrand et al., 2014; Natale, 2017).

Gender-transformative approaches seek to reshape gender relations so as to be more gender-equitable, largely through interventions aiming to counter the impact of harmful gender norms for both women and men. In other words, gender-transformative approaches seek to challenge internalized belief systems, closely held gender identities, entrenched institutionalized structures and gender roles. Similarly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Association of Canada offers a definition that states that "gender transformative programming actively seeks to challenge existing and longstanding gender norms, promote positive and transformative social and political change for women and girls, and seeks to address power inequities between genders"

(Natale, 2017, p. 1). This definition emphasizes that gender- transformative programming attempts to be fully transformational at the structural, political, and economic levels and is an interactive, long-term process that allows for the learning of new behaviours through practiced and repeated action.

Enhancing gender equality through education requires approaches that tackle the root causes of gender inequality and reshape unequal power relations. There is currently limited research that defines the components of gender-transformative education and how this approach can be applied to transform social norms and classroom practices to promote quality education. In fact, the definitions used by practitioners, academics, donors, and international organizations for gender-transformative education vary significantly. Currently, the existing limited research defines gender-transformative education as an approach that enhances quality education through challenging power relations, changing gender norms, and raising critical consciousness, through engagement at multiple levels (individual, community, structural). Plan International (2018) has framed a gender-transformative approach as one that removes barriers that prevent girls from achieving their full potential and exercising their rights. This approach aims to break the barriers that prevent men and boys from embracing gender equality, exercising their rights and being champions of change. Plan International's gender-transformative approach focuses on three dimensions of change: (1) altering harmful social norms, attitudes and behaviours to promote gender equality and to enable children and youth to grow up healthy, safe and happy; (2) using social and economic resources to support equally girls, boys, young women and young men to develop their full potentials; and (3) applying international and national laws, policies, budgets, investments and services to tackle gender inequality and exclusion in very tangible ways (Plan International, 2018). The six essential elements required to achieve these three dimensions of change are: gender norms, women's agency, engaging men and boys, diversity, social position, and an enabling environment.

A gender-transformative approach to gender mainstreaming acknowledges that gender equality is not solely the responsibility of policymakers and practitioners; instead, it is the prerogative of all members of society, community organizations and

associations, who themselves challenge and reframe established ways of doing and being. This approach to gender equality in education is the one that will achieve quality education and gender justice. By understanding that achieving gender equality is the responsibility of all members of society, the approach will not view the school in isolation, but rather incorporates all members of society to meet its goals. In other words, for transformative approaches to address deep-rooted structures of inequality, collaborative efforts are required in all levels of society to engage individuals, communities, NGOs, and policymakers (Unterhalter, 2011). For gender mainstreaming to be effective and transformative in development, it is essential that objectives move beyond including women in development approaches, and towards understanding how women are working in solidarity and collaboration with men, with community organizations, and with development partners to reformulate established gender relations. However, there is insight to be gained from the empirical evidence required to demonstrate how a transformative approach to gender equity in education can be implemented, how community-based women's groups have become model examples of working with other stakeholders to achieve gender-equality goals, and how these grassroots models can ensure strategies move beyond "parity." To address research question 4, I explore to what extent MAs leverage gender-transformative approaches to remove barriers to education for girls.

Challenges of Gender Mainstreaming

There is no doubt that tremendous gains in education have been made since 1990. Access and participation have significantly increased, for girls and boys, through the provision of more classrooms, textbooks and toilets, and the recruitment of more, and better trained, teachers. Although there are many achievements to celebrate, these achievements do not come without their own limitations and challenges. Academics, practitioners, donors, and policymakers have made great strides to identify and define the necessary conditions to address gender inequalities; however, inequalities persist. Presently, the achievement of gender sensitization and responsiveness has been framed as using more gender language or promoting participation by calling on girls before calling on boys, yet this understanding does not enhance the rights,

empowerment, and agency of girls, nor does it necessarily involve the experiences and voices of the learner (Aikman et al., 2011). Similarly, research done by FAWE and UNGEI has acknowledged that training teachers in gender-responsive pedagogy has not led to transformative changes in classroom practices (2016). One reason for this is that teachers only receive a one-day or three-day training on gender-responsive pedagogy, which allows time to learn about gender-responsive tools and languages, but is not sufficient to transform traditional values and norms embedded in identities and institutions and reproduced in the classroom. As such, although girl-friendly practices are learned and used in the classroom, such as girls being called on to participate, they are also being consistently chosen to clean the teacher's desk, to bring the teacher food, to get classroom supplies, to refill the water basin, and to sweep the classroom floors – reproducing a culture of domesticity (Rouhani, 2015).

This finding aligns with research done by UNICEF (2016) on the challenges in changing teacher practices. For example, in Karamoja region, Uganda, the UNICEF Gender Socialization in Schools programme trained over 1,000 primary school teachers to enhance their knowledge, attitudes and practices related to gender-equality promotion and conflict resolution. The initial training was for two days and was followed by two refresher training sessions. A subset of teachers received reinforcing text messages reminding them of examples of good practice. However, although the programme improved teachers' knowledge and attitudes on gender equality, classroom practices did not become more gender-responsive (American Institutes for Research and UNICEF, 2016; El-Bushra and Smith, 2016).

Although there is heightened awareness that gender equality must be taught and implemented in the classroom and school environment, current gender-responsive practices and training programs are not adequate to transform unequal gender norms and power relations. Concurrently, there is a growing body of literature from critical feminist scholars (Chisamya et al., 2012; Leach & Humphreys, 2007; Stromquist, 2015) that questions the potential of formal education to foster gender equality, as they recognize that a school is unlikely to independently challenge gender norms and constructions, and instead is more likely to reproduce and strengthen them.

Striving for Transformation: Practical and Strategic Gender Needs

The process of and potential for gender transformation through gender mainstreaming approaches relies on the ways in which donors, practitioners, and international organizations interact with both practical and strategic gender needs. An underlying rationale for gender mainstreaming concerns the fact that men and women not only play different roles in society, with distinct levels of control over resources, but that they therefore often have different interests (Molyneux, 1985). Practical gender interests stem from women's positioning within the gender division of labour (Molyneux 1985). Alternatively, strategic gender interests arise from women's subordinate position in society (Molyneux 1985). Caroline Moser extends Molyneux's concept of practical and strategic gender interests by identifying practical and strategic gender *needs*. When identifying needs, Moser (1993) argues that it is useful to differentiate between strategic gender needs and practical gender needs because often in the process of gender mainstreaming these two needs are confused, and prevent the potential for transformative change. She identifies them as follows:

> Practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society [...] Practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provision, health care, and employment (1993, p. 40).

> Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordination to men in their society. Strategic gender needs vary according to particular contexts. They relate to gender division of labour, power and control and may include such issues as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages, and women's control over their bodies. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position (1993, p. 39).

The fundamental difference is that if practical gender needs are met, the lives of women (or men) would be improved without challenging women's subordinate position in society, whereas if strategic interests are met, the existing relationship of unequal power between men and women would be transformed (March et al., 1999). Practical gender needs are related to women's social roles (e.g., as a wife or as a mother) and providing for these needs improves living conditions and overall well-being. In contrast, strategic gender needs are related to women's social position (e.g., women's subordination to men) and, by addressing these needs, women can enhance their social position through challenges to the existing division of gender roles. Women are more likely to recognize their practical gender needs, while identifying strategic gender needs can be more difficult. Women detect practical gender needs more easily because these are usually related to inadequate living conditions or situations.

Strategic gender needs necessitate structural transformation, which may provoke negative reactions from men whose power and privileges could be threatened by structural change. Thus, it is more difficult for women to recognize or accept having strategic gender needs, particularly if a change could impose high costs that would fail to improve their current situation (Molyneux, 1985; Young, 1988). As such, many development initiatives are planned to meet practical gender needs since this method tends to be safer socially and politically.

The concepts of practical gender needs and strategic gender needs can be analytical tools for recognizing and considering the important difference between addressing immediate situations and more systemic change. Kabeer (1994) uses the notion of "transformatory potential" as a bridge between practical gender needs and strategic gender needs, arguing that it is not so much which needs are addressed that makes a development planning strategy more or less likely to bring about a change in gender relations, but rather "the way in which needs are identified, prioritized and satisfied" (Kabeer, 1994, p. 305). The emphasis is therefore on process.

In theory, practical and strategic gender needs are differentiated. However, in practice, the distinction between the two is blurred. It is problematic to isolate practical gender needs because struggles of daily survival and material needs can develop into strategic gender needs. Moser (1993) suggests the key to addressing gender

subordination is to "utilize practical gender needs as the basis on which to build a secure support base, and a means through which more strategic needs may be reached" (p. 77). There are instances where women's struggles, although not directly confronting gender inequality, meet practical needs and result in achieving strategic needs. The process of bridging practical gender needs with strategic needs has the potential to change gender relations and contribute to empowerment. Although some authors argue that identifying and addressing strategic gender needs will enhance empowerment, ultimately meeting both practical and strategic gender needs is the route to empowerment.

2.2 Conceptualizing Empowerment

The term empowerment is not a new notion (Sinha et al., 2012). It is a widely used term, whose definition is elusive (Hennink et al., 2012). Broadly speaking, empowerment refers to “an experience of power: the power of being changed, the power to change oneself, the power to have an impact on others, or the power gained from serving/influencing others” (McClelland, 1975 in Monkman et al., 2007, p. 453). It has been related to terms like agency, autonomy, bargaining power, self-direction, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-strength, self-determination, confidence, liberation, life of dignity in accordance with one’s values, capacity to fight for one’s rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening, capability participation, control, own choice, and mobilization (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan, 2002; Narayan, 2005a). For Karl (1995), “empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity-building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action” (p.14) – the emphasis being on taking action and transforming structures of power. According to Friedman (1992), empowerment entails the dismantling of oppressive social constructions and “an increased sense of self-confidence […] which comes, in part, from conquering a fear of acting outside culturally sanctioned (patriarchal) or state-imposed norms” (p.34). Petesch and others have defined empowerment as ‘increasing both the capacity of individuals or groups to make purposeful choices and their capacity to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Petesch, Smulovitz, & Walton, 2005, p. 40). This definition implies that

empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of poor and disadvantaged groups to make choices and to be able to use them to realize desired outcomes. It is about the extent to which some categories of people are able to control their own destinies, even when the people with whom they interact oppose their interests (Mason, 2005). Furthermore, Batliwala (1994) defines empowerment as the process by which the powerless gain great control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both the control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). She argues that empowerment is the process that enables poorer and subordinate groups to gain control over resources and ideology which they did not possess prior to empowerment.

Moreover, achieving empowerment is intimately linked to addressing the causes of disempowerment and tackling disadvantages caused by the way in which power relations shape choices, opportunities and wellbeing. As the word “empowerment” affirms, power is central to the concept of empowerment. Empowerment is essentially about shifting the power balance to boost the influence of those groups relatively powerless in relation to others who have access to and use of formal and informal power (Oakley, 2001; Staudt, 2002). Rowland’s (1997) typology of power is of great analytical and practical use. She categorizes four types of power relations to stress the difference between power over (ability to influence and coerce) and power to (organise and change existing hierarchies), power with (power from collective action) and power within (power from individual consciousness). To put it briefly, empowerment based on a view of power as *‘power over’* emphasizes the need for participation in existing economic and political structures but does not involve changes to those structures. When power is framed this way, it is often conceptualized as a finite supply, the only way to gain being to take it from the more powerful (e.g. for women to be empowered, men must have less power). *‘Power with’* stresses the way in which gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it, as occurs with power over. This raises the distinction between personal and collective empowerment. A focus on *‘power to’* has led to an emphasis on access to decision making, whereas an emphasis on *‘power within’* has led to a focus around building self-esteem. The process

of acquiring such power must start with the individual and requires a change in their own perceptions about their rights, capacities and potential.

These definitions contain the idea that empowerment is about making changes, changing the perception of the community, causing personal transformation, and improving individual capabilities to be able to formulate strategic choices for their lives (Malhotra et al., 2002). Applying this idea to women's empowerment means that women should be able to define and formulate self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices (Kabeer, 2001; Malhotra et al., 2002). Kabeer (2001) defines empowerment as the "expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (p. 19). Her work emphasizes that empowerment entails a process of change by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. Kabeer (2001) argues that "choice necessarily implies alternatives", the ability to have chosen otherwise (p. 19). Examples include choice of livelihood, where to live, whether to marry, whom to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, whether to use contraceptives, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, choice of friends, etc. In order to be able to make choices, women need to move from the state of disempowerment by expanding their ability. I adopt and employ Kabeer's (2001) description of empowerment in this study.

2.2.1 Essential elements of empowerment

Although the concept of empowerment has various definitions, some unique definitional elements can be elaborated. The first essential element is that empowerment is a process and not a one-time action (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 2001; Chen, 1992; Monkman et al., 2007). Therefore, unique to this concept is the idea that it is not a static state, nor easily measurable (Jejeebhoy, 2000).

The second element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency—the notion that women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (Sen, 1993; Mehra, 1997). Sen (1985) defines agency as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (p. 206). Put simply, an agent is "someone

who acts and brings about change" (Sen, 1999, p.19). A further and occasionally explicit assumption in Sen's approach is that agency will be socially beneficial, that agents advance goals people value, and have reason to value. A number of other authors articulate similar concepts, although terms vary. Narayaran-Parker (2005) explains that "among the various concepts and terms we encountered in the literature on empowerment, 'agency' probably comes closest to capturing what the majority of writers are referring to" (p. 72). Similarly, Kabeer describes agency as related to the ability of an individual to set his/her own goals and act upon them. This element is added because, hypothetically, there could be an improvement in indicators of gender equality, but unless the intervening processes involved women as agents of that change rather than merely as its recipients, it would not be considered empowerment.

2.2.2 Mainstreaming empowerment in development praxis

Empowerment has become a central focus of development efforts over the past two decades. There are many ways in which empowerment is defined and conceptualized across development efforts. This plethora of meanings has allowed for a multitude of development programs to be labeled as empowerment programs, but has also led to confusion as to what is meant by "empowerment" and what empowerment programs are attempting to accomplish.

The emphasis on empowerment as a development strategy came about during the implementation of the "Gender and Development" framework, which recognized that women are deeply affected by patriarchal structures and power relations at the national, community, and household levels (Connelly, 2000). During this time, the term "women's empowerment" began to enter the discourse of mainstream development agencies (i.e., UNDP, World Bank) as they sought to mitigate some of the harsh effects of neo-liberal policies (Bergeron, 2003; Elson, 2012; Parpart, 2014). The emphasis on "empowerment" was an attempt to move away from top-down frameworks of imposed development models. In this shift, the concept of empowerment placed a new emphasis on local people, local contexts, and local forms of power and change. The intention of empowerment was to focus on "people as active subjects of their own history" (Friedman, 1992, p. vi) and as participatory active forces in their own development.

At the same time, feminist scholars, particularly those from the Global South[1], promoted empowerment as a new approach that allowed women to challenge patriarchal, political, and economic inequalities (Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 1994; Parpart, Rai & Staudt, 2003). An early vision of empowerment offered by feminists of the South (e.g. Srilatha Batliwala, Naila Kabeer) was rooted in a commitment to collective action in response to specific problems and in respect of local contexts. The grassroots nature of early empowerment programs was in answer to a perceived failure of top-down development initiatives to lessen poverty and other gender inequalities for women. Empowerment was envisioned as a weapon for the weak, best wielded through participatory activities such as women's organizations, group protests, marches and participation and access to community meetings and decisions, to address issues of gender equality at the local level (Kabeer, 1994; Momsen, 2004; Parpart et al., 2002). However, some scholars from the Global South, such as Batliwala (2007) argue that empowerment has lost its transformative edge by being altered from a concept evolved to address specific development challenges into a universally applicable panacea. In this way, empowerment has been robbed of its original meaning and strategic value.

The mainstreaming of empowerment projects means that many are no longer based in grassroots participatory activities, but are part of larger, top-down development initiatives. The relatively recent adoption of the term empowerment by mainstream development agencies has, in some cases, changed the goal of empowerment programs from fostering social transformation to improving productivity within the status quo. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and official development agencies (ODAs) have increasingly endeavoured to implement projects that empower local people. Yet as Parmar (2003) has argued, people cannot be empowered from the

[1] Like Mohanty (2003) and many others, I will use the terms "Global North" and "Global South" to distinguish between affluent, privileged nations and communities and economically and politically marginalized nations and communities. Although these terms are meant to loosely distinguish the northern and southern hemispheres, it is noteworthy that affluent and marginal communities do not line up neatly with this geographical frame (take, for example, many Aboriginal communities in Canada, where living conditions fit more neatly into what I call the Global South, despite their geographic position in the northern hemisphere). Yet, as a metaphorical (if not geographical) distinction between the "haves" and the "have-nots," these categories continue to hold a certain political value (Mohanty 2003). I do not intend for these designations to homogenize the huge differences that exist within communities, nations, and geographical regions, nor do I mean for them to be understood as fixed or stable.

outside; they can only empower themselves. Although INGOs and ODAs can facilitate empowerment by providing resources and assisting in removing barriers and creating conditions that will facilitate empowerment, it can only be actualized from within. Similarly, Castellani (2014) argues that specific actions do not lead to empowerment; rather empowerment is a result of the participatory process of taking action: mobilization, decision-making, and advocacy.

Likewise, the general use of empowerment has led to the creation of a linkage between empowerment, inclusion and voice that "papers over the complexities of empowerment, both as a process and a goal" (Parpart et al., 2002, p. 3). For example, income generation or micro-loan programs support traditional development goals of reducing poverty, yet do not necessarily empower women. Income generation alone, without full autonomy to spend the income and control resources, does not equal empowerment. Women may become income earners, yet not increase their power in decision making, social relations or in freedom of movement (Moghadam, 2007; Narayan, 2005). Further, even if income generation does result in economic empowerment for women, it cannot be assumed that empowerment in other dimensions (i.e. political or social) of women's lives will follow. Women can be empowered in some areas, but not in others (Malhotra, 2003). As such, empowerment is not about self-esteem or other individual characteristics, it is about developing capabilities that enable engagement in social change processes. Development approaches that do not provide opportunities to challenge inequitable social relations (e.g. gender relations) remain a tool of social reproduction, not of social change (Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1997).

2.2.3 Frameworks for measuring empowerment

There are different proposed frameworks by scholars and practitioners for measuring women's empowerment. Rocha (1997) proposes a consolidated framework for identifying the types of empowerment; Kabeer (2001) proposes a framework for measuring women's empowerment; and the World Bank provides an empowerment sourcebook (Narayan, 2005) that proposes different frameworks for measuring women's empowerment at different levels. This research theoretically places itself within the framework of empowerment by Kabeer (2001) and draws from the framework of

Malhotra and Schuler (2005) and Rocha (1997), which will be outlined below, to better understand the position of women in Benin.

As it has been noted earlier, Kabeer's (2001) concept of empowerment refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. In order to make changes in the ability to exercise choices, for Kabeer (2001) empowerment can be thought of in terms of resources, agency and achievements. According to Kabeer (2001), resources can be material, social or human; resources form the conditions under which choices are made. Agency is the heart of the process by which choices are made; it is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Resources and agency together constitute what Sen (1985) refers to as capabilities, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing' (Kabeer, 2001; Sen, 1985). Achievements are the outcomes of choices.

Similarly, Malhotra and Schuler (2005) provide a framework of dimensions and indicators of women's empowerment in household, community and broader arena. Most of the indicators of empowerment by Malhotra and Schuler (2005) refer to women's ability to make strategic decisions that affect their well-being and their families. The dimensions of empowerment in Malhotra and Schuler's (2005) framework are economic, social and cultural, legal, political and psychological. Economic empowerment includes women's control of finances, access to credit, contribution to family support, and increased household ownership of properties and assets. Social and cultural empowerment includes freedom of movement, lack of discrimination against daughters, commitment to educating daughters, participation in domestic decision making, control over sexual relations, ability to make childbearing decisions, use contraception, control over spouse selection and marriage timing, and freedom from violence. Legal empowerment includes the knowledge of legal rights and mechanisms and familial support for exercising rights. Political empowerment includes knowledge of the political system and means of access to it, familial support political engagement and ability to exercise the right to vote. Psychological empowerment includes women's increased self-esteem, self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Kato and Kratzer, 2013).

Moreover, Rocha (1997) identifies five main types of empowerment — atomistic individual, embedded individual, mediated, socio-political, and political — each with its particular locus of intended change and its own goals, methods, and associated experience of power. Monkman et al. (2007) argue that empowerment approaches that focus primarily on the individual tend to leave the basis of powerlessness intact. Atomistic and embedded individual empowerment processes do not address the community level; as such, they are limited in their ability to stimulate social change. The table below outlines the types of empowerment envisioned by Rocha (1997):

Type of empowerment	Locus of change	Characteristics: goals, methods, and experiences of power
Atomistic individual	Individual	Personal satisfaction and coping ability are the goals, gained through methods focused on therapy, daily living skills, self-help. Being strengthened by support from a helping professional or agency, is the typical power experience.
Embedded individual	Individual	Similar to the atomistic individual model, but emphasis is on developing competence in negotiating one's surrounding environment. Power experiences include better understanding of mediating systems and meaningful participation.
Mediated	Individual and Collective	Goal is to provide the information and knowledge to support individual or collective decision-making and action; nature of the relationship between experts and clients/consumers determines the power experience. Two types — prevention or rights — assumes dependence or agency respectively.
Socio-Political	Individual and Collective	Transformative populism. Change through stages of collaborative grassroots political action to alter social, political, or economic relations. Involves raising critical awareness of people's relationship to structures of power and collective action upon these structures.
Political	Collective	Political action directed toward institutional change such as legislative change. Involves expanded access to group resources.

Figure 1: Types of Empowerment

Empowerment invariably implies the transformation of structures and institutions that reproduce inequalities and discrimination directed against vulnerable groups. A common thread that traverses the various definitions of “empowerment” is the notion that it is not a one-time action, nor an object to be given to people, but is rather a transformative process that involves the mobilization of people, the building of capacity, the resisting of norms, and the creation of enabling environments. Although this latter understanding of empowerment is synonymous with the idea of structural transformation, many of the empowerment projects of international NGOs, ODAs, and CSOs in development practice projects tend to focus exclusively on women (Razavi & Miller, 1995) and continue to support a liberal feminist approach that equates gender with women and girls. This focus overlooks questions about gender relations and masculinities and provides little attention to structural inequalities (African Development Bank, 2012; Davids & van Driel, 2009). Consequently, the current commonplace focus on women and girls in mainstream development agencies suggests that gender equality can be achieved by women and girls alone.

From this perspective, women and girls are represented as change agents working in isolation who do not need to cooperate and collaborate with men or reformulate established gender relations (Chant, 2012; Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Indeed, empowerment projects often put the onus on women to confront patriarchy and change their own lives. Kabeer (2001) critiques scholars’ assumptions that women are able to challenge the belief systems in which they were raised, analyze their own situation and develop their own strategies for change. Vavrus (2007) similarly argues that the rhetoric of empowerment constructs a notion of "a highly autonomous female subject upon whom much of the responsibility for national development falls" (p. 39). This presents another challenge: by regarding women and girls as “solutions” to gender inequalities, development programmes tend to tacitly assume that men and boys are “the problem” and thereby too often fail to address the deep-rooted structural foundations of prevailing power arrangements and gender inequality.

Part Two: Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Gender Equality

2.3 Role of Civil Society Organizations in Mainstreaming Gender

The past four decades have seen a drastic increase in the role and expectations of CSOs in generating progressive social change throughout the world. CSOs have evolved significantly to become well-established key players in the international development arena. In sub-Saharan Africa, they have used their evolving prominence to promote social, economic, and political development activities. The main reason for the emergence of CSOs was their location at the grass-roots level, their participatory nature, and their proximity to poor people (Cernea, 1988; Fowler, 1990; Kabeer et al. 2012). Similarly, with the rise of state corruption, donor agencies trusted CSOs, given that CSOs often hired donor country citizens as staff, and became experts at compliance with donor countries' procedural requirements (Panday, 2016). As the prominence of CSOs throughout the continent expanded, so did their number and diversity. The CSOs participating in sub-Saharan Africa's development are as broad and multi-dimensional as the development mission itself (Chaplowe & Engo-Tjega, 2007). CSOs represent diverse interests, such as gender equality, human rights, environmental protection, and humanitarian relief. The diverse actors included as CSOs are voluntary organizations, membership organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), microfinance organizations, labour unions, women's groups, faith-based organizations, and agriculture associations, to list a few (Dagher, 2017). These CSOs can be further divided into three categories: community-based organizations, national organizations, and international organizations, on the basis of their geographic coverage and the scope of their activities. Although CSOs are to focus on 'non-political' issues, in sub-Saharan Africa their mandate and capabilities have evolved within the political context of globalization (Bukenya & Hickey, 2014). This section will outline how CSOs have evolved in sub-Saharan Africa and the parallel tensions that emerged for local African women's groups.

2.3.1 The Metamorphosis Of Civil Society Organization In Sub-Saharan Africa

Whereas formal CSOs (such as NGOs) may be a relatively new phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa, organizing into associations based on common interest in one's community is not. Indeed, the mandates and capabilities of CSOs in sub-Saharan Africa have evolved through three historical processes – precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial (Appiagyei-Atua, 2005). This section will outline this metamorphosis and how the social and political changes during each stage have influenced the nature of CSOs.

Historically, organizing into common interest groups has been an important part of communal life in many African societies. Although current definitions associate CSOs with the emergence of the state (Bereketeab, 2009; Dagher, 2017; Eto, 2012), other forms of organizations and associations in African societies existed prior to the creation of the state. Indeed, prior to colonialism, African societies organized into two types of associations: voluntary associations based on interest-group, and ascriptive associations (Shaw & Chazan, 1982). Interest-group associations included women's associations, associations of chiefs, youth groups, literary societies, religious societies, self-help groups, rotating credit associations, and sports clubs (Bereketeab, 2009). Ascriptive associations, on the other hand, included ethnic associations, traditional political units, and kinship associations. The majority of associations in pre-colonial Africa were organized in rural areas and employed diverse means, in collaboration with traditional governing authorities, to promote various sociocultural interests (Obadare, 2014). It must be noted that associational life took on different forms in different countries: hometown associations in Nigeria (Osaghae, 2006), Harambee associations in Kenya (Orvis, 2001), and associations linked to traditional kingdoms in Uganda (Oloka-Onyango & Barya, 1997), all of which were networks through which social values were constituted and resources exchanged.

Although traditional associations in sub-Saharan Africa originally organized on the basis of interest group or primary ascriptions, the rise of urbanization–which accompanied colonial rule–prompted many African societies to create new forms of associations. As new urban centres emerged, people began to migrate to these new urban centres, and associations based on ascription were no longer possible. In fact,

many colonial states sought to transcend ethnic differences through the construction of a unified national identity (Howell & Pearce, 2002). As such, new associations were created to meet the various needs and demands of the new urban residents These new forms of organizing (such as labour unions, cooperative societies, professional bodies, welfare associations, and construction work parties) transcended the ascriptive character of precolonial African associations (Bukenya & Hickey, 2014).

In their endeavour to create a modern society, colonial powers began to compartmentalize the common space created in urban centers into three sub-spaces to represent the state, civil society, and the family (Akinrinade, 2004). This separation of a distinctly public and private sphere provided the foundation for modern civil society–that is an entity separate from the state and the family (Kew & Oshikoya, 2014). However, the transition to a distinct public sphere cannot be separated from the failures of the colonial state in various areas such as the economic, educational, and social welfare during this time (Akinrinade, 2004). The failure of the colonial state to provide the basic welfare and developmental needs for the masses of people led to the evolving role of civil society in sub-Saharan Africa–one that filled the gaps created by the state to provide public services to the people (education, micro credit facilities, scholarships). Therefore, modern civil society emerged during the colonial period as (a) urbanization leading to new forms of associations, (b) creating a distinct public and private sphere and (c) the state's failing to provide essential services to the people.

During the 1980s, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa were introduced to Structural Adjustment Programs[2] (SAP). At the core of SAP was a reduction in the role of the state in economic affairs and its replacement with private and/or other non-state actors (Nega & Schneider, 2014). Although SAP originally encouraged privatization of the industry, agriculture, and manufacturing, this policy package also extended to welfare services (education, health, housing, water supply) (Momoh and Adejumobi, 1999). For countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to the privatization programs, the

[2] SAP consists of loans provided by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to countries that experienced economic crises. As part of the loan packages, borrowing countries were required to implement certain policies (ex. privatization, open markets, improving governance).

amount of foreign aid[3] allocated for state programs was reduced, and this amount was redirected to the non-state sector (private sector institutions, NGOs[4]). During this time, international aid agencies (for example, USAID, DFID, NORAD, SIDA[5]) started to recognize the need for aid on humanitarian grounds; therefore, they started to develop aid programs in particular countries (Philips, 2013). It was at this point that NGOs were singled out by international aid agencies, foundations, and governments (looking to invest in Africa's development), as the favoured representatives of civil society in the drive to privatize the provision of social services. It must be noted that, during the time of SAP, understanding of civil society evolved to refer to organizations that have a presence in public life and that express the interests of their members. As such, NGOs were considered to represent all civil society and were chosen by international aid agencies as alternative deliverers of social services and welfare, thus providing a solution to the incapacities of the state. NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa utilized foreign aid to provide services to those disadvantaged by poverty, and those unreachable by the limited private sector (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

Although NGOs were only one of the many actors within the broader definition of CSOs, they were the most visible actors in sub-Saharan Africa. Throughout the 1990s, NGOs experienced an increase in direct funding; therefore, their numbers expanded throughout most African countries (Bukenya & Hickey, 2014). As the number of NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa expanded, so did their diversity. New opportunities emerged for NGOs to offer alternative visions of development, avenues of employment for professionals outside the state, and an institutional basis for reflection on practically addressing issues around poverty, welfare, and participation. As such, NGOs were split between those that engaged in service delivery and those that performed advocacy roles. The former engaged in the design and implementation of development projects

[3] In the 1920s, colonial powers began to give money to their colonies to build infrastructure, railways, and ports. After independence, many colonial powers continued to provide support and focused their foreign aid on economic development (See Phillips, 2013).

[4] It is important to distinguish NGOs from CSOs. The latter can be defined to include all non-state organizations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. The former is a subset of CSO involved in development cooperation.

[5] The acronyms stand for: United States Agency for International Development, Department for International Development (UK), Norwegian Agency for Development, and the Swedish International Development Agency.

while the purpose of the latter was to promote and defend specific causes (Nega & Schneider, 2014). One of the major issues with distinguishing NGOs (between service delivery and advocacy) was that those performing advocacy roles were viewed in opposition of the government; therefore, many NGOs felt the pressure to avoid advocacy activities and to focus on development and service delivery (Lister & Nyamugasira, 2003). In other words, the mandates of NGOs began to change to meet the needs of international donors (national governments, the World Bank, Northern NGOs) and the development agendas of their external funders.

2.3.2 Tensions Between Civil Society Organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa

The increased funding to NGOs was a result of the assumed characteristics of NGOs (a) being grassroots-based (closer to those most marginalized and able to promote participation of all) and (b) having a progressive development agenda (one that focuses on participation, gender, and empowerment) (Edwards, 2009). However, NGOs emerged as a result of the funding received from international aid agencies; therefore, had no social roots in society. As such, NGOs were critiqued for their focus on more broad and abstract issues (pushing forward the development agenda of external funders), rather than the real, local concerns of the local people (Bodewes, 2013). Second, many national NGOs were assumed to be closer to the most marginalized and to have the capacity to promote participation for all in their development approach. However, feminist scholars (Eto, 2012; Phillips, 2002) have criticized the development approach taken by NGOs (during the 1980s - 2000s) which framed civil society actors as a common entity that is socially equal. Although women were not formally excluded from participating in the decision-making processes of NGOs, gender inequalities among those who participated (women and men) framed how they participated. Eto (2012) argues that in mixed-sex activities of deliberation led by NGOs, for example, men tend to have more dominant roles than women. Therefore, participation within the group often masks the uneven gender relations between the sexes (p.104).

Moreover, although international donors recognized NGOs for promoting the participation of all in their development approach, NGOs failed to recognize the gendered nature of power dynamics–that is the ways in which notions of gender

(societal expectations of men and women) interact with how power is exercised–in participation. The discourse on participation in NGO activities and decision-making assumes communities to be homogenous, harmonious, and static entities (see Edwards, 2020). However, communities do not speak with a single voice. Communities in sub-Saharan Africa are heterogeneous, multi-layered, and governed by various hierarchies of power—determined to an extent by economic, ethnic, age, gender, caste, and other social factions that disagree about development goals and poverty reduction (Dunne, Akyeampong, & Humphreys, 2007).

Since different hierarchies of power exist within communities, the question should not be whether communities participate in the development approach of NGOs, but rather, who is participating—which community members are having their voices heard, which members are participating in decisions, and whose agenda is being advanced. Often it is the most visible, vocal, wealthy, articulate, and educated groups that dominate participation. Given these restrictions, those who are most vulnerable (women, girls) are often alienated from participating in social development. Given that women were often denied access to participation in public affairs, they have used their natural associations in society to organize into groups and challenge the conditions inherently biased towards them. Utilizing civic space in various ways, women's associations in sub-Saharan Africa leverage their collective power to mitigate harmful practices, and to improve the lives of women in the community (Cutcher, 2013).

2.4 Women and Civil Society in Sub-Saharan Africa

As the notion of civil society became prominent in development discourse, so has the literature on women's mobilization in sub-Saharan Africa (Mensah & Antoh, 2005). In view of African women have often been excluded from participating in the public domain of society and their voices have often been ignored in the decision-making process, women in sub-Saharan Africa have utilized civic space to organize themselves into groups in order to accomplish goals or to create opportunities (Spear & Dambekalns, 2016). Indeed, to change harmful practices and norms in sub-Saharan Africa and to address their daily economic and social challenges, women are mobilizing in associations to strengthen their role in the management of their own affairs and to

transform conditions in their community.

2.4.1 Role of African Women In Civil Society

There is no uniform way to define how African women participate in civil society organizations. Across the continent and through the phases of contemporary history, African women have utilized civic space in various ways: as a site of economic and social advancement, as an area in which to mobilize for national liberation, as a place to rebuild and regenerate after conflict, and as a network for transnational mobilization for the advancement of women's rights and status (Britton & Price, 2014, p. 293). In other words, African women have shaped civil society in different ways to meet different and evolving needs. Howell & Mulligan (2005) argue that, as a result of historical and cultural pressures, women have often been denied the right to access and participate in Africa's public spaces. However, regardless of this restriction, women have formed countless associations specifically targeted at assisting or improving the lives of themselves and of other women (e.g. women's secret societies in Sierra Leone that struggled for land; dance associations in Mombassa, Kenya that provided a mutual aid network for women; and financial self-help groups among Kikuyu women in colonial Kenya) (Fallon, 2008, p. 2).

The heterogeneity of women's associations has inspired different classification schemes in the literature. For instance, Sen and Grown (1987) identified six major categories of women's associations: (1) service-oriented organizations (education, health, and related services); (2) associations affiliated with political parties; (3) work-based associations addressing issues of employment, income, working conditions; (4) donor agency-initiated associations; (5) specific development project associations; and (6) research associations (p.93). In the broadest sense, women's associations can be defined as formal interest groups in which membership is voluntary rather than mandatory (Steady, 2005). Many scholars frame women's associations as collective groups advocating for women's rights and challenging patriarchal norms (Chaney, 2016).

As Steady (2005) observes, women's associations in sub-Saharan Africa spend most of their time finding solutions to economic and social challenges. Their efforts are

focused on advocating for democratic institutions, facilitating access to services, providing mutual aid in times of hardship, and raising awareness about barriers for women and girls (p.1). Purkayastha and Subramaniam (2004) further state that women's associations use their collective power to create safe spaces to participate in civil society, raise concerns, and address their needs (p. 5). Therefore, civil society has become a crucial space within which African women mobilize for advances in social status, economic roles, and political voice. Although different stakeholders in society have created associations for different purposes, the goal for women, as argued by Mama (2005), is to use their associations as a space to form networks and to change practices and norms that try to dictate their movement and mobilization.

Women's associations in sub-Saharan Africa encompass an immense diversity. Most associations, however, share some common characteristics and underlying assumptions such as implicitly recognizing that women have endured far greater socioeconomic deprivation than men over the years, and that it is only through gender-specific mobilization that women can prevent further occlusion of their interests (Meier zu Selhausen, 2015). Women in sub-Saharan Africa have taken an empowerment approach through their associations to mobilize and solve their own problems (Mensah & Antoh, 2005). 'Empowerment' here connotes a situation where women have mobilized themselves through associations in order to exercise control over resources and to promote skills training, leadership formation, participation, enabling environments, and capacity building among women (Friedman, 1992). The empowerment gained through women's associations entails the dismantling of oppressive social constructions and "an increased sense of self-confidence [...] which comes, in part, from conquering a fear of acting outside culturally sanctioned (patriarchal) or state-imposed norms" (Friedman, 1992, p. 34). Given the diversity of women's associations, women in sub-Saharan Africa have used their associations as platforms to offer their labour, time, money, and other resources to support projects and issues that concern, and empower, them collectively.

A concern for scholars such as Tisdall and Davis (2004) is that current discourse associates women with being powerless and passive rather than acknowledging that they have power within their own realms. Yet as Purkayastha and Subramaniam (2004)

argue, when favourable traditional systems do not exist or are not available to women, women have found ways to use to their benefit structures, regulations, and language that are already in place. In fact, women have created spheres of influence, authority, and power within institutions that have previously allowed them little formal authority. As a result, even poor women are rarely completely defenseless. Although they must adapt more to local (often male-dominated) pressures, women with strong support systems often manage to bend traditional norms to meet their own ends (Purkayastha & Subramaniam, 2004).

Part Three: Enhancing Education through Community Participation

Government policies implemented during 1950s and 1960s that provided for "mass schooling" led to a particular experience of schooling 20-30 years later. One characterized by poor infrastructure, lack of school materials, undertrained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and reduced resources (Lloyd et al., 2000). As a mechanism to address the various issues that arose with the implementation of mass schooling in sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers began introducing reforms that focused on improving the quality of education provided. One trend to improve the quality education was decentralization, or the transference of control from the central to lower levels of a system. A central premise for greater decentralization of education in sub-Saharan Africa is that those "closest to the school, e.g. community members, have a better understanding of local conditions and are in the best position to make decisions about the educational process that best serve[s] local needs" (Chapman, et al., 2002, p.181). This central premise stems from three general arguments: (1) decentralization of programs will lead to greater responsiveness to the particular needs of local communities; (2) decentralization will result in better service delivery by transferring tasks from central authorities to more effective management at local levels; (3) decentralization of social programs (such as education) will foster greater participation by local people, specifically in decision-making processes, and more distributive equity (Maclure, 1995; Wunsch, 1991; Rondinelli & Cheema, 1983). However, the meaning of

decentralization has changed over time, with at least three identifiable periods: (a) the first spanning the 1950s to mid-1970s, (b) the second lasting from the mid-1970s to early 1980s, (c) the third beginning in the mid-1980s (Edwards, 2017).

Wave One: Independence and the Establishment Of National Education Systems

In sub-Saharan Africa, a wave of independence from colonial powers swept the continent during the 1950s and 1960s. In this context, decentralization was defined as the transference of power from the center to the periphery of the world system. Cohen and Peterson (1999) explain: “In the early 1960s proponents of decentralization focused on using the intervention to assist colonies in beginning a transition to independence, achieving political equity, and responding to rising demand for public goods and services” (p. 1). National development and the establishment of national education systems were two of the main focuses for sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, the creation of the latter was perceived as a hallmark of a ‘modern’ nation and was the responsibility of national governments and therefore, ministries of education were responsible for the management of the schools (Bol et al., 1985; Hanson, 1970). During this period, the establishment of “national education systems reflected decentralization in that they meant expansion of both government oversight and educational provision at the sub-national level” (Edwards, 2017, p. 3). In other words, this period resulted in the expansion of mass schooling at regional levels and the formation of regional ministries.

Wave Two: Administrative Decentralization (mid-1970s—early 1980s)

During the second wave of decentralization, education systems continued to ‘modernize’—formal school structures were created, governments focused on creating consistency and standardization across school systems, and hierarchies of school organizations were created. In other words, policymakers framed education systems as complex organizations and created reform strategies for their improvement based on rational and technical logic (Zadja, 2002). The policy focus at this time was on decentralization of administrative responsibility to the regional level to improve the quality of the education system (Hanson, 1984). In contrast to later forms of decentralization in sub-Saharan Africa, which would concentrate on the community

level, these policies focused on provincial/regional level administration of education systems (Bray, 1985).

Wave Three: Neoliberal Decentralization (mid—1980s)

Neoliberal decentralization received increasing attention during the 1980s and 1990s as international aid agencies became more influential in sub-Saharan Africa and international organizations began promoting the downward shift of state activity. During this phase, international aid agencies began directing their efforts to reduce and devolve responsibilities that had previously been the domain of government organizations to the community level, for reasons of efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Edwards & Klees, 2012). More specifically, in education, the trend of decentralization was to devolve responsibilities to local schools in order to increase their performance, improve their technical capacity, and reduce corruption (Schiefelbein, 2004, p. 362). Therefore, national governments throughout sub-Saharan Africa began adopting community-based management strategies, which involved the formation of responsible councils at the community level/village committees. The primary responsibility of these councils/ committees was to provide input into local management of the school (Maclure, 1995), to hold schools/teachers accountable through the application of pressure (Compton & Weiner, 2008), and in some cases to purchase necessary educational materials (Edwards, 2017). In other words, decentralization was thought to be more efficient and cost-effective for central ministries of education because voluntary councils/committees managed schools and gave the national government a way to reduce the need for intermediate levels of bureaucracy, and ultimately reducing ministerial expenditures due to increased community contributions.

The reach of decentralization has been extensive—policy reforms have shifted from macro-level decentralizing (the state from colonial powers) to micro-level decentralizing (school management from ministries of education), and its popularity has varied through different historical trends. Although the interpretations of the meaning of decentralization vary during each phase, a generally accepted view of educational decentralization is that it signifies a “wider representation of legitimate interests in the

school system" (Maclure, 1994; McLean & Lauglo, 1985, p.5). The next section will outline the impact of decentralization on community participation.

2.5 Community Participation in Education

Notions of community participation have been prevalent in development discourse, but particularly in the field of education-for-development (Edwards, 2017). Community participation has taken on different forms and meanings depending on the context. Within the context of education in sub-Saharan Africa, community participation has been framed as the involvement of the whole community (families, parents, school institutions, community members) in the education of the child. The central premise for community participation in education is based on the argument that beneficiaries of education programmes need to take active roles that empower them to monitor their schools and to make decisions about their children's education (Kendall, 2007). Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour (2014) further argue that community participation in education initiatives creates opportunities to promote sustainable development, address community needs, build local trust, and shift the role of community members from beneficiaries to actors (p. 352). However, community participation is not a panacea for sustaining quality education, because various power dynamics exist in communities. All activities grouped under the notion of community participation involve power in some form. For example, Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour's (2014) case study of community participation in Ghana's School for Life complementary education programme found that local community members do not engage in the project in identical ways, and the ways in which they participate determine the different benefits they receive (p. 358).

The School for Life programme was implemented in 1995 and provided nine months of education for children in rural communities who had either dropped out of school or who never enrolled in school. The objective of this programme is to offer a second-chance education to children who are above the school-going age (Arkorful, 2013; Hartwell, 2006). Unique to this program was the community participation approach taken. In fact, the role of the community to identify and recruit individuals to be classroom facilitators, to identify children to participate, and to outline a school schedule

is instrumental in sustaining the program. However, Mfum-Mensah and Friedson-Ridenour's (2014) case study demonstrated that those most educated participated in the program more often. In other words, the education the community members receive determines the confidence and power they have to participate. Therefore, given that men were often more educated than women, they participated in more formal roles, and were given more authority in how they participated. This case study emphasizes the importance of understanding the politics of participation and how power dynamics and societal structures influence who participates and how they participate.

2.5.1 Power and Participation

To further understand the complexities of community participation, it is important to understand power and power dynamics that govern how community members can participate, specifically women. For Foucault (1983), power is "a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others […] instead it acts upon their actions" (p. 220). From this perspective, power is understood as something that is exercised, not possessed. Foucault resists defining power in a metaphysical way, insisting "something called Power […] which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action" (1983, p. 219). In other words, Foucault refrains from defining power and rather focuses his enquiry on how power is exercised in particular contexts. Therefore, for Foucault the issue is to determine "what are the various power-apparatuses that operate at various levels of our society, in such different domains and with so many different extensions" (2003, p. 13).

Within this definition, I can argue that there is no homogenous form of community participation since the way in which power is exercised in each circle of interaction is context-specific. With this in mind, Foucault encourages us to think of 'powers' rather than 'Power'. For example, the power a teacher exercises over students is not the same as the power that those students exercise to resist the teacher's demands, nor is it the same as the power exercised by that teacher's director. Similarly, these kinds of powers are likely to differ from the power exercised by a parent (Gallagher, 2008, p. 398). This exemplifies Foucault's (1978) claim that "power is everywhere" – power circulates and exists in various networks, relationships, and structures (p. 93). Therefore, power is not

concentrated in the hands of institutions and trickled down the social hierarchy; rather, power animates local practices and is distributed through all levels of society.

2.5.2 Whose Voice?

A Foucauldian conception of power could suggest that it is useful to examine power in community participation within the context of networks that exist and relationships that are formed (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Considering power always involves a relationship between at least two entities, it will vary "according to the nature of [those] relationships, the personal characteristics of the actors involved, [and] the resources (social, cultural, material) available within [those] relationships" (Gallagher, 2008, p. 403). Therefore, when analyzing the power dynamics involved in community participation, merely stating that men possess power over women in a community is simplistic and does not encapsulate the various networks and relationships that exist among community entities.

The discourse on community participation assumes communities to be homogenous, harmonious, and static entities, whose resources can collectively be mobilized for a perceived collective community good (see DeStefano, 1996). However, communities do not speak with a single voice. Communities in sub-Saharan Africa are heterogeneous, multi-layered, and governed by various hierarchies of power — determined to an extent by economic, ethnic, age, gender, caste, and other social factions that disagree about educational goals and management of local schools (Dunne et al., 2007). Since different hierarchies of power exist within communities, the central question should not be whether communities participate in school management; rather, the question should be who is participating—which community members are having their voices heard, which members are participating in decisions about schools, and whose agenda is being advanced. Very often it is the most visible, vocal, wealthy, articulate, and educated groups that participate in managing schools. Given these restrictions, often those who are most vulnerable (women, girls, rural dwellers) are excluded from community participation in school management (Moghadam, 2005; USAID, 2015). Although women are not formally excluded from participating in the decision-making processes of school management, gender inequalities and social

norms in the community frame how women and men participate. Eto (2012) argues that in mixed-sex activities of deliberation, for example, men tend to have more dominant roles than women, or meetings tend to be at times when women are not available. Therefore, Although participation is open to all, power dynamics and gender relations between the sexes govern how participation is actualized, and it is these relations of power that are often masked in the notion of community participation (Eto, 2012). The next section will outline the connection between gender and power, as it relates to community participation.

2.5.3 Gender and Participation

As mentioned earlier, the justifications for community participation in school management are (a) to improve quality education and promote sustainable development, (b) to involve and empower communities in decision-making processes, and (c) to develop the capacity for schools to address the particular needs of local communities. Although these justifications aim to promote inclusivity and equity, the practice of community participation often obscures the gendered nature of power dynamics in communities —that is the ways in which notions of gender (societal expectations of men and women) interact with how power is exercised. Under the guise of community participation, communities are often perceived as gender-neutral units with shared interests in education. However, this perception neglects the importance of distinguishing who participates, how they participate, within which structures they participate, and at what stage they participate in school management. For example, the implementation of Parents Associations—formally organized committees through which parents can play an active role in education—throughout Benin best exemplifies community participation strategies that did not distinguish who participates and how. In Benin, schools are organized in such a way that each school's parents create association to better follow the evolution of their children in school as well as the performances and academic results of the kids. The parent's associations (PA) are social groups composed of students' parents who decide to work for the well-being of the school community they represent. The main objective of those associations is to help the schools in any kind of difficulty. It will face and contribute to establish a good

climate of work between the school actors. Each association is managed by two important bodies: the National Assembly and the Executives. The objectives of these Parent Associations were to create a liaison between the school and the community and to encourage children's enrolment in school, to improve school performance, and to empower local communities (Compaoré, 2006; Mundy, 2008). During their formation, Parent Associations were particularly prominent in the rural regions, where the education sector has shifted from state-led school management to an increase in community-based school management (Sultana, 2009). When Parent Associations were formed, the ideal for these committees was to have both mothers and fathers participate. However, if we question who has an active role in Parents Associations, who is present at Parent Association meetings, or whose voice is valued, in most cases it is men who are present at committee meetings and whose voices are being heard (Spear & Dambekalns, 2016). These male-dominated Parents Associations run the risk of neglecting issues specific to the needs of girls – e.g. barriers to education for girls (access, enrolment, completion) and inequalities in education for girls (classroom participation, gender-based violence, menstrual hygiene management) because their focus is on supporting school management(World Education, 2015).

Therefore, without a gendered perspective—one that situates the participant within wider societal context and examines power relations involved—community participation in fact can reproduce inequalities present in wider society. For instance, women's participation in the process of planning and decision-making regarding school resources and school management is constrained by gendered responsibilities (productive and reproductive), logistical constraints related to women's time, as well as local norms of appropriate gender behaviour (Agarwal, 1997; Cornwall, 2003). In other words, a woman's ability to participate in planning and decision-making processes is governed by social perceptions of their abilities and social norms of women's behaviour and actions—e.g. speaking in a public forum (Sultana, 2009). Consequently, a woman's autonomy to participate is curtailed by sociocultural ideologies of her capacities to participate.

As mentioned earlier, distinguishing who participates, how, and at what stages determines how 'participation' is implemented into practice. However, simply including

women in participation strategies will not enable them to exercise their agency or promote gender equality in practice because power relations that exist between men and women, and among *different* women, are not addressed. Emphasis is placed on the latter to highlight the hierarchies of power that exist between women and the harmful nature of collectively categorizing women into one group. Intersectional feminists (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990) argue against homogenizing women into a single group as it makes the assumption that all women share the same perspective by virtue of being women. An intersectional approach to community participation in sub-Saharan Africa requires an analysis of social inequalities among those who participate, one that moves beyond the gender marker but explores the interaction between different identity markers (ethnicity, race, age) that underpin social, political, and economic formal rules and informal norms and cultures (Evans, 2016). In other words, an intersectional analysis of community participation speaks directly to questions of power in relation to racism and sexism. Therefore, it questions the power dynamics in place that enable some members of the community to participate, while excluding others. Cornwall (2000) posits that situating women on school committees as "a legitimating device may merely shore up and perpetuate inequitable 'gender relations' between women" (p. 13). Indeed, notions of community participation ignore the fact that women experience simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion based on other social processes—such as social relations of class, kinship, and marriage—all of which can complicate how people participate. To answer research question 2, this thesis aims to examine the power relations among women as they participate in school activities, and to unpack how different members participate in MAs.

Summary of Chapter

This literature review provides an overview of the scholarship on gender equality and development praxis, by outlining the topography of the global landscape for the rise of gender mainstreaming as a development approach, and providing a conceptual background on the empowerment literature and the challenges of development agencies in addressing gender equality through empowerment approaches. The second part of the literature review focuses on the evolving role of CSOs in Africa and their

approach to gender mainstreaming. The chapter concludes with the debates around community participation for development and the challenges of using the discourse of participation as a panacea for women's empowerment.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Lens

The advent of feminist movements around the world—which generally have sought to redress inequalities experienced by women based on their gender—has led to an increase in scholarship theorizing gender relations and highlighting women's struggle against gender-based oppression. Generally speaking, feminism is a form of advocacy and analysis that puts the social construction of gender at the center of inquiry and appeals "to the power of agency and subjectivity as necessary components of socially transformative struggle" (Lather, 1991, p. 28). A feminist theory positions gender analysis as the basis for a critique of social and political relations and systems, and seeks to make structures more equitable (Marshall & Young, 2006). A gender analysis examines how constructions of masculinity and femininity are reproduced, maintained and challenged, and how the behaviour and experiences of girls, boys, men and women are influenced by expectations created out of these constructions (Paechter, 2006). As such, the emancipatory objective of feminist research is to challenge, and ultimately change, power structures to become more equitable, in part by highlighting the voices and experiences of the less powerful, and enabling the expression of 'subjugated knowledge' using ethical research that does not harm those being researched (Collins, 2000; McCormick, 2012).

Emancipation and empowerment are at the core of feminist research, and should characterize both feminist analysis and the research process itself, occurring through obvious or subtle shifts in opposition to oppressive social structures. They can also result from a process of individual and collective self-reflection, the deepening of social knowledge, and the development of critical problem-solving skills and resources (Reid, 2004). My analytical framework draws on a critical feminist lens, to examine the role of power structures that contribute to gender inequalities for women, including influences within the international development community. At the end of this chapter, I introduce the social ecological model as a framework to analyze women's experiences in Benin and as a way to analyze the various layers involved in women's empowerment. Using a critical feminist approach combined with a social ecological model, my analysis moves beyond addressing gender inequalities as a simple issue of working within one sector to consider the need for gender inequalities to be addressed at numerous levels of society.

This combined approach is used to expose the socio-cultural processes and the environment in which hierarchies, differences, and inequalities are reproduced.

3.1 Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory, as a framework, is comprised of methodologies of resistance that work towards the following goals: (a) disrupting mainstream academic knowledge; (b) questioning hegemonic understandings of oppression; and (c) calling into question structures of power that govern society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Critical feminists seek to examine how women experience and resist oppression and to uncover and understand issues of justice and power. More specifically, critical feminist theory recognizes the importance of the historical context of gender inequalities. Therefore, critical feminists tend to focus on the relations of power involved in knowledge production, negotiation, transformation, and distribution throughout society, and situate this knowledge in practical experiences (Greene, 2009). A critical feminist approach draws primarily on techniques of consciousness-raising. A standard practice is to begin with concrete experiences, integrate these experiences into theory, and rely on theory for a deeper understanding of the experiences. One distinctive feature of feminist critical analysis is a grounding in practical problems and a reliance on "practical reasoning" (Bartlett, 1990). Rather than working deductively from abstract principles and overarching conceptual schemes, such analysis builds from the ground up. Many critical feminists are also drawn to narrative styles that express the personal consequences of institutionalized injustice. As such, critical feminist theory is particularly useful for my research project because it recognizes the validity and importance of the experiential knowledge of women, emphasizing the legitimacy of storytelling and counter-narratives.

My analytical framework is informed by critical feminist theory as I use this lens to examine whether Mothers Associations (MAs) in Benin, as a collective, can be identified as an effective model that reduces the societal structures that reinforce gender inequalities. Through this lens, I examine whether and how MAs are mobilizing to challenge the relations of power that govern both their lives and the lives of their daughters. Emphasizing the experiential knowledge of women, I examine whether MAs' mobilization to enhance their daughters' lived experiences with schools helps mothers

create greater knowledge of how unequal relations of power have real implications in their lives, and how barriers to education are not abstract concepts, but have implications for their daughter's futures. Through this process of mobilization and realization, I argue that MAs are collectively and individually subtly undermining the harmful relations of power that govern their position within their community, and in turn finding avenues of empowerment.

3.2 Critiques of Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory provides insights on analyzing power relations that reproduce gender inequalities; however, their insights are not without critiques. One of the main criticisms put forward by non-Western feminists (Collins, 2008; Crenshaw, 2010) is that critical feminist theory emphasizes collective women's knowledge and glosses over significant differences among women. By using terms such as women's voices, women's experiences, or women's oppression, feminist theory homogenizes groups of women into a single category based on gender, making the assumption that all women share the same perspective by virtue of being women. Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2017) argue that collective terms do not frame the differences of women's experiences. I am mindful of Chandra Mohanty's (1988) postcolonial feminist concern about the discursive construction of *Third World Woman* as a singular, monolithic, and universal category. One of Mohanty's key ideas is that patriarchy is not singular or universal; therefore, how women experience patriarchy is also not singular or universal. Mohanty draws attention to the political effects of *a priori* assumptions about same-ness and shared oppression that inherently position women as victims. This dialogue works to essentialize women's diverse lived experiences. Third World feminists argue that even in the academy "Third World women" are construed as a voiceless "Other" lacking in agency (Chowdhry, 1995; Kabeer, 1993; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty and Alexander, 1997; Narayan, 1997).

They suggest that prevailing representations imply that girls and women in the Third World are ignorant of their own plights and the role of patriarchy in oppressing them. They are bystanders for whom decisions are made, whose labour is accounted for in family economies, and who are in need of protection until such time as they are

"married off." All these women are portrayed as "traditional, voiceless and a homogeneous (interchangeable) group" (Chowdhry, 1995, 33). Mohanty contends that by assuming that women constitute monolithic subjects, "Others," with shared interests and experiences who are universally oppressed by patriarchy, dominant feminist perspectives overlook class, race, ethnic and national divergences among women (Mohanty, 1991). Echoing Mohanty's critiques of the image of the "Third World woman" produced by mainstream development discourse, Escobar (1995) spells out the features of the "underdeveloped subjectivity" attributed to her: "powerlessness, passivity, poverty, ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the (white) Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently, hungry, illiterate, needy and oppressed by its own stubborn-ness, lack of initiative and traditions." To avoid this analytical issue, Mohanty stresses the importance of historical specificity in the study of women's lives. Therefore, as I take up women's concerns about girls' education in the specific context of Benin's rural South and rural North, I also work to contextualize the ways in which contemporary arrangements of power and privilege in this part of Benin have been constructed historically by the unique politics and social and cultural traditions shaping the research context.

Mindful of the complicated ways in which structures of power work across multiple geographies of scale, I also heed Michelle Fine's (2014) suggestion that researchers not *crop too close*. In a discussion of her work using Participatory Action Research with marginalized youth in the US, Fine cautioned about the limitations of making meaning based solely on observations of the behaviours and interactions of individuals. Although close attention to the immediacies of daily life in institutions such as schools and communities is critical for understanding the experiences and agencies of women in Benin, this analytical frame also risks obscuring the systemic nature of inequalities. As such, it is important to consider how institutional cultures are shaped not only by the agencies of the people in them, but also by broader and historic patterns of discrimination. Therefore, I strive to push my analytical perspective to include, but also look beyond, immediate interpersonal, community, and even national dynamics. In my analysis, I work to consider broadly how the people and groups in Benin whose perspectives and experiences shape the study are located within structures of power

that operate on a global scale. In doing so, I consider the ways that foreign aid influence is exercised and its potential adverse effects on the 'beneficiaries' of international development programming in aid recipient countries such as Benin. The main goal is to offer new critical perspectives on the factors which contribute to gender inequalities and subvert both Beninese and international stakeholders' efforts to eradicate them.

3.3 African Feminism

African feminists echo many of the critiques articulated by Third World feminists while also constructing a paradigm for viewing African realities from African perspectives. In order to counteract the persistence of negative stereotypical representations of Africans, they emphasize the agency of Africans in resolving their own challenges. They aim to counter prevailing beliefs in development circles that Africans' oppressed conditions can be redressed primarily by external aid. Some of the defining principles of African feminism are discernible: multiplicity, contextual and cultural complexity, comprehensiveness, and self-determination and liberation. The most potent critique of feminism in Africa is its inevitable association of feminism with Western liberal feminism. Several vocal African feminists such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Filomina Chioma Steady, Ifi Amadiume, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Oyeronke Oyewumi believe that "an ideology of women and about women is necessary and has always existed in Africa" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 224). They affirm not just the pertinence of feminism to Africa but also its primordial place in African societies and cultures.

Mannothoko (1999) asserts that feminism in the modern sense emerged out of the intersection of indigenous cultures and colonialism and imperialism, rather than having been located in, or informed primarily by, either Western or non-Western cultures. She writes that, "feminism has its roots in the [Eastern and Southern African] region and [she] dismisses arguments which consider feminism as alien" to Africa (p. 457). Some theorists propose that African women were feminists before the term was coined. As one instance, Filomina Steady identified Africa as the original home of feminist principles (Steady, 1981). Yet others suggest that African women simply act their feminism and do not theorize it. African feminisms comprise values like "human totality, parallel autonomy, cooperation, self-reliance, adaptation, survival, and

liberation" (Steady, 1996, p. 4). Such a humanist feminism "emphasizes the totality of human experience, portraying the strength and resilience of the human spirit" (Steady, 1996, p. 4).

African feminists view the practical applicability of Western feminism as more relevant to abstract situations than actual occurrences in Africa (1995). Feminists such as Maria Nzomo (1995) have issues with the idea of transplanting Western feminist notions of gender, related values, and solution to problems, into discourses that relate to African women, because of their overgeneralization of African oppressions. For example, many African feminisms emphasize the centrality of motherhood in households and communities as a source of agency, power and solidarity for women (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Mungai, 2012), as opposed to Western feminism which can be critical of the association of women with motherhood as an essentialist view of women's experience and identity (Diquinzio, 1993; Snitow, 1992). As such, African feminists point out that meanings and interpretations should derive from local contexts and should be culturally specific (Oyewumi, 1997).

African feminisms are often distinguished from Western feminism by their focus on community, the power of collective organization among women, and common humanity shared by women and men (Mikell, 1995; Ngunjiri, 2010). One way this is expressed is through the concept of *ubuntu*, which encapsulates the values of solidarity, mutuality, generosity and community well-being, adding the collective identity to the individual identity (Ngunjiri, 2010). This philosophy is reflected in the work of Wangari Maathai, who conceptualized empowerment as situated at both the individual and community level, and promoted community solidarity as leading to collective mobilization. This is particularly useful as a lens for analyzing the collective work of MAs in Benin as they navigate the structural inequalities to address gender inequalities in education.

3.4 Intersectionality

Using intersectionality as a method for understanding the complexities of social experience, this research examines how intersectionality informs the ways in which mothers engage with the collective of MAs and how together they navigate the

structures that reinforce gender inequalities. Initially a lens for addressing how gender intersects with other social categories such as race and class, intersectionality now explores difference among any number of social categories. As activists and scholars work with intersectionality, more specific understandings of experience emerge, along with more effective and nuanced strategies for addressing power and oppression. Hailed by McCall (2005) as feminism's most important theoretical contribution to date, intersectionality offers a critique of feminist theories that have, as Mohanty (1988) demonstrated, essentialized women as a universal category.

Developed by Black, multicultural, and postcolonial feminists, the theory emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in resistance and response to how theorizing about women's experiences of discrimination solely as a result of patriarchy based on sex fails to account for the complexities of oppression (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Collins, 1990; Mohanty, 1988; Moraga, 1983; Narayan, 1997). The term "intersectionality" is generally credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who articulated the distinct multidimensional experiences of Black women in the US: "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p.140). Framing experiences through a single lens such as gender, race, or class distorts and marginalizes those who face multiple intersecting oppressions.

With an ever-widening frame, intersectionality now refers to "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Multiple intersecting dimensions extend beyond gender, race, and class to include social categories such as sexuality, culture, and ethnicity, among others, and larger structures of power such as government, colonialism, and capitalism (Simpson, 2009). Intersectional thinking offers an important social framework for countering the production of a universal Third World Woman, and for differentiating gender relations.

In my approach, I consider concurrently feminist questions about the analytical benefits and compromises of focusing on the terms, 'women,' 'gender,' and 'intersectionality.' Rather than delimit a sole focus, I hold these tensions together and

simultaneously consider women as “real, material subjects of their collective histories” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 62), gender as a relation and structure of power, and intersectionality as a lens for particularizing how gendered experiences intersect with other forms of difference. In doing so, I strive to maintain a frame that differentiates and considers a diversity of perspectives, but also to work with collective ideas about solidarity in which group identification is a source of strength and advocacy.

3.5 Social Ecological Model

When examining the process of empowerment for women participating in MAs in Benin, I draw on a social ecological model to inform my analytic framework. This model borrows the assumption from ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) that people do not exist in a social vacuum, but encounter different environments throughout their life that may influence their behavior. Ecological system theory, focusing on the development of children, proposes that individuals directly influence their own experiences and vice versa within specific microsystems (e.g., family, school) and between different microsystems. People’s development can also be influenced by settings that the individual is not directly part of (such as ecosystem and school policy). Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues that these three lower-order systems, combined, constitute consistencies fitting with relevant cultural ideologies. Next, this cultural macrosystem is influenced by time, such that the past influences the present.

The social ecological model used for this research adheres to the same general structure and underscores the importance of the interplay between individuals and their environment. This model is used to understand the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine certain behaviours. More specifically, this model assumes not only that multiple levels of influence exist, but also that these levels are interactive and reinforcing. Indeed, this model concurs with other research, noting the importance of considering changes at the individual, the relational, and the community level when examining processes related to social change for women (e.g. Kabeer, 1999; Grabe, 2012). Importantly, this model closely ties into the empowerment process described by Rowlands (1997) in the context of social work and education. Rowlands (1997) stressed that women’s empowerment occurs at three

levels–the personal, close relationships, and collective–and that these three levels have to be taken into account simultaneously when trying to investigate empowerment. The social ecological model recognizes that behavior change can be achieved through activities that target five levels: (1) individual, (2) interpersonal, (3) community, (4) organizational, (5) policies. See figure below.

Figure 2: Socio-ecological model

Using this model, I examine whether women organized in MAs in Benin mobilized through all five dimensions, whether all dimensions are required for women's empowerment, and how mobilization unfolds in the various dimensions. This model proposes that women's empowerment can take place in three distinct dimensions: (1) the micro-level, referring to an individual's personal beliefs as well as actions, where personal empowerment can be observed; (2) the meso-level, referring to beliefs as well as actions in relation to relevant others, where relational empowerment can be observed; and (3) the macro-level, referring to outcomes in the broader, societal context where societal empowerment can be observed.

Chapter Four: The Research Context–Benin

In order to understand the plight of the members of MAs in Benin, it is necessary to place the educational system in a historical and social context. The current situation is the result of a historical flow that includes the legacy of French colonial involvement, post-independence political structure, global monetary agency policies, and the ongoing involvement of transnational development agencies and civil society organizations. Education in West Africa has long been portrayed as an overburdened system in disarray, in need of outside intervention (World Bank, 2000; UNDP, 2006). In particular, there has been tension between what is sometimes referred to as “traditional” education and “formal” education (Adeyemi and Adeyinka, 2003). This chapter sets the context for the current study by exploring the political and socio-cultural factors that have shaped primary education in Benin. It begins with providing the current context of Benin, followed by the various movements within education, and the corresponding waves of educational reform that have taken place during the country’s colonial and post-independence period, and ends with a brief history of the rise of MAs in Benin.

4.1 Benin: The Geographic and Demographic Context

Benin, a French colony known as Dahomey from 1902 until 1960, is a Francophone West African country bordered by Niger and Burkina Faso to the north, Togo to the west, Nigeria to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south.

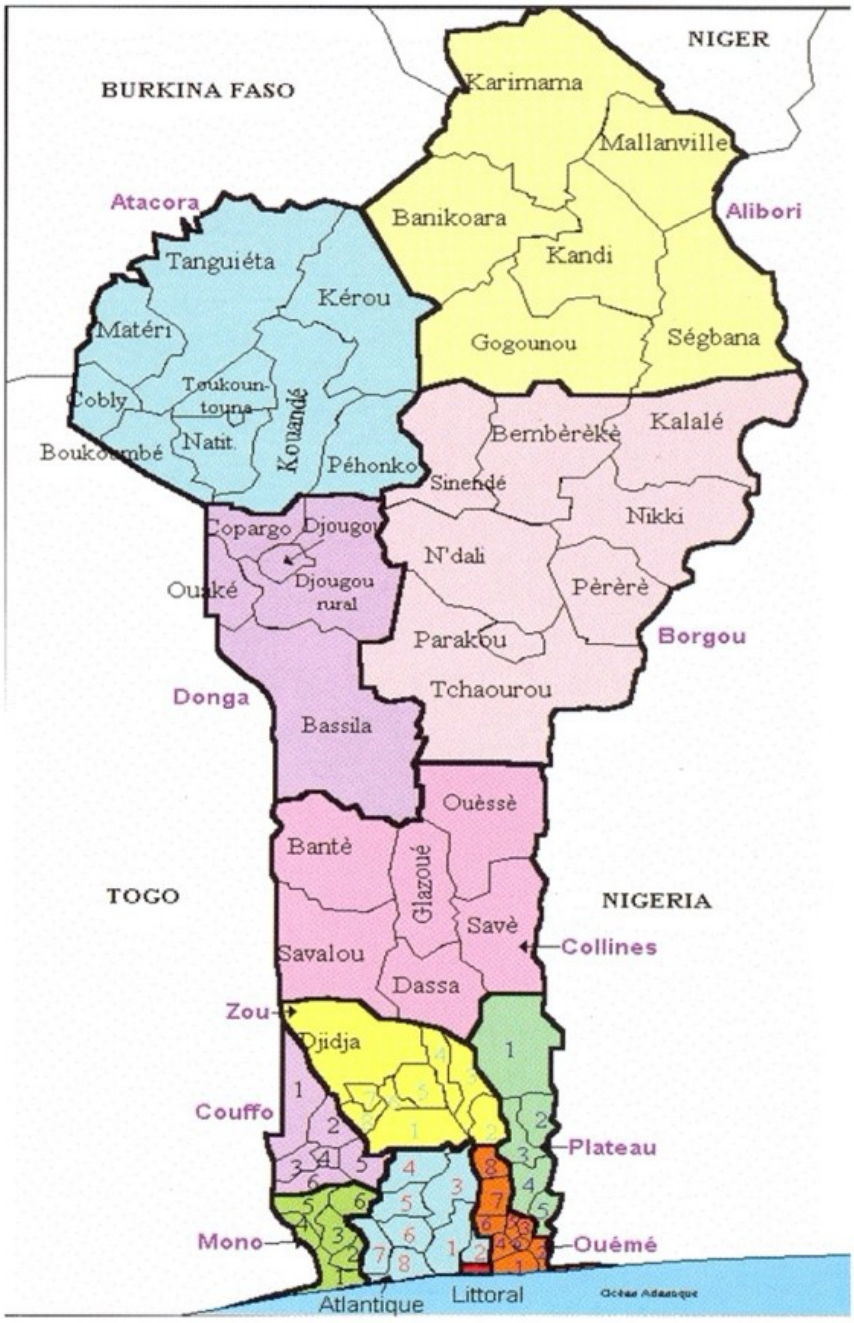


Figure 3: Map of Benin (UNDP, 2008)

Administratively, Benin has been divided into twelve departments since January 15, 1999 (the Alibori, Atacora, Atlantic, Borgou, the Collines, le Couffo, la Donga, le Littoral, le Mono, l'Ouémé, le Plateau and le Zou). The departments are subdivided into 77 communes, which in turn are divided into 546 *arrondissements* (INSAE, 2013). Each arrondissement is administered by a *Chef d'Arrondissement* assisted by a *Conseil*

Arrondissement. Each arrondissement contains villages and may have several *quartiers* or urban neighborhoods. In Benin, there are currently 747 villages/urban townships. Each arrondissement is governed by a local council which is elected by the population. These local councils then elect the *chef de village*.

Benin's population, 11.8 million, is relatively young, with an estimated 65% of the population under the age of 25, and an even division along gender lines (UNESCO, 2018). As of 2016, the average number of children per family was five (UN, 2019). French is the official language of Benin, with Fon and Yoruba the most common local languages spoken in the south, and Bariba and Fulani spoken in the north. There are eight main ethnic groups in the country: Fon, who constitute over a third of the population; Adja (15.2%); Yoruba, who migrated from Nigeria (12.3%); Bariba (9.2%); nomadic Peulh (7%); Ottamari (6.1%); Yoa-Lokps (4%); and Dendi (2.5%) (Deschamps, 2012).

Religion is significant in Beninese citizens' lives. One set of statistics provides the following picture of religious affiliations: Christianity 48.5%, Muslim 28%, Vodun 12%, and others 11.5%. Although there are Christians, Muslims, and adherents of other African traditional religions throughout the country, Christians are represented heavily in the south and Muslims in the north of the country. It is common for Beninese to have more than one set of religious beliefs; for example, Catholic and Vodun[6].

The South of Benin is densely populated, with the highest concentration of people residing in and around the cities on the Atlantic coast (e.g. Porto Novo, Calavi, Cotonou). Only five percent of the population of the Northern region resides in urban centres, reflecting internal migration to the south of the country and a pattern of development that has favoured the south over the north. Urban areas in Benin have customarily been supplied with more amenities—such as educational institutions, government offices, and private-sector institutions providing employment opportunities to citizens—than rural locations (INSAE, 2013). In 1999, in line with the government's decentralization policy, district assemblies were created to transfer power and devolve

[6] Vodun is practiced by the Fon people in Benin and across other West African countries (e.g. Togo, Ghana, Nigeria). It is an official religion in Benin. Followers of Vodun believe in deities and spirits, each of which has their own domain (e.g. agriculture, love, war).

development responsibilities from the centre to local levels (INSAE, 2013). The Beninese economy is predominately agrarian and reliant on cotton production. Agriculture employs more than a quarter of the population on a formal and informal basis and accounts for a quarter of both the country's gross domestic product and export earnings (CIA, 2015).

4.1.1 Women's Status in Benin

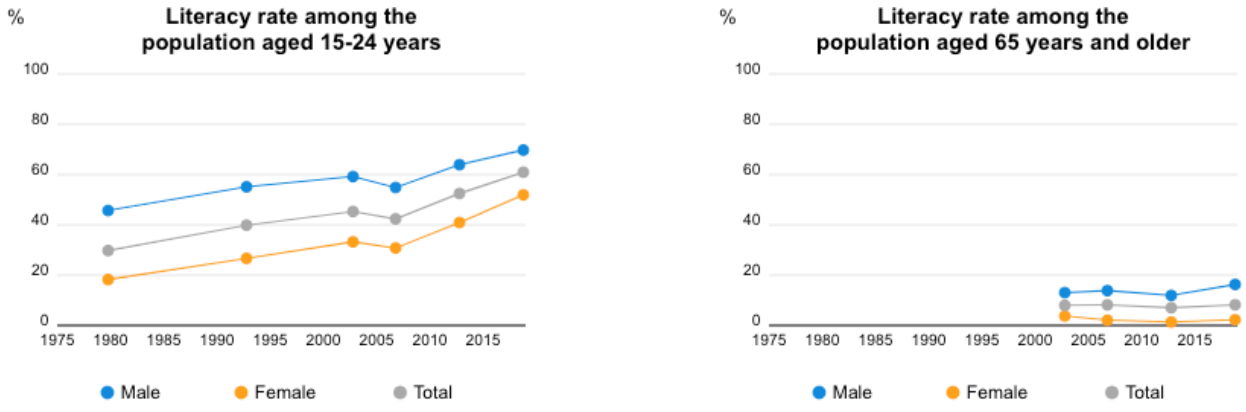
The burden of poverty weighs heaviest on women, who face the obligation to feed and care for their children, in many cases with little or no economic support from their husbands. This is a particular problem for women whose husbands migrate from the north to the south in search of work, and for women in polygamous households across the country, which is common cultural practice in Benin. The income women are able to earn is severely limited by their lack of access to land, technology, and credit. In the north, women are heavily engaged in producing subsistence food crops, while men specialize in commercial crops. Where non-commercial agricultural production is the main economic activity (e.g. in the north), women till the land to provide food for the household. Overall, women's annual income is far less than that of men who are generally deemed to be the main breadwinners (Sene, 2015). In the south, with more cities and urban centres, women work in the informal economic sector, as small retailers.

Currently, some estimates indicate that approximately 80% of Benin's active population exercises economic activity in the informal sector, which is largely dominated by retail sale and services. Over 95% of Beninese women who work outside the agricultural sector are in the informal sector and they represent 62% of the overall non-agriculture informal sector in the country. Moreover, 99.1% of Beninese women in trade do this informally. Informal retail sale is usually carried out: through peddling or street vending, in small stalls, in "boutiques", family-run non-registered small to medium-size shops selling food, plastic, clothes and other products, and/or in markets. Street trading, the cheapest and most rudimentary type of sale, takes two forms. In the first, young girls leave their village early each morning, loaded with products for sale and go solicit clients from village to village. This structure is deemed useful for the many people who

live in isolated rural regions in Benin, especially since markets do not take place every day in such areas. In the second, young girls go to offer their products from door to door, or person to person in urban areas. Products sold respond to pragmatic day-to-day needs of buyers (rather than needs that are created in formal stores through displays)[7].

Legal and cultural factors limit opportunities for women in Benin. The formal legal system has not yet been harmonized with the Constitution, which provides for equal rights for all citizens. Many discriminatory laws remain in effect with regard to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody and support. Customary law still prevails, denying women the right to own property and widowed and divorced women access to household property—and to their own children—among many other discriminatory provisions (Hessling O'Neil, 2012). Girls also suffer from traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and being sent away to work for other families as domestic workers (*vidomegon* in Fon) (Deschamps, 2012). Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is also a serious problem, though statistics are currently lacking (Sene, 2015). Similarly, illiterate women have significant challenges to their ability to achieve gender equality. The figure below outlines the literacy levels in Benin and how women and girls significantly lag behind men and boys.

[7] I experienced the flexibility and social character of this selling structure during past visits in Benin. At any location in a city or village, at whatever time of the day, there is almost always someone nearby selling small products one may need (peanuts, soap, Kleenex, etc.). All one needs to do is ask.



	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	
Literacy rate (%)				
15-24 years	60.95	69.76	51.94	(2018)
15 years and older	42.36	53.98	31.07	(2018)
65 years and older	8.22	16.31	2.27	(2018)

Figure 4: Literacy levels in Benin (UNESCO, 2018)

The high level of female illiteracy (2.3 million) and the low status of women are reflected in their level of health (UIS, 2017). Women lack control over health and reproductive decision-making, which affects their and their children's access to health services. Use of contraceptives is very low, at 7.6 percent, and average total fertility is high, with 6.3 live births per woman of reproductive age (UNESCO, 2018). Women with no education have more than twice the number of children (7) as those with secondary schooling (3.2). Maternal mortality is estimated at 498 per 100,000 live births (UIS, 2017).

Female illiteracy and the fact that women are less likely than men to speak French are factors limiting their knowledge of, and ability to, exercise the legal rights granted to them under the formal legal system. The subordinate status of women limits their ability to participate in decision-making at any level, including the family and community levels, and to participate in community organizations (Sene, 2015). This is also reflected in political structures where women are poorly represented, holding only 6 of 83 seats in Parliament and 2 of 21 ministerial positions (World Bank, 2018).

4.2 Benin: History and Political Economy of Education

The Dahomean empire, located in the southern region of what is now Benin, was one of the most powerful empires in Africa between 1600 and 1900. Its leaders have been criticized for trading people for power, money, and cloth (Bay, 1998). The military power of Dahomey was well-known throughout West Africa, and European traders and visitors shared stories in Europe about the "savage" practices they witnessed, including cannibalism, slavery, and human sacrifices (Bay, 1988). It must be noted that the majority of the travelers' accounts came from individuals who were active participants in the slave trade; an estimated 1,000,000 slaves were traded through the port of Ouidah from the 1670s to the 1860s (Law et al., 2001). Despite the "bad press" (as Bay calls it), Dahomey was a reasonably well-functioning state; power changed hands between individuals of varying backgrounds in what Bay (1998) calls "a social history of ruling coalitions" (p. 5). This was possible because although a king in the royal palace in the city of Abomey ruled the empire, he was aided by a monarchy of men and women from varying lineages and social groups.

4.2.1 Missionaries, Colonialism, and Education

The history of formal education in Benin is closely entwined with politics and religion, primarily Christianity. The Portuguese established mission schools in Dahomey in the 1800s, and all instruction took place in both Portuguese and English. In addition to academic lessons, the missionaries imparted social and cultural values to students. In fact, Bay (1998) argues that missionaries brought with them European standards of proper behaviour, including gender norms and monogamous marriage arrangements. In addition, indigenous worldviews were condemned, including the common belief in the power of Vodun (spirits or deities) to intervene in human affairs. Vodun were not accepted as deities "linked to humanity through complex relationships of mutual interdependence" (Bay, 1998, p. 22), but instead were portrayed as evil beliefs by the missionaries.

In 1887, the French occupied Dahomey and decreed that all school courses were to be taught in French by French instructors trained in France. French colonial policies enacted shortly thereafter had long-lasting consequences on the educational system as

schools were portrayed as a primary means of “bringing [primitive populations] up gradually to [civilized nations] level” (Claudié ,1897 as cited in Gyasi, 2012). Gyasi argues colonial language policies were an expression of power that contributed to “discrimination and disagreement” between those who spoke it and those who did not understand it. Understanding the importance of French policy is vital to understanding how upward mobility was linked, not just to birth, but to education in Dahomey. During the early French colonial period, Catholic missionaries took the lead in formalizing education, establishing and running mission schools (Ronen, 1974). In 1900, in addition to the mission schools, there were approximately 20 lay schools throughout the country whose students were primarily the sons of chiefs and notables (Bunche, 1934).

During this period, education was divided into two systems, one for Europeans and one for Africans. The European system included infant schools, primary schools, and secondary schools–each identical to its European counterpart, so that French children residing in Africa, as well as a small number of assimilated Africans, could return to France and enter school without loss of academic standing (Mumford, 1970). The European schools specifically sought to prepare students for their future role in developing and supporting the French economy. However, the African education system, by contrast, was initially much less systematic and was designed to fulfill a different purpose altogether. Colonial politicians did not intend to create a replica of the French metropolitan system for Africans, believing that such an education lay beyond the grasp of most Africans, was incongruent with the goals of the colonial government, was too expensive to maintain, and would prove disruptive to African society (Kelly, 1984). Consequently, unlike the ethos that guided European schools, African schools were designed to teach students how to participate in African life and how to effectively communicate with the French colonizers (Kelly, 1984).

Dahomey gained its independence on August 1, 1960. The first twelve years after independence were characterized as a period of instability, during which there were nine changes of power, and several bloodless coups as power shifted between civilian governments and military rule (Assani, 2010). This instability ended in 1972 as General Mathieu Kérékou, who was educated at military schools in Mali, Senegal, and France, led a successful coup to end all coups, which ultimately positioned him as the

country's official leader almost exclusively for the following 17 years as a Marxist-Leninist military dictator, and later as president. Kérékou renamed Dahomey as Benin in 1976, partially as a means of uniting the nation, as Benin was a more neutral name without the legacy of the Dahomean empire.

However, education in Benin during the Marxist-Leninist period suffered; teaching quality was weakened and the educational system came near to collapse (USAID, 2005). By the mid-1980s, Benin faced yet another economic crisis and requested assistance from the transnational lending community. The World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided loans with the stipulation that the public sector needed to be cut significantly going forward, including a freeze on recruitment in the public sector (Fichtner, 2010). Beginning in 1987, a series of teacher training centers were closed, and the Ministry of Education determined that primary school diploma holders were qualified to teach. The situation culminated in a period of *déscolarisation* in which confidence in the educational system plummeted along with the net enrollment rate. By 1989, the percentage of school-aged girls attending primary institutions dropped to less than 30 percent, and overall enrollment dipped to just 45 percent, the lowest it had been in a decade (UNICEF, 2008). The 1988-1989 academic year was lost due to a prolonged strike over teacher salaries, which had not been paid for months, and the IMF mandated that teacher salaries would be cut by 50 percent going forward (Guingnido et al., 2001).

During this time, Kérékou's socialist "utopia" fell under domestic and international criticism as critics emerged condemning Benin's leadership for endemic issues of corruption, patronage, and clientelism. In 1988, the government grappled with its legitimacy publicly, and underwent complete economic bankruptcy, at which time Kérékou was forced to participate in the first ever Sovereign National Conference (SNC). Ultimately, in face of these pressures and the bankrupt economy, Benin transitioned to democracy in late 1990, after seventeen years of Marxist rule. Since 1991, Benin has undergone six successful elections and four changes of power, making her the first African country to successfully transition from dictatorship to a pluralistic political system.

Since her transition to democracy in 1990, the government of Benin has privatized several major national companies and liberalized the economy, in turn encouraging foreign investment. Additionally, various development agencies have applauded Benin for the significant progress the country has made in increasing formal education enrollment and healthcare initiatives. Decentralization has been a crucial part of Benin's recent economic development, as this process has been carefully observed by other democracies, money-lending organizations, NGOs, and private investors. The country's recent neo-liberal economic initiatives and investment in the social sector have led to the IMF's 2005 decision to grant Benin 100% debt relief. Additionally, in February 2006, the country received approval for a USD $307 million-dollar grant from the Millennium Challenge Corporation that aims "to improve the investment climate of the country and diversify the private sector" (African Development Bank, 2007). However, despite these minimal levels of economic growth and investment; poverty, unemployment, inflation, and corruption continue to take a toll on life in Benin and have not drastically re-oriented the country's externally dependent economy.

Today, Benin is a resource-poor country which remains underdeveloped and dependent on subsistence agriculture, cotton exports, and regional trade (World Bank, 2019). The majority of Benin's population is concentrated in the southern regions of the country in major cities and areas surrounding the political and economic capitals, Porto-Novo and Cotonou, respectively. With a per capita income of US$ 900, according to the 2017 Human Development Report, Benin remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 163 out of the 177 countries listed. Nearly 40% of Benin's GDP is derived from cotton production, and although Benin was recently ranked as one of the largest cotton producers in Africa, over half of the country's population remains overly dependent on subsistence farming, while many of the poor have not benefited from the cotton sector (Mongbo, 2008). Benin's agricultural potentials, particularly with cotton and palm oil, "have not been fully exploited to meet the needs of a human-centered and people-driven development" (Ngwane, 2006). Job creation, rural development, economic diversification and investment in agriculture are key development issues in Benin due to their potential to improve the nation's citizens' lives.

4.2.2 Evolution of Formal Education in Benin

The Beninese education system operates on a 6-4-3-3 system: six years of primary school, four years of junior high school, three years of senior high school, and three years of higher education. There are also two years of pre-primary education offered in many primary schools. Children are eligible to enter primary school at four and a half years old, and the primary cycle is comprised of six levels: Cours d 'Initiation (CI), Cours Preparatoire (CP), Cours Élémentaire 1 (CE1), Cours Élémentaire 2 (CE2), Cours Moyen 1 (CM1), and Cours Moyen 2 (CM2). At the end of the sixth year, students take a primary-school-leaving exam that culminates with the Certificat d'Études Primaires (CEP) - the qualifying certificate that grants access to junior secondary school. Students are required to take two other national exams, the second at completion of junior high school (Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle: BEPC), and the third at the end of high school (Baccalaureate: BAC). The education sector is managed by three ministries: Pre-Primary and Primary Education (MEMP), Secondary Education and Technical and Vocational Training (MESFTP), and Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS). This current format of education is a result of numerous reforms that have altered the objectives and outcomes of the Beninese education system.

Across the country, primary schools faced two major challenges. First, overcrowding often results in classes with an average student-teacher ratio of one to 50-100 students - a problem particularly severe at the CI and CP (grade 1 and 2 respectively) levels where enrollment is heaviest. The second is the poor credentials of primary school teachers. Currently, there are three categories of primary school teachers: civil service, contractual, and community teachers (UNICEF, 2017). The latter two categories came about as a result of the chronic teacher shortage that emerged in the early/mid-1990s. This shortage was due, in part, to the freeze on civil service teacher hiring stipulated by the World Bank as part of Benin's economic SAP (Welmond, 2000). In response, the Government of Benin began to recruit temporary "contractual" teachers. These teachers operate on two-year contracts, are paid from the national budget at approximately half the salary of civil service teachers, and are not entitled to many of the benefits afforded to employees of the State (Debourou et al., 2005). As such, their level of commitment remains low, and many teachers take on

private tutoring jobs to earn more money–some of them during school hours (Debourou et al., 2005).

Low teaching quality and overcrowded classrooms have meant that many students repeat grades, or fail the CEP exam, preventing them from beginning secondary school. Despite efforts to increase access to education for all children in Benin, completion rates are still affected significantly by region, wealth, and gender (Debourou et al., 2005). Less than ten percent of female students from poor families make it to 9th grade, while over 40 percent of rich males reach that benchmark. In theory, the students who progress to the higher grades, and who pass the CEP and BEPC, are those who receive the highest grades. A significant problem in the system, however, is the fact that there are no predetermined passing grades for these exams. Exam results are used to match the number of students who qualify, to capacity in the public secondary school system. The government-administered tests are graded and then reviewed by a departmental commission. There are frequent allegations of corruption by members of ministries or wealthy individuals who are able to sway the commission to assist their relatives. These allegations further decrease general confidence in the equality of the educational system.

The challenges posed by overcrowding, not fully constructed primary schools, and poorly trained teachers have created a primary education system marred by very low internal efficiency. According to a 2012 report issued by the World Bank, “although 87 percent of a particular age group have access to CI (the first year of primary school), only 40 percent will go on to CM2 (the final year of primary school)” (World Bank, 2012, p. 8). Moreover, the report estimates that primary grade repetition rates average 25 percent. These high rates of school leaving and grade repetition reduce the efficiency rate of public funds allocated to primary education to a mere 54 percent. As crippling as the barriers to educational quality are to all children, children in the rural areas–and girls in particular–are especially disadvantaged since they are more often confronted with and affected by the limited supply of schools, poorly trained teachers, and, in the case of girls, a host of socio-cultural and economic obstacles to their participation in schooling.

4.2.3 Educational Reforms in Benin

As mentioned earlier, in the aftermath of the economic crisis that forced the closure of teacher training colleges and large-scale cuts to the civil service in the 1980's, the socialist regime's failed attempts at reform (see Allen & Lattal, 1989) left Benin amongst the worst-performing countries in the world with regards to primary school enrolment and gender parity. In 1990, a democratic government was elected. This was also an important year for global education, as the international initiative Education for All (EFA) was spearheaded by UNESCO, supported by WB, UNDP, and UNICEF, and accepted by Benin's new administration. As a result of the launch of the EFA, the government of Benin prioritized education through the *New Study Program (NSP)* reform. The NSP was launched at the National Conference on Education in October 1990, a result of the global push at the EFA Conference reaffirming the right of all children to have basic education. It brought together more than 400 teachers, school directors, parents, government officials, politicians, donor representatives and trade unionists to plan and initiate reforms to the country's deeply dysfunctional and inequitable education system. At the time, Benin had one of the world's lowest primary and secondary enrolment rates, with enormous disparities in access to education according to gender, wealth and region. In the 1989/90 school year, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) stood at 49.7%–and only 31% for girls (ODI, 2011). The aim of the conference was to restore society's trust in the public education system by formulating, on a democratic, consensual basis, recommendations for a systemic reform in line with the national needs of the new democracy, the international commitment to EFA, and World Bank advice to the government stressing the importance of education for economic development (Republique du Benin, 1990, p. 9).

During this reform, supported by USAID funding, the Beninese government designed new curricula and updated training materials, which rearranged 22 formerly taught subjects into six broad fields of instruction (Scientific Education and Technology, Social Education, Arts, Physical Education, Mathematics, and French). This reform also named French the official language of instruction at all levels and required teachers to adopt a competency-based approach. This approach places the learner's intellectual, methodological and social competencies, rather than the teacher's objectives, at the

centre of the learning process. This pedagogical approach was perceived by the reform architects and consultants (Canadian and US technical experts) as an important means for the transformation of learners into curious and self-reliant citizens of tomorrow (Fichtner, 2010). As a result of this reform, in conjunction with the global push for making education a basic right and the support of international organizations, Benin went from having 418,000 students enrolled in primary school in 1990 to 932,000 students in 2000 and by 2004, there were 1.3 million students enrolled in primary school (OECD, 2005).

Over the following two decades, Benin has almost universalised access to primary education, with the GER reaching 131%[8] in 2018 (United Nations, 2019).[8] The gender gap has been narrowed substantially; in some regions of the country, it has been eliminated. Almost all Beninese children have at least initial access to schools, and the gross rate of children completing primary school and enrolling in secondary school has shown a threefold increase (UNESCO, 2018). Three interlinked factors have been central to the ongoing process of reform. First, successive governments since 1990 have addressed the education sector's many deficiencies as a priority, making access to education for all children a constitutional right and central policy objective. This has been reflected in rising education expenditures and initiatives such as the gradual abolition of school fees for primary school. Second, development partners have had an important role in this process, supporting the government from the outset of the reform efforts and providing substantial funding and technical expertise. Finally, the Beninese government's outreach efforts have been supported by numerous NGOs working at local levels, which have been instrumental in addressing constraints and increasing demand for education. These organisations have worked with communities to foster normative changes concerning the value of education. Working within the context of a patriarchal culture, whereby girls face substantial cultural barriers to education, this has been particularly effective in increasing girls' enrolment (ODI, 2011).

[8] The GER in Benin is over 100%, owing to the large number of overage and underage students. The net enrolment ratio (NER), which expresses the rate of coverage for the official school-age population only, increased from 38% in 1989/90 to 89% in 2008/09 (92% for boys and 85% for girls).

The introduction of the NSP reform has been more than a shift in pedagogy; it marked a shift from French influence on Benin's education system to US and has triggered heavy involvement of external assistance. From the beginning of the Beninese reform process, donors have been highly influential in the implementation of initiatives, at times shaping the direction of policy. For example, UNESCO and UNDP were involved in providing the necessary diagnostic analysis to inform education reforms. USAID, UN agencies and the World Bank have funded education programmes throughout the country, particularly during the early stages of the reform process. As a result, Benin has a high dependence on foreign aid. Aid is estimated at approximately 10-15% of total expenditures and 3% of GDP in recent years. The number of donors has increased since 1990, as has the quantity of aid to education (ODI, 2011). An equally significant aspect has been the key role of donors in providing technical expertise in the development of plans and in putting pressure on the Beninese government to carry out institutional reforms to improve the sector's effectiveness. This has raised questions about the extent to which the Beninese government is driving the policy agenda, and whether the improvements are sustainable in the long term (Olukoshi & Diarra, 2007).

Since the early 1990s, there has been a strong increase both in the amount of aid to education and the number of development partners involved. Given the number of donors investing in Benin's education system, there has been growing recognition of the importance of increasing synergies between development partners and the government. However, considering donors use their funding to invest in their priority areas, coordinating investments has been a challenge. Table 1 lists key donors and main areas of activity from 2000-2010.

Development partner	Principal areas of intervention
African Development Bank	School construction
Belgium	School construction
Denmark	Primary education, vocational training, integration of disabled children in schools
European Union	Vocational training, school/class construction
France	Vocational and technical training, educational management, technical assistance
Germany	Vocational training and apprenticeships
Islamic Development Bank	School construction
Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries	School construction
Peace Corps	Girls' education and improvement of students' knowledge of environment
Switzerland	Literacy, vocational training and apprenticeships
UN Children's Fund	Girls' education, community participation
US Agency for International Development	NPE, girls' education, involvement of parents in schools, management of school system resources
World Bank/International Development Association	School rehabilitation, promotion of girls' education, improvement of educational management capacity, provision of school textbooks, recruitment of teachers, budgetary support to the education sector

Source: ODI (2011)

Table 1: Key donors in Benin

In 1992, incentive programs such as All Girls to School were set up to encourage rural families to send their daughters to school. The All Girls to School program was funded primarily by UNICEF, which served as the overarching organizer of several localized efforts throughout the country, such as BØRNEFonden and Batonga Foundation. Projects facilitated by these NGOs include community-selected scholarships that pay for uniforms, school supplies, and tutoring for girls in Benin. Other projects include the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), which gave stipends to older girls who acted as mentors to younger girls who were entering the school system. EFA, with the support of the Beninese government, built classrooms, paid the salaries of female contract teachers, and performed awareness campaigns for rural parents to encourage them to send their daughters to school (Guingnido Gaye, 2004). Education was positioned as a fundamental human right, and no longer as a privilege of the elite, or males only.

In 2000, representatives from Benin attended the World Educational Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and joined the international community in reaffirming commitment to education. The Dakar Framework for Action was rolled into the higher-profile Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), signed through a resolution adopted through the General Assembly of the United Nations. Education was positioned as critical to the success of all eight MDGs. During this time, Benin was selected for the EFA Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) because of its severe shortage of learning facilities, teachers, and instructional materials. Countries selected for EFA/FTI were given increased funding and the assistance of outside experts to complete education projects in a five-year period. The efforts of programs included in the All Girls to School initiative were so successful that the initiative was modified to include all children and was renamed All Children to School. School feeding programs were established in rural areas to encourage attendance and to meet students' nutritional needs while relieving families of the burden on o provide mid-day meals. Primary school fees were eliminated for both boys and girls, and secondary school is currently subsidized for boys until the end of junior high school and for girls until the end of senior high school. The elimination of school fees does not mean, however, that schooling is free. In principle, primary education is free, but in practice parents contribute to the day-to-day running of schools and pay for security, construction and rehabilitation of classrooms, the purchase of school furniture, and in some cases, teachers' salaries (Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2004). There are also costs associated with sending children to school, including the compulsory khaki uniforms, textbooks, school supplies, and other school fees, depending on the region.

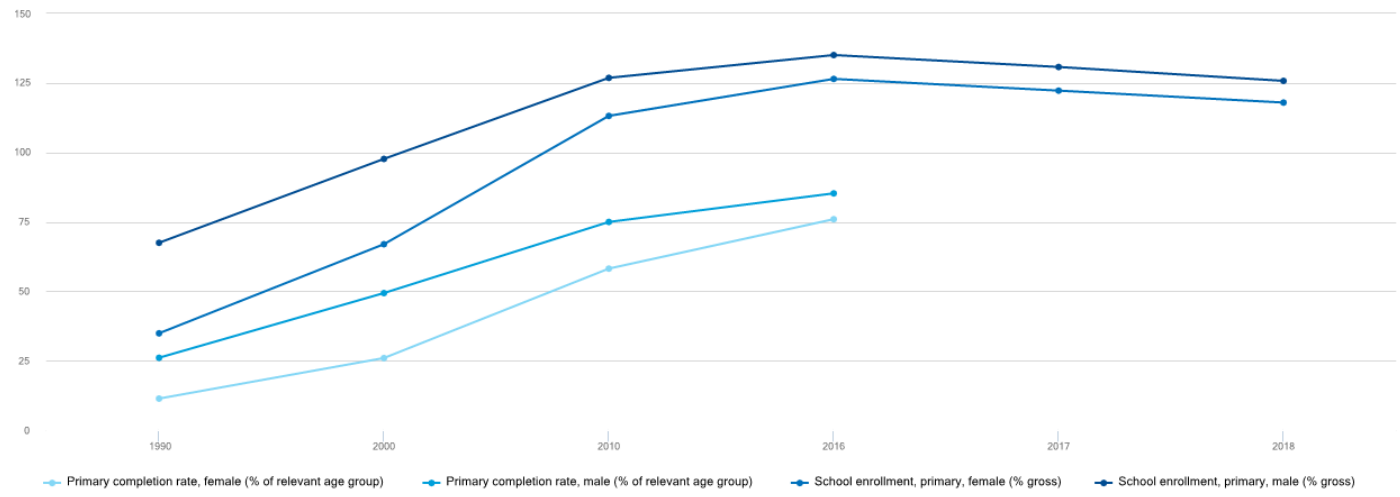
In 2018, the government of Benin worked with the Global Partnership for Education to design the Education Sector Plan for 2018-2030, which highlights the government's vision that: "In 2030, Benin's education system ensures that all learners, without distinction, have access to the skills, entrepreneurial spirit and innovation that will make them full-blown/fulfilled, competent and competitive citizens able to ensure economic growth, sustainable development and national cohesion." (GPE, 2018) The four priorities for this newly approved education sector plan are to implement a 12-year universal basic education cycle, develop vocational training adapted to the needs of

economic development, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and develop more effective, efficient and inclusive education governance.

Although Benin has made astonishingly fast progress towards universalising access and increasing completion rates for boys and girls, this expansion of the system, paired with substantial existing institutional constraints, has frequently overextended its capacities, with supply not keeping up with demand. Progression rates are improving only gradually, and teaching quality remains low, with poorly trained–and frequently untrained contractual and community teachers making up a growing part of the corps. Further, the government remains heavily reliant on donors, both to finance the system and so support central planning, raising doubts about the national ownership and sustainability of reform efforts.

4.3 Girls' Education in Benin

As mentioned earlier, girls' education significantly has improved as a result of the development of international efforts such as Education for All. Within the context of the wider international commitment to girls' education, Benin's educational development has also focused on girls' education. Although the gender gap in primary enrollment has narrowed, it nevertheless progressively widens as students advance through the education system, such that boys' enrollment rate in post-basic education is over 73 percent, while for girls it is about 50 percent (World Bank, 2018). Thus, although a general awareness of the importance of girls' education is successfully being transmitted, girls are still much more likely to be pulled out of school to support the household financially, or for socio-cultural reasons (such as marriage and teenage pregnancy). As such, the primary completion rate for girls is 76% in comparison to 86% for boys (UIS, 2017). The figure below shows the gender disparities between enrolling in primary school and completing primary school:



Country : Benin
Source: World Development Indicators

Figure 5: Gender disparities in primary school

In rural areas, such as the Alibori region, families often keep their children home to help them in the fields. Sometimes, parents bring to school a very young child (younger than preschool age) to take the place of an older sister who is asked to help with watching cattle or picking cotton or other crops (GPE, 2018). The variety of barriers girls face is wide in scope and deep in complexity, crossing economic, socio-cultural and political boundaries.

From an economic perspective, fees for school materials and other opportunity costs pose a significant barrier. As mentioned earlier, although school fees have been abolished in Benin, the indirect costs involved in schooling, such as school fees for community teachers, uniforms, textbooks, writing materials and school supplies (pens, rulers, notebooks, photocopies, etc.) create a dilemma which forces economically disadvantaged families to engage in an informal cost-benefit analysis regarding which child's education to support and finance, often leading to a preference to invest in boys (GPE, 2018; UNESCO, 2003)

At the socio-cultural level, among those girls who do successfully enroll in school, completion rates often lag behind boys', as patriarchal ideologies govern the roles of girls and boys. Patriarchy relates to the institutionalization of male domination over

females while reiterating and preserving the gender roles, attitudes, and social stereotypes between the sexes (Dlamini & Adams, 2014). In other words, patriarchy is reflected in the assignment of roles based on cultural values and perspective in a hierarchal way so that men are dominant, and women are subordinate (Machira, 2013). Patriarchy is an ideology linked to all social establishments such as family, religion, law, the economy and schooling, among others. Patriarchal ideologies connect women to motherhood, caregiving and frugal values, while men are portrayed as assertive, aggressive and protective of their families and thus responsible for their financial well-being (Ridgeway, 2011, Stromquist, 2015). The ideology of patriarchy entrusts men with most social advantages such as property ownership, education, training, and economic power, while limiting women to the home and agricultural work (Machira, 2013). Seeing as girls are subjected to greater household responsibilities, this often deters their completion of the primary cycle (UNICEF, 2017). The issue of time for domestic chores and tasks has been frequently cited as inhibitory for girls' education across the continent (World Education, 2015, USAID, 2005). Once they go home from school, girls often do are unable to review school homework as they are responsible for supporting household tasks and activities (Sene, 2015). Girls become fatigued by chores and can be discouraged when not able to complete homework or find sufficient time to study (Sene, 2015). Moreover, patriarchal ideologies shape the expectations of society and consequently the life aspirations of individuals (Molla & Cuthbert, 2014). The socio-cultural expectations embedded in women's lives create pressures that limit the boundaries for every female to those of the home (Molla & Cuthbert, 2014). In fact, Makuma (2013) argues that "womanhood is reduced to […] a second-class citizen; hence, there is the commonality of a general belief system that the best place for women is in the 'kitchen'" (p. 115). The assigned gender roles provide distinct social interpretations of girls' and boys' personal aspirations (Lynch & Nowosenetz, 2009). These traditional gender roles are linked to cultural beliefs, norms, and values.

From a structural/school perspective, the long distances between schools and villages, coupled with inadequate infrastructure in some schools, constrain girls' participation in education. Due to safety concerns, parents are often reluctant to send their daughters to schools that require them to walk long distances to, or that do not

have appropriate hygiene facilities (e.g., toilets, latrines) for girls. For those girls who are allowed to enroll in school, a number of other factors can discourage their continued participation, including gender bias from teachers and administrators, high failure and grade repetition rates, and school policies that expel pregnant girls (but not the schoolboy who fathers the child) for the duration of their pregnancy (Service de Promotion de la Scolarisation des Filles, 2004; GPE, 2018).

Finally, at the political/institutional level, the insufficient supply of schools (World Bank, 2011), especially in rural parts of the country; the relatively small number of female teachers (UNESCO, 2013); and a lack of sufficient data on the factors that influence parents' willingness to send their girls to school create a macro-policy environment that undermines other efforts to increase girls' primary school enrollment, promotion, and completion (INSAE, 2013). As such, despite making girls' education a national priority and taking great strides in reducing the gender gap in education, the persistence of these social, economic, structural, and political barriers ensures that providing quality education for girls in many parts of Benin will remain an ongoing challenge.

4.4 Mothers Associations (MAs) in Benin

Part of the CSO response to reducing the gender gap in education was to encourage greater mothers' involvement in the education of their daughters. Consequently, in 2003, World Education (an American INGO) launched a program organizing women in MAs to create new opportunities for women to become more involved in education and for girls to be supported and retained in school. The creation of MAs came about through the Civic Action in the School Environment (CASE) Project (2003-2006), which was funded by USAID[9]. The project built on the work of the USAID-funded Primary Education NGO Project's (PENGOP) project (Phases I & II), also carried out by World Education, which began in October, 1994 and ended in September, 2003. That project strengthened Parents Associations (PA) in over 1,300

[9] USAID was the first donor to support education reform in Benin. USAID worked with the Ministry of Education to create 15 action plans. Included in them was a focus on improving girls' access to school (Welmond, 2002).

schools and raised the profile of the PA movement to that of a legitimate stakeholder and partner in the country's formal education. As a result of the PENGOP project, however, World Education observed that women were not present in PA meetings and seldom had their voices heard concerning school issues. As such, their intention was to increase women's participation in the education of their daughters, and to have MAs complement the existing PA. The objectives of the project were to have mothers play a role in girls' education and to create a more favourable socio-economic environment for girl's education at community, district, regional and national (USAID, 2005). CASE relied on training designed to strengthen the organizational capacity of the Parents Associations and Mothers Associations. The training was carried out by local NGOs previously trained by World Education. Community radio programs spread the message that girls should attend school and popularized the concept of the Mothers Associations by having active Mothers Association members answer callers' questions in the local language. As a result of this project, World Education was able to establish 36 Mothers Associations which worked under the umbrella of Parents Associations to raise community awareness of the importance of girls' education, encourage girls to enroll in school, and monitor girls' school attendance (USAID, 2005). However, the two main aims of this first project were to build the partnership between MAs and PAs, to ensure no conflict would arise between the two groups, and to increase women's participation in schooling. The result of this project found mothers interested in taking a role in the education sector–following up on their children, promoting the best possible environment in which their children could learn, and in contributing their time and resources to the national effort of enhancing girl's education.

Following the success of the CASE project, World Education implemented three other projects that worked with MAs to improve girls' education: Education First project (2003- 2007), Girls Education and Community Participation (2008-2013), and Food for Education (2014-2015). To implement these projects, World Education has received funding from various donors such as USAID, UNICEF, World Food Programme, US Department of Labor, and have collaborated with different NGOs both international and local, as well as the Ministry of Education, to implement their diverse projects. As a result of different donors funding different projects, each project has had different

priorities, e.g. addressing child labour, preventing child trafficking, implementing school canteens, and promoting community involvement. Through all these projects, World Education has worked with MAs to support girls' education and as a result has organized more than 660 MAs throughout rural Benin.

The MAs do not have a specific mandate as they were meant to meet the specific needs of their locality. Their overall objective is to provide a space for women to freely exchange ideas and opinions about education in their locality with the aim of improving girls' education. It is important to note is that MAs are not formally recognized by the government of Benin; rather they work under the umbrella of PAs, which in theory are present in every public school in the country (around 7,000 as of 2014) and have the mandate of "following the pedagogical activities of children both in and around school, contributing to the maintenance of a safe school environment and of school infrastructure, contributing to the maintenance of discipline at the school, promoting access to school for all children, and co-managing the school" (USAID, 2014, p. 3). The fact that the MAs are not formally recognized is a fundamental principle governing the creation of MAs: that they will not replace the PAs, rather they were to become partners, with activities coordinated between the two.

4.4.1 MAs and the Promotion of Girls' Education

As mentioned earlier, MAs organize to enhance the situation of girls in schools. The objectives of these MAs include: (a) raising public awareness of the importance of girls' education; (b) encouraging girls to enroll in school; (c) monitoring girls' school attendance; and (d) removing barriers to education for girls (World Education, 2015). Specifically, MAs were designed to facilitate women's participation in decisions. The argument made by funders and NGOs was that women's activities would increase girls' participation in education directly and indirectly (directly because mothers would improve learning conditions, indirectly because girls would see the importance their mothers gave education). As girls would see their mothers involved in important decisions, they would learn that it is possible for women to be simultaneously a mother and an influential community member. MAs undertake many different types of activities, some focusing on the demand for education (initial recruitment of girls, getting girls back

in school, etc.), others on the supply, broadly construed to include issues of quality (being able to study in a quiet space, having supplies available, hiring of community teachers). The MAs design activities to improve girl's enrolment (e.g. organizing groups to listen to radio broadcasts advocating for girl's education, monitoring school attendance), reduce financial obstacles (e.g. purchasing school supplies, raising funds for school necessities), address cultural barriers (e.g. lobbying against child marriage, reducing teenage pregnancy), and facilitate girls' success through education (e.g. creating study halls, providing role models). However, research on whether MAs mobilization has transformed the position of women in the community is limited. This research will examine whether the advocacy and activities of MAs has resulted in improving girls' education, and whether this has led to women's empowerment in the wider society.

Chapter Five: Methodology

Qualitative researchers should work to establish credible, trustworthy, transparent, and persuasive research (Butler-Kisber, 2018). How qualitative researchers position themselves, ground their work in research literature, explain their research process, and report in sufficient detail, helps establish their credibility. In this chapter, I will describe my inquiry process, how the data were collected, and the ethical tensions of doing fieldwork. I begin by explaining my approach to fieldwork, justifying my use of an ethnographic and participatory approach. I then emphasize my commitment to collaboration, and my relationship with my research assistants. This is followed by a description of the research design, location, instruments for data collection, and my process of data analysis. Lastly, I reflect on the ethical tensions I faced as a researcher in a post-colonial context working to do the most good and the least harm. In this chapter, I situate myself in the research context and explore how my positionality and subjectivity, as well as those of various participants and collaborators, inform the study.

5.1 Methodological Design

The methodology for this research combines an ethnographic design with multiple approaches, such as participatory research, to complement my role as an outsider. My methodological design of using multiple approaches allowed me to undertake the best strategies from each field of inquiry and to take approaches that were best suited to the specific context – respecting local knowledge systems – while simultaneously adhering to my research aims (Chilisa, 2012). These mixed approaches were used to explore the breadth and depth of the cultural milieu in which women's organizations are situated in Benin.

5.1.1 Ethnography

Many ethnographers (Montsion, 2018; Hastings, 2018) contend that the key to research is "being there." Identifying and selecting different sites, and connecting with individuals and organizations in the communities, form a process of discovery, networking, and building relationships. Therefore, I used an ethnographic approach to immerse myself in the communities I lived in during my fieldwork. Spending eleven

months visiting, observing, and participating in the activities of grassroots women's organizations in Benin was essential for getting involved, and gaining the breadth and depth of data that I collected. Broadly speaking, ethnographic research involves:

> the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts–in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

An ethnographic approach involves an in-depth exploration of social interaction, through participant observation of one or a few small-scale cases in order to interpret the phenomena she observes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The core practices of ethnographic researchers are participant observation; immersion in the setting; reflection and reflexivity; the use of field notes; and active participation (Lichtman, 2014). As such, an ethnographic approach allowed me to draw from and triangulate multiple data sources, each of which provided a piece of the puzzle that contributed to understanding the phenomenon as a whole (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A key aspect of ethnography for critical feminist researchers is the relationship that develops between the researcher and those who are being researched. Many critical feminist researchers are aware of the power differences that exist in cross-cultural research and have taken steps to redress this imbalance. Bobasi, Jackson, and Wilkes (2005) reflect that "although there is acknowledgement that the relationship between researcher and participant inherently involves power differentials, feminist researchers adopt strategies to minimize power inequities as far as possible" (p. 495). These strategies include, for example, structuring interview situations and focus groups as an exchange of information and two-way movement of ideas, rather than as an exercise in collecting data. Also, the researcher gives ample opportunities for participants to direct the conversation, to ask questions, and to raise their own concerns (Reed, 2007). A feminist ethnographer is cognizant of her role in the field and how her positionality affects the relationships as well as the flow of information, and what is shared and what is withheld from the conversation. When power differences threaten

the legitimacy of research, it is important to use these strategies to ensure that imbalances are evened out.

As a feminist researcher, I am conscious of the fact that research is not neutral, and therefore, whenever possible, I use methods that include participants in meaningful ways throughout field research. This is especially important when we work in contexts that have a history of colonization and oppression. As a feminist researcher, I was cognizant of not casting participants as a peripheral homogenous group who needed help from outsiders (Chilisa, 2012), nor to view host communities as merely informants or objects in case studies rather than as possible collaborators in the research (Nnaemeka, 2003). Conscious of these challenges, I used participatory research approaches to create a project that works alongside the research participants and local communities, engaging with them to analyze their challenges, and to identify solutions grounded in their own experiences. Research participants were not only sources of data, but were intimately engaged in directing the flow of research, in identifying other stakeholders, and in analyzing the issues.

5.1.2 Participatory Research

A review of the history of ethnographic and feminist research in Africa has revealed complex issues of power and authority between outsiders and insiders, the researchers and the researched. Today, researchers share a deep sensitivity to the legacy of colonialism and the involvement of anthropologists with colonial regimes. This sensitivity has influenced and restructured the process of research design and implementation. As a result, a field of participatory research has emerged through the work of critical, feminist, and action researchers. Contrary to traditional modes of inquiry in which the authority for research decisions rests solely with the researcher, participatory researchers raise critical questions and concerns about the research purposes, researchers' responsibilities, and relationships with the people being studied.

In essence, participatory research recognizes that local people and communities are experts about their lives and experiences, and are best positioned and capable of identifying, analyzing and resolving the problems they face. Drawing on the work of Reason and Bradbury (2006), I subscribe to research that is:

> A participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes, grounded in a participatory world view which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p. 1)

Participatory Visual Methodologies

Informed by educational research about the critical role of art in expressing and exploring different types of knowledge and ways of knowing (Eisner, 2008), visual research helps to decenter the written text as the primary mode of knowledge production (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Visual modes of communication offer inclusive possibilities for production of knowledges often overlooked or ignored in traditional research (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2012). Images can encapsulate—in one frame—the complexities of social relations (Moletsane & Mitchell, 2007).

When the visual is combined with a participatory approach, the resultant participatory visual methodologies (PVMs) offer tools for both research and community engagement, or "modes of inquiry, modes of representation and modes of dissemination in research related to social change" (Mitchell, 2011, p. xi). Using visual methods in collaborative and participatory ways offers critical openings to avoid replicating the problematic history and ongoing risk of voyeuristic objectification of traditional research methods (Kindon, 2003; Pink, 2011; Rose, 2012). PVMs offer opportunities for alternative and participant-produced constructions of knowledge that 'speak back' to or disrupt dominant narratives and representations (Mitchell & de Lange, 2013). PVMs encompass a number of different arts-based methods that include drawing, cartooning, collage and performance, and increasingly work to incorporate digital technologies within visual productions, such as digital storytelling and cellphilming (making videos on mobile phones). I use digital storytelling to create a space where participants are engaged to reflect on important issues in their lives. Much of the foundational work about participatory visual methodologies for social change has

emerged in the context of gender research in relation to HIV and AIDS, gender-based and sexual violence, and schooling, offering critical groundwork and possibilities for taking up gender issues within education.

5.2 Working in Collaboration

5.2.1 Research Assistants

Research assistants have the advantage of providing “insider” insights into the cultural factors that shape and influence societal dynamics that are being examined (Chilisa, 2012). During the first month of being in Benin, I hired two research assistants to work with during my fieldwork. I hired Azaratou from Kandi region to support my research site in the North of Benin, and Emma from Cotonou to support my research site in the South of Benin. Both Azaratou and Emma are social scientists and advocates in the education sector. They have both worked as consultants for various INGOs in Benin and have experience conducting research. I trained both research assistants on the objectives of the research project, focusing on the research design, processes of ethnography, ethical protocols, consent, and transcribing. During this training, Azaratou and Emma provided suggestions to adapt my research questions, timeline, and interview questions to the research context. Seeing as language was a significant barrier in both communities, with the majority of the members of the MAs not speaking French, Azaratou and Emma played a crucial role in translating conversations, providing context to my observations, and simply being a colleague to run ideas by. They joined me during my participant observations, translated and transcribed the interviews, and contributed significantly to data analysis by helping me understand much of the cultural background that shapes and influences the data.

5.2.2 University of Parakou

During the period of data collection, I was affiliated with the University of Parakou, as a Research Associate. I worked under the supervision of Professor Yvette Doubogan, who leads the Network of Women Officials at the University of Parakou. Her research focuses on gender and development issues in West Africa. My affiliation with the University of Parakou generally, and with Professor Doubogan specifically, greatly

enhanced my access to local NGOs supporting the work of gender, education, and development. Professor Doubogan assisted in the selection of the MAs and the locations for data collection. Similarly, her connection to women's rights groups and advocates enhanced my becoming invited to regional and national spaces where key stakeholders were discussing gender issues and allowed me to engage in the national dialogue around women's rights.

5.3 Research Design

Data collection took place in two sites. The first site is "Nokou"[10], a rural village in the north of Benin and the second site is "Sokossa"[11] a rural village in the south. I arrived in Benin in September, 2018 and left Benin in July 29, 2019. During these eleven months, I conducted ethnographic participatory research with two grassroots women's organizations and their larger communities in Benin. I spent four months in each of the research sites. I was in Nokou from October, 2018-January, 2019 and in Sokossa from March-June, 2019. Spending almost an entire year visiting, observing, living, and participating in the activities of women's grassroots organizations in Benin was essential to getting involved, and gaining the breadth and depth of data that I collected. This extended fieldwork helped me move "beyond the front stage, beyond politeness and openness, and into more complex dynamics of power relations" (Simpson, 2006, p.129). Spending time within the communities contributed to my understanding of each community's dynamics and the ways in which groups of women, in conjunction with others, collaborate in addressing inequalities. A prolonged period in the field also put me in a better position me to know which questions to ask and to conduct a holistic research approach that captured the experiences and perceptions of community members.

5.3.1 Participants

The participants of this research shared similar childhood experiences, as we will see in Chapter 7; many of them did not attend primary school, had limited literacy skills,

[10] Pseudonym.
[11] Pseudonym.

engaged in petty trading, and worked either in agriculture or in the market. Participants were active in farming, gardening, and small entrepreneurship. They harvested and sold the products of farming to take care of themselves and their children, and to contribute to the household expenses. Many of them lived with their co-wives or with their extended families.

Age and Marital Status

The participants' ages ranged from 45 to 75. The ages were not necessarily exact, for most women were born in a village where there were no record of their births; the women guessed their ages referring to some major events they learned from their parents, or other women's ages based on their time of wedding and the birth of their first children. In Nokou, most of the women had moved there when they became brides, whereas in Sokossa, most of the women were born and raised there. Most of the women in this study were also responsible for their grandchildren.

The majority of the participants were married between the ages of 16 and 18 and had their first babies when they were still teenagers. However, the majority (70%) of the women in my study are *de facto* heads of households. Most husbands are migrant labourers in the cities. Others work in the fields far away from the home. It is also the case that many men who migrate to the cities never come back or do not support their rural families, leaving most women to be the sole support of their families, making them *de facto* heads of their families. Some men take city wives, in effect abandoning their rural families. Most men who migrated from Nokou region went to either Parakou (the second-largest city in the country) or Cotonou (the country's economic capital). In my own observations, I never encountered men at the homes of the members of the MA in both the north and the south. Even the women who considered themselves married told me their husbands were rarely home, because they were either working in cities or at large distances away.

Religion

Participants in Nokou shared the same religious values; they were all Muslim. Some of the participants in Nokou had attended Koranic school occasionally when they were younger and learned how to say a few Arabic verses for their daily prayers. Most of them reported that they never attended a Koranic school, but learned a few verses they knew on their own with the women who had some knowledge of Islam so that they could practice their daily prayers. Participants in Sokossa all shared the same religious values; however, they were all Christian Celeste. Although the women participated in different religions, both groups of women also followed Vodun practices.

5.4 Data Instruments

As part of this qualitative research, I used a variety of data instruments to gather data and to triangulate data sources, each instrument providing a piece of the puzzle that contributed to understanding the phenomenon as a whole. My data collection instruments were participant observation, field notes, informal conversations, interviews, and digital storytelling. Using a variety of data instruments helped me ensure that a holistic portrayal of my research was presented. Reinharz (1992) argues that:

> The multi-method approach increases the likelihood that researchers will understand what they are studying, and that they will be able to persuade others of the veracity of the findings. Multiple methods work to enhance understanding both by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate or refine another. (p. 201)

Yin (1994) supports Reinharz's point by stating that a significant characteristic of in-depth qualitative research is the use of multiple sources of evidence. By using these different data collection procedures and various sources, I was able to collect various perspectives and types of information to provide a good description and analysis of the perspectives of the women's group, the reasons that motivated the women to be advocates for girls' education, their experiences with their association, and the changes they went through as a result of their participation. Below is a timeline of my data collection methods.

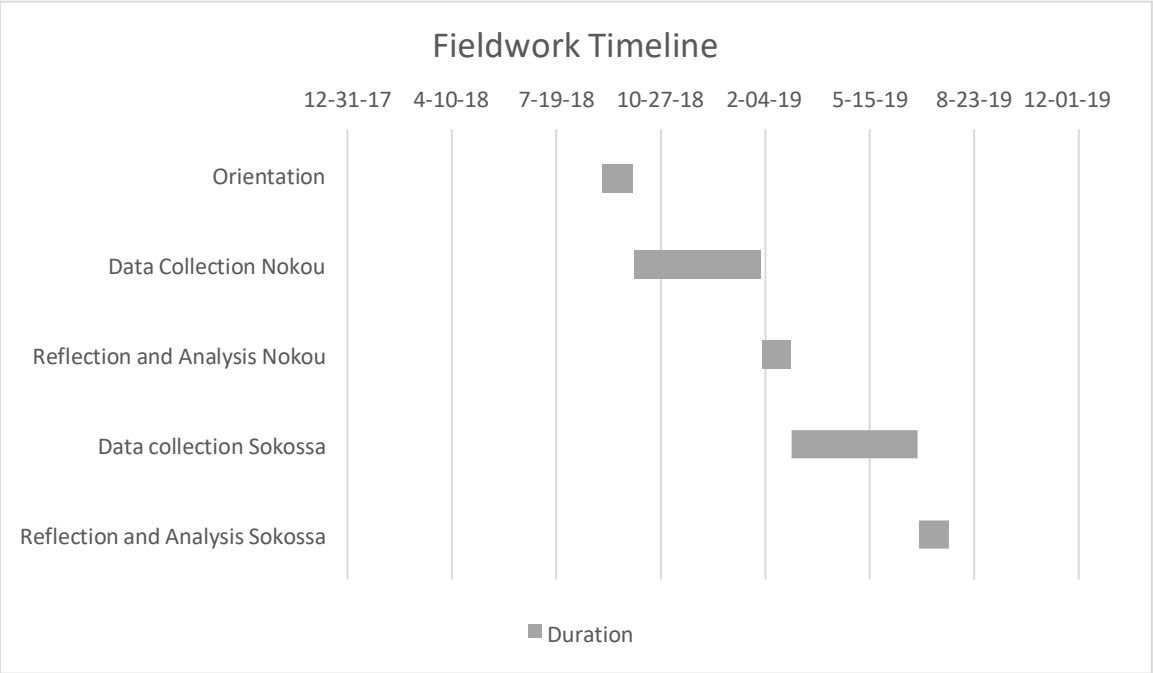


Figure 6: Timeline of fieldwork activities

5.4.1 Participant Observation

Participant observation represents the dual role of the researcher. To develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, she must become a participant in the life of the setting, while also maintaining the stance of an observer (Hoey, 2014). Although I was a participant observer in both communities throughout the entire data collection period, during the first three of months in each community, participant observation was the only data collection method. I concentrated solely on participant observation during the first three months in order to build trusting relationships with the MAs. The initial stage of participant observation provided me with a strong understanding of daily life for MAs, enhanced my relationships with all members of the MAs as well as with school teachers, school administration, and students, and strengthened my position in the community. I spent the first three months observing the members of the MA in the school in which they were volunteering. After this period, once I established familiarity with each of the women, I spent some time with each member of the MAs, observing them both in the school and in their community – joining

them at the market, assisting them in their home activities, going to the agriculture fields with them, and learning more about their activities outside of the school environment.

My days often began before sunrise, with the call for prayers being announced in the community. I would spend my mornings chatting with members in my housing complex as they were either coming back from their agriculture activities (around 6:30 a.m.) or heading out to the market. Following this, I would walk to the MA President's house to check in, see how she is and what her plans were for the day, before walking to the school. Often, I would stop and chat with students, community members, or the market kiosks before arriving at the school around 7:30 a.m. When I would arrive at the school, often the members of the MAs were completing their set-up for the day (collecting the firewood, setting up the tables, cleaning their work environment). I attempted to observe and participate in all parts of their life. I would observe the activities of the MA members, their interactions with the school director, the teachers, the students, the community members, their conversations with one another, and their participation in school meetings. During this time, I engaged in informal conversations with the MA members, the school director, teachers, and parents, taking detailed field notes to record my observations on a daily basis as well as recording the conversations on my audio-recorder.

Participant observation was an effective method for my data collection because it allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge of the social environment (Uldam & McCurdy, 2013). In reference to its application to gain an understanding of social movements, Litcherman (1998, p. 402, as cited in Uldam & McCurdy, 2013) indicated that participant observation is particularly relevant for social movements that are made up of micro-actions which take place every day and are often taken for granted. My attention during my daily participant observation was to focus on the activities the MAs. This involved observing where the members of the MA would participate, their relationship to the school director, teacher, and parents, their role at the school, whether they would be invited to meetings, how they worked together, and their sphere of activity. Participant observation enabled me to understand the context, including the daily minutiae that participants might not think to discuss in an interview.

5.4.2 Fieldnotes

During my data collection, I took extensive fieldnotes of all the activities I observed, the conversations I heard, and the ideas that came to mind with regard to key themes. I jotted descriptive information, in which I attempted to accurately document the settings, actions, behaviours, and conversations I observed. I filled eight notebooks with handwritten notes and typed over one thousand pages of field notes on my laptop computer. At the beginning of my data collection, my observations were very descriptive, jotting down the ambiance of the setting, where MAs would visit in the school, the role of each member of the MA in the school, how often the MAs would intervene in classrooms, the dynamics in the conversations they had with different members of the community, my impact in the situation I observed, etc. Once I gained familiarity with the context, I focused less on descriptive documentation, and took a reflexive approach to my fieldnotes – documenting my impressions and emotional experiences of the actions observed and statements heard, as well as my ideas, questions, and concerns during the observation.

These reflections were essential during my data analysis, as I compared the findings with my own reflections to check my assumptions and biases as I observed. These reflective pieces were also used to engage in dialogue with my research assistants, who often accompanied me in the field. I used these reflective pieces to gain their feedback on the observations and if they had similar impressions, and to begin our preliminary analysis. The feminist tool, reflexivity, helped me situate myself and critically reflect on the research process (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Rose, 1997). I questioned my reactions and assumptions, and wrote about how others reacted too, so that my notes also consider the concerns of those around me (Emerson et al., 1995). My fieldnotes trace my thinking about the research design, and interpretations in the field. At the end of all my fieldnotes, I would end with three questions “What surprised me?” (to track my assumptions), “What intrigued me?” (to track positionality), and “What disturbed me?” (to track the tensions within my values, attitudes, and belief systems). Writing fieldnotes about my everyday life in Benin as a participant observer helped me develop a more nuanced understanding of context, beyond what I would have learned in interviews alone.

5.4.3 Interviews

During the last month of my data collection in each community, I conducted semi-structured one-to-one interviews with all the members of the MA in Nokou and Sokossa, with the school director in each school, with the president and secretary of the PA in Nokou, and with country directors of two NGOs that support the work of MAs in Nokou. The purpose of the interviews with the MA members was to gain insights into how women have mobilized to enhance education for girls specifically, and more broadly how they have navigated barriers in the community to address gender inequalities. Participants were introduced to the research process; the voluntary and non-obligatory nature of the interviews was clearly explained, along with the objectives of the research and the type of interview questions. Interview durations ranged from approximately 30 minutes to one and a half hours and were held in the local language. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into French, before coding. During the interviews, I also took hand notes and jotted down comments as the participant talked.

A total of 26 interviews took place: 18 with members of the MA (10 in Nokou, and 8 in Sokossa), four with members of the PA (two in Nokou, and two in Sokossa), and one each with the school director in Nokou, the school director in Sokossa, the director of Alama (a local NGO in Nokou), and the country director of World Education. Each participant was asked to choose the interview venue. All the MA members chose their home as the venue, members of the PA picked a school classroom, the school directors selected their office, and the NGOs chose their head offices.

The interview questions were specific and characterized by the relationship with, and knowledge that I had acquired of, the participant during the previous months of participant observation. This made it possible to refer to an experience or practice I had observed as an example and ask them to elaborate on their understanding or intention during that experience. For example, when interviewing a member of the MA in Nokou about her activities in the school and practices in promoting gender equality, I said that I had noticed that she intentionally would ask boys to perform chores that were often associated with being a girl's responsibility (such as fetching water). She agreed and

expanded upon this to say she was trying to break the gender stereotype by asking boys and girls to perform different domestic duties. Particularly in cross-cultural interviews, “the importance of rapport cannot be overstated” (Ryen, 2003, p. 431) in fostering sufficient confidence among participants to pass information about themselves to the researcher.

During the interviews, I provided a lot of space for members to share stories, and for me to simply listen. Sometimes this included a lot of silences that normally I would identify as either being awkward or requiring my intervention to fill the void; However, I challenged myself to sit through the silence. Often participants would continue speaking and sharing their stories after a momentarily silence or reflection on their part. Storytelling is central to the oral narrative tradition of Beninese culture, and I worked to emphasize this process in the interviews – providing the time and space for participants to navigate their experiences and share the pieces they were comfortable sharing.

5.4.4 Member Check Interviews

Following the completion of the formal interviews, I conducted member-check interviews with four members of the MAs and one school director. In preparation for these interviews, we conducted initial coding of the completed interviews and created a list of emerging themes. During the member-check interviews, I shared with the participants the emergent themes, asked the participants whether they agreed or disagreed with the themes, and asked questions to contextualize and probe for more detail. These member check interviews sought to affirm the accuracy of the emergent themes and their relevance for MAs and school directors in the school. The goal was not to affirm the validity of the themes and descriptions as an objective social reality, but rather to ensure a coherent understanding of participants’ perceptions and experiences (Koelsch, 2013).

5.4.5 Digital Storytelling

As part of the participatory component to ethnography, near the end of my data collection, members of the MAs were invited to come together and to create short four-to-six minute digital stories about an issue they want to explore further (i.e., advocacy,

mobilization, collaboration). Broadly speaking, digital storytelling is a participatory video approach used to narrate stories; it draws on the power of digitized images to support the content of the story (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). My aim was to use digital storytelling as a method to include women as collaborators in the research–giving them the agency and opportunity to identify challenges and explore potential solutions to these challenges–while also accommodating the oral histories and storytelling practices of the Beninese community.

For women in Benin, stories are central to their lives. They have been used to collect, deposit, analyze, store, and disseminate information and as instruments of socialization (Chilisa, 2012). Indeed, storytelling and oral narratives have been commonly used to discuss day-to-day experiences and practices, to create solidarity among women and build a sense of community among those who have similar experiences (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Through storytelling and oral narratives, West African women have been able to create solidarity and empower themselves by creating spaces where they unpack their lived experiences and strategize about the options available to them (Gillespie, 1998). Building on the strength of storytelling and oral narratives to empower women, digital storytelling approach seeks “to encourage people to give voice (and image and sound) to their life experiences” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, pg. 158).

As a feminist qualitative researcher, I hoped that digital storytelling would enable me to open up opportunities for participants to explore issues that affect their lives and derive solutions from their own experiences and perspectives (Moletsane et al., 2009). I particularly hoped that it would help me gain insights into the views of women on difficult subjects, including their feelings about living with illiteracy as adults. As I was to find through the digital storytelling process, illiteracy is a source of shame for many women. The goal of the digital storytelling process was not only to work with rural women to produce digital stories and express their views, but more importantly to support them to challenge and change attitudes around girls’ and adult women’s education, and the dominant images and narratives around gender inequality, rural women, and empowerment. As a feminist, I believe that the importance of those affected by gender inequalities being positioned as protagonists in taking action in their everyday lives

cannot be overestimated. The research centred on a recognition of the importance of the participation of those most affected–women–in mapping issues of importance to themselves.

To be able to guide participants through the digital storytelling workshops in my doctoral work, I had to gain the expertise required to successfully facilitate people through workshops with the highest level of creative, educational, and ethical consideration. As such, I took part in three trainings in digital storytelling hosted by StoryCenter[12]. The first was an "Introduction to Digital Storytelling Webinar" which provided an introduction to the concept of digital storytelling, how it is used in different advocacy sectors, and how it can be a tool for agency. The second training I attended was a three-day workshop, where I had the opportunity to create my own digital story. This training ignited my passion to include digital storytelling in my doctoral work as I experienced first-hand the transformative potential of digital storytelling. The third training was a one-week Digital Storytelling Facilitator training that provided the foundational skills for leading digital storytelling workshops in Benin.

Engaging MAs in Digital Storytelling

Facilitator Training

Each digital storytelling workshop was co-facilitated by my two research assistants and myself. To prepare for the digital storytelling workshops, I worked with my research assistants and trained them as facilitators of digital storytelling. I hosted a two-day workshop for my research assistants in digital storytelling. On the first day of this training, I covered the theories informing participatory visual methodologies, the steps and techniques for using digital storytelling, and issues related to visual ethics. On the second day of the training, we went through the workshop content and practiced the different components and techniques of using digital storytelling–learning the different

[12] StoryCenter is a non-profit organization located in San Francisco, USA, that provides workshops and trainings in storytelling methodologies. They create spaces for transforming lives and communities through the acts of listening to and sharing stories. They support individuals and organizations across the globe to share their stories and work on different projects as they related to social justice, education, arts, civic engagement, health services, human rights, and environment, among others.

types of images that can be taken, how to use the voice-over microphone, how to use the online software for editing, the schedule for the workshops, and their roles and responsibilities. The research assistants were essential in helping the participants get through the various phases of the digital storytelling process.

Community-Based Digital Storytelling Workshops

We hosted five half-day workshops during a span of one week in each community. The workshops were held during school holidays, where the women were not expected to be at the school. In consultation with the members of the MA, we tailored the workshop to five half-day workshops rather than three full-day workshops, to give women the opportunity to work in the fields or in the market during the rest of the day. The workshop in Nokou (North Benin) was attended by seven participants and the workshop in Sokossa (South Benin) had six participants.

Day 1

On the first day of the workshops, we introduced participants to the digital storytelling process, and using my laptop, showed two examples of digital stories, followed by a discussion on visual ethics, discussed in the next section. Over the course of this first day, we gave participants prompts about various challenges and barriers to girls' education, and they brainstormed and shared stories of their personal experiences regarding these challenges. For example, some prompts included:

- 'Tell me a story about the difficulties of your daughters going to school',
- 'Tell me about a time when you saw clearly that boys and girls were not treated equally, and how you reacted to this',
- 'Tell me about a time you worked together, to solve an issue in the community/school',
- 'Tell me about a situation that showed you how important it is for your daughters to go to school'.

We asked them to work in pairs, taking turns to reflect and share their stories to one another. As the participants shared their story, the research assistants and myself

would sit with each pair and listen to their stories, probing them (often asking why) to assist them in thinking through the story they were sharing, or to support them in providing more details.

Day 2

On the second day, we organised a Story Circle, where each participant chose a story of her own that she had shared with her partner in the first exercise on day 1, which she now shared with the group. Each participant was given 15 minutes to share her story. As each participant shared her story in her mother tongue, the first research assistant wrote down word for word the story in the mother tongue, while the second research assistant translated each sentence into French for me to form the basis of the story script.

In the Story Circle, participants identified many issues critical to girls' education. Some of these were factors that prevented or discouraged girls from attending, ranging from corporal punishment, burdens of work at home, unmet needs for water and sanitation at school, to negative perceptions of schooling on the part of parents or girls themselves. Some of the topics discussed were potentially helpful in the struggle to keep girls in school and avoid high dropout rates, including collective action in the community, and promoting ideas of female autonomy, and women's empowerment. During the Story Circle, when one woman would share a specific struggle, other women would agree with "mmmmm" and "ooooooo" or by shaking their heads. For example, a member of the MA shared the story of not having autonomy to make the decision about her daughter's future, and having to send her to a neighbouring city to live with a relative where she would be used as a domestic labourer. Following her vocalizing this point, there was silence, and the storyteller looked to the ground when two of the members got up, walked to the storyteller and told her "We know", and then followed by hugging her. Although the emotional effect during this story was hard to endure, as all members felt the pain of the storyteller, it also created a solidarity among the participants, many of them relating to the story being shared.

In the evening of the second day of the workshop, the research assistants and I worked rigorously to compare the scripts written in the mother tongue language with the

French translations, ensuring that the French translations mirrored as closely as possible the voice and message of the storyteller. The French scripts would be later used for subtitles in the videos screened to key stakeholders. We also identified areas in the script where we could cut repetition, add more details, and required clarification.

Day 3

On the third day, the research assistants and I worked with each participant to edit their scripts. I read the script in French (which the research assistant then translated to the local language, using the script she had drafted) and we worked with the participants to confirm if this was the story she was sharing. The edits made to the script were to add more details where necessary, to cut out repetition, and to clarify certain parts of their stories. These scripts were now ready to be used as voiceovers for the digital stories.

Following the script edits, we facilitated a brief training on photography, for example, the different types of camera shots (long shot, medium shot, close-up, extreme close-up), the use of lighting, and the difference between explicit and implicit imagery. Participants were given time to brainstorm pictures that would connect with their story, and to think about what message they wanted to convey with the picture. After working in pairs and practicing taking different types of shots, participants, along with the research assistants and myself went into the community to take pictures using their cellphones. In some cases, the members wanted to take pictures of a specific community space that reminded them of one aspect of their story, in others they wanted to take a picture of their organization together, or they took more literal shots of a house to be used in the part of the script that referred to their house. The pictures taken were then printed on a portable printer and were used to create the storyboard for their digital story. Viewing the hard copy of the storyboard, the participants decided whether they liked how the photos depicted their story and, in some cases, members went out into their community and took other photos they thought better represented the idea they wanted to portray.

Figure 7: Women experimenting with their cell phone

Figure 8: Women taking pictures for their digital story

Day 4

On the fourth day of the workshops, we recorded each participant's voiceover for their story. We began with the research assistants taking turns to work with each participant to practice their script. The research assistant would read a sentence in the local language, followed by the participant repeating the sentence. We practiced saying the script slowly, using intonation, and articulating each sentence. Once each participant was ready, we used voice recorders to record the script. As practiced, during the voice recording session, the research assistant would read the script and the participant would repeat the sentence. While I was working with one research assistant to record the voice over for each participant, the other research assistant was working with those not recording their voice overs to create the digital stories using WeVideo, a

web-based video editing platform, using the storyboards the participants had drafted the day before.

Figure 9: Women voice recording their story

In the evening, I worked diligently with the research assistants to edit the voiceovers–removing the voice of the research assistant, increasing or decreasing the volume–and to add the voiceovers to the digital videos.

Day 5

The fifth day of the workshop was spent screening each participant's digital video to the MA. The screening was followed by dialogue, reflection, and analysis of the themes that were generated in the stories, as well as images that resonated with the participants. Through this analysis, participants collectively identified the key issues they

wanted to highlight, and the videos that depicted these key issues. The intent of using the digital stories to stimulate collective awareness-raising leading to action was a very conscious aim in the research process.

Screening of Digital Stories

Near the end of my fieldwork, a screening was organized for key stakeholders and decision-makers (NGOs, donors, gender focal points, activists, government ministries), hosted by the US Embassy in Cotonou, Benin. Six videos were shown at this culminating screening (three from participants in Nokou, in the North, and three from participants in Sokossa, in the South). The video producers–all members of the MAs–were the honoured guests at the screening. Screening of the videos was followed by an open dialogue between the video producers and the guests on the key issues highlighted in the digital stories.

Figure 10: Screening digital stories at high-level event in Cotonou

Figure 11: Members of the MA speaking on the panel at the screening

During the screening, many key stakeholders were shocked that they were not aware of the existence of MAs and identified opportunities of collaboration and the need to extend the activities of MAs (entrepreneurial, leadership). Men in the group acknowledged that although they live in the same society, they are often not aware of the inequalities and struggles that women experience. Others acknowledged that the videos brought to life the lived experiences and impact of inequalities, and the videos brought to light–in a tangible way–the long-lasting impact of these inequalities. In this way, the potential of the research process to create materials useful to advocacy was realized.

5.5 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, there is no one simple way to approach data analysis. Most qualitative research scholars provide useful guidelines to help researchers with suitable ways to analyze data. For example, Stake (1995) argues that the process of

analysis requires making sense of the data by separating and condensing them in order to interpret them meaningfully. Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (1989) define data analysis as the process of "bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat" (p. 112). Other scholars argue that data collection and analysis are simultaneous processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). Miles and Huberman recommend early analysis because they believe that such a process helps the researcher to think about the existing data and collect new or even better data.

As described previously in the data collection section, I collected my data from diverse sources. As part of my data analysis, I needed to reconcile that diversity of information, described by Baxter and Jack (2008) as strengthening the findings because "various strands of data are braided together to promote a greater understanding of the case" (p. 554). To accomplish that reconciliation, I used the constant comparative method of thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the entire case, rather than an embedded analysis of specific aspects (Yin, 2009). I began analyzing data thematically as soon as it was collected (starting with documents collected prior to fieldwork) and used the early analyses to guide the continuation of my data collection. A thematic analysis is a common approach in which sections of text, such as a transcript of an interview, are broken down into units. Typically, each is only a single sentence, but occasionally an anecdote or story, and always interpretable as a single cohesive idea. I then sorted and coded the units according to common ideas (Schwandt, 2007). The themes, or categories, generally emerge from the sorted data after an extensive and iterative process of consideration (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Creswell (2009) describes a step-by-step process for thematic analysis (p. 185) that informed my study, beginning with the collection of raw data and concluding with interpretation as the final step. The seven phases for analytic procedure outlined by Creswell include:

1. Collecting raw data
2. Organizing and preparing for analysis

3. Reading through all the data
4. Coding the data
5. Developing themes
6. Interrelating themes
7. Interpreting the meaning of themes

Creswell (2009) cautions against the interpretation of the steps as an ordered or hierarchical process; stages may occur simultaneously or in a different order, as needed, due to the interconnectedness of the analytic tasks. In the remainder of this section, I will describe each of the stages as it pertains to my data analysis.

5.5.1 Organizing and Preparing

In this phase, data were organized and prepared for analysis (Creswell, 2009). Tasks at this stage included transcribing all interview data, typing observation and field notes, and preparing the data for coding. All data were double-spaced, formatted on the left half of the page, keeping a wide right-hand margin for writing codes and notes. Texts were separated into short paragraph-length units with a line break in-between whenever the topic or subtopic appeared to change (Saldana, 2015). Following this organization, all fieldnotes were printed and coil-bound into a book.

5.5.2 Reading Through the Data

The goal of this stage was to gain an overall sense of the data (Creswell, 2009). To align with the evolving design of qualitative research, I read through and examined the data as I was collecting the data. Therefore, by the time I collected all of my data, I had read and reread my data repeatedly and listened to audio recordings of interviews multiple times. During this phase I reflected on the overall ideas the participants were sharing, wrote notes in the margins, and began recording my thoughts about the data.

5.5.3 Coding the Data

The third stage, data coding, began the detailed analysis process (Creswell, 2009). In this phase, I followed Johnny Saldana's (2015) guide to coding by using what

he terms ‘descriptive’ coding and ‘in vivo’ coding. Descriptive coding summarizes in a word or a short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. I combined the descriptive codes with ‘in vivo’ codes, which refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data. In other words, ‘in vivo’ codes are “the terms used by participants themselves” (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). I used this method for coding to ensure I honoured the participants’ voices throughout the process. During this phase, I trained both my research assistants in coding and thematic analysis and asked them to code some of the fieldnotes and interview transcripts in order to compare the codes we applied. The discussions around our coding led to our initial analysis of the data collected and informed our engagement with the research community, particularly during our member check interviews.

As part of the coding process, I and the research assistants wrote bi-weekly analytic memos. I used ten of Johnny Saldana’s (2015) prompt suggestions to guide our analytic memos:

1. Reflect on and write about how you personally relate to the participants/phenomenon
2. Reflect and write about your code choices and their operational definitions
3. Reflect on and write about emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions
4. Reflect on and write about the participants’ routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships
5. Reflect on and write about the possible networks and processes (link, connections, overlaps, flows) among the codes, patterns, categories, themes, and assertions
6. Reflect on and write about an emergent or related existing theory
7. Reflect on and write about any problems with the study
8. Reflect and write about future directions for the study
9. Reflect and write about tentative answers to your study’s research questions
10. Reflect and write about the final report for the study.

These questions helped guide my thinking during my data collection, bringing my thinking back to my research objectives, helping me connect the dots between the data from different sites, allowing me to question my assumptions, and served as preliminary analytical pieces that helped guide the writing of my dissertation.

5.5.4 Describe the Emergent Categories and Themes

The fourth stage builds on the categories established in stage three. We used the categories as a foundation upon which to build thick descriptions of the categories and themes, as well as incorporating the research settings and participants (Creswell, 2009). As I reviewed the codes and the corresponding data points, we began to group them together into categories. The initial categories were shared with members of the MAs during member check interviews to get feedback. Charmaz writes that theoretical sampling "builds a critical self-correcting step into the analytical process" (2003, p. 325). Theoretical sampling can occur through several different means; most often, it is interpreted as purposeful sampling in which participants are selected based on their experience or identity that contributes to an emergent theme. It can also involve asking participants targeted questions, or supplemental information about linkages between categories and using the resulting data to verify or modify the theory (Morse, 2014). In this case, I used both of these approaches: some participants were selected based on their expressions, demonstrations and experiences of advocacy for gender equality in education, and all participants in member check interviews were asked targeted questions with the objective of verifying and modifying the emergent theory.

5.5.5 Interrelating the Themes and Interpreting

In these final two stages, the themes are connected and interwoven with a narrative to communicate the findings of the study, and the researcher then interprets the findings (Creswell, 2009). At this point in the data analysis process, I made connections between my study and the existing literature, identified any lessons learned (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and made recommendations for future studies. The results of this stage are presented at the end of each data chapter.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

In addition to ethical approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, I engaged in a practice of continuously negotiated ethics to ensure the comfort and security of my research participants. Both my research assistants received extensive training on ethical issues (confidentiality, anonymity, consent, audio recording, making ethical decisions, ensuring that the participants' well-being is at the heart of the project). In collaboration with the research assistants, we drafted an ethical protocol to cover procedures for conducting participant observations, individual interviews, and s to address issues of harm that might arise as a result of the project. Participants were informed of the nature of the project, the specific project objectives, what their participation would entail, and the methods that would be used to collect data from the onset of the project, as well as every couple of weeks, or when a specific issue arose.

5.6.1 Ethical Considerations Using Digital Storytelling

A second ethical consideration relates to the use of digital storytelling. Although digital storytelling has the potential to contribute a participatory dimension to qualitative research and practice, this innovative approach can also open up space for ethical issues around: boundaries between research and advocacy; consent to participate; power of shaping stories; representation and harm; and confidentiality (Clark, 2010; Wang, 2001). Various ethical considerations arose in this research process. Although collaborative methods allow researchers to deconstruct power dynamics in the context of international development research, it is important to also explore the ethical dilemmas of participatory methods, and whether these methods truly build participant capacity to become co-producers of knowledge (Moletsane et al., 2009).

One key issue for me was that feminist researchers need to be mindful, by reflecting on their methods of intervention, of how they shape the narrative of the stories being told. For example, although participants are encouraged to tell their personal stories, sometimes facilitators may help 'shape' the narrative to produce stories that resonate with audiences, inadvertently superimposing their own agendas. Using prompts, such as 'tell me about a time you worked together as women, to solve an

issue in the community/school', and 'tell me a story about a situation that helped you understand what being a woman means to you' help guide the participants in focusing their stories. However, these prompts can also reduce the autonomy of voice designated for the participant.

Similarly, I will note here that using digital storytelling as a participatory methodology to deconstruct power dynamics is more about the process of digital storytelling (sharing stories, reflecting, feedback, building unity among participants) and less about the end product (a polished digital story that can be distributed to key stakeholders). Given the significance and popularity of using 'participatory' approaches in development contexts, it is critical to work out the ethical issues, ensuring that our well-meaning interventions do not in any way further marginalize the very people we intend to support. As Relebohile Moletsane et al. (2009) argue, it is the responsibility of all of us (scholars, activists, practitioners) to anticipate the direct and indirect consequences of participatory projects, and to "mediate the negative impact of such consequences through project activities that are explicitly ethical" (p. 328).

A range of other ethical issues concerns visual images. First, throughout the workshops, I stressed the importance of ethical considerations when gathering images, especially when people can be recognized. Often, I suggested ways to represent people without showing identifiable faces, when doing so could put people at risk of harm. During the workshop, I also conducted a visual ethics activity where participants were given various photos, and then were asked whether the subject in the photo would be recognizable to the community. For example, one image showed facial markings, another had a visible store name (that meant the community could be identified), and another image clearly showed the subject's face.

Although community-based video production offers a unique view into the ways in which participants choose to depict their lives, it also presents ethical challenges with regards to confidentiality. Considering the participants spoke about how critical it was to show their videos to school directors and to host a screening for community leaders, we had to have discussions about the potential reaction of the community to the issues being discussed in the digital stories they created.

Ethical engagement is a continual process, not a one-time activity. At the beginning of each workshop day, both the research assistants and I engaged in a dialogue around ethics (for example, ethics of visual images, ethics of using a voiceover, ethics involved in video screenings).

5.6.2 Consent

Securing the consent of research participants is a critical ethical component in any research project involving human participants. Reflecting on Shamim and Qureshi's (2013) claim that obtaining consent at the outset of the project is inadequate, and that continuous negotiation and reaffirmation of participants' comfort and commitment throughout the research process is more appropriate, I followed a multi-step process to ensure participants' consent. Prior to beginning school observation, I explained the objectives of the project and gave an overview of the research plan to all members of the MA, the school director, and the president of the PA. All explanations were given orally in the local language (Bariba in the Nokou and Fon in the Sokossa). Each member was provided the opportunity to not be observed. Each interview also began with an explanation of the rights of the research participant, including the voluntary nature of their participation, stressing that at any point they could decide not to participate, and all of the information they had provided would no longer be considered in the data analysis and any records of it would be destroyed.

I followed ethical practices established by other researchers that the consent forms be read aloud and discussed, using explanation and examples to ensure understanding (Brody & Waldron, 2000; Logan, Walker, & Cole, 2008). All participants were explicitly reminded throughout the process that they could withdraw if they wished and that withdrawing would not affect them negatively in any way. At the completion of each interview, this opportunity was presented again so that participants had multiple opportunities to qualify and negotiate their involvement (Halse & Honey, 2005). Although participants were given the option to choose pseudonyms, all members of the MAs wanted to have their own names used in the research. We also paid attention to the comfort level of participants during both the observations and interviews and, if a participant appeared uncomfortable, we offered them the opportunity to stop the

notetaking or the interview, reassuring them that there would be no negative consequences. In one case, we observed discomfort in using the audio recording device. In this case, we observed one month into the data collection that the MA members were looking at the audio recording device more often. After consulting with the research assistant, we decided the following day we would not wear the audio recording device and we explained to the members of the MA the purpose of the audio-recording, that it was to remember the conversations for when we wrote the fieldnotes at night. We said if they were uncomfortable, they could listen to the audio-recording or ask us to not record them. We did not audio record for two days to ensure their comfort, and then on the third day one of the members said they were okay with our audio-recording the casual conversations.

5.6.3 Positionality

An awareness of my positionality as an outsider/researcher has been essential to my ability to do this research. My position undoubtedly created both barriers and opportunities that made it difficult for me to be fully aware of my limitations. I sought to develop an approach that recognized that, as an outsider in the communities where I work, I have limited ability to truly understand and/or speak on behalf of those communities. I am deeply aware of how the history of colonialism has shaped research in Africa. Research has been used for political purposes that have undermined African communities. Aware of the challenges around Western academics conducting research in Africa, I ensured that a reflexive approach involving analysis of my perspective, bias and influence on the research process and analysis, and draws themes from data collection, as opposed to imposing a predetermined theory onto the data, was interwoven in all phases of my doctoral research. To navigate this reflexive approach and strive to do the most good and the least harm, Vanner (2015) developed a methodological framework for a Western feminist conducting research in a postcolonial context[13]. It entails: 1) a collaborative approach; 2) situated ethics; 3) cultural and

[13] Vanner (2015) defined the term postcolonial as “previously colonized space that is now technically independent. It can describe a nation-state or an area, group of people, texts, or ideas within a nation-state that may or may not be postcolonial itself. These spaces are officially

linguistic sensitivity; and 4) participatory research. My approach to research, which I elaborate on above, combines these methodological considerations as I draw on research traditions that seek alternative ways of doing research with participants, communities, and organizations (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Maguire, 2006), but that also strive to think through broader historical and ongoing structures that impact the everyday.

It must be noted that I am a first-generation Canadian, born to Iranian parents who were subjected to various human rights violations and gender inequalities in their home country, and renewed forms of prejudice when they immigrated to Canada. As a child born to immigrant parents, and an ethnic minority woman going to school in a predominantly English community, I have both witnessed and experienced first-hand discrimination based on my race, class, and gender. My experience, combined with the stories of injustice shared by my parents, informs my values, opinions, and passion to explore issues of social justice. This passion for social justice and the foundations of this research project were further ignited when I travelled to Benin in 2008 to teach in a primary school. I worked in a range of settings: in both rural and urban environments, and in private and public sectors.

My aim was to integrate fully into the communities, and make profound friendships, but I became aware that Benin was used as an experimental site by many international visitors, where academics conducted research, foreign NGOs implemented projects, and volunteers gained experience by working in placements. All these engagements were typically short term. At the end, the visitors would leave with their data, findings, and experience. This experience made me critical of my own privilege and the power dynamics involved with Western feminists conducting research in postcolonial contexts. Although I did go on to do doctoral study in Benin, I wanted to produce research that gives back to the people involved. It is this fundamental principle that I have sought to weave into every phase of my doctoral study.

However, my social position and identity are not singular or fixed, but conflicted and changing as I move between different contexts, relations, and audiences. Although

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decolonized but are usually characterized by new imperialism shaped by the economic, political, military, and cultural hegemony of the West within the context of globalization" (p. 1)

in Canada, I am labeled as an ethnic minority–being of Iranian descent–this power dynamic shifts in Benin where I am labeled as 'White' because of my fair skin tone in comparison to the Beninese population's. As a result of this label, in Benin I am afforded a lot of power and privilege that I do not necessarily experience in Canada, nor am I accustomed to. While in Benin, I tried to recognize the opportunities afforded to me for being Canadian and to use these opportunities to raise awareness of the advocacy efforts of the MAs.

Conscious of the fact that research is not neutral, I always tried to use methods that include participants in meaningful ways throughout the project. This is especially important when we are working in contexts that have a history of colonization and oppression. As qualitative researchers, we must be careful to not cast participants as a peripheral homogenous group who often need help from outsiders (Chilisa, 2010), nor to view host communities as merely informants or objects in case studies rather than as possible collaborators in the research (Nnaemeka, 2004). This is a challenge for Western researchers conducting research in a foreign setting, particularly if they spend limited time in the field and therefore have little social connection with the host community. As such, I drew on the participatory visual methodologies and my close collaboration with my research assistants to challenge the relationship between power and knowledge, and to offset some of the power tensions that exist between Western researchers working in postcolonial contexts.

5.6.4 Language

One challenge that I had not anticipated prior to conducting fieldwork was that of language. As I negotiated entry into this research collective, my understanding of Benin as a former French colony initially led me to assume that my French language skills learned through French Immersion school in Ontario would be helpful for fieldwork. Indeed, in my encounters with government officials during fieldwork, my French skills offered critical points of connection for building trust and rapport. However, 55 other languages are spoken in Benin. Given that my research worked with grassroots rural women, I was not always able to conduct research in French. I was not conversant in Bariba or Fon, the local ethnic languages that are used by many of the women in these

communities. I studied both Bariba and Fon to enable me to have basic conversations with community members and members of MAs.

However, in order to conduct research sensitive to cultural differences and accurate about the voices and perspectives of the members of women's groups, I needed to partner with local researchers who worked with me to ensure that my questions were culturally sensitive and appropriate, and that I achieved an accurate understanding of the research sites and participants. Seeing that I relied heavily on my research assistants, I worked diligently to ensure that they understood the research project, the methodological approach, and the conceptual framework that informed the work we were doing. I was fortunate to have had incredible research assistants who continuously provided insightful observations that contributed to data analysis, provided clear translations and transcriptions, and enabled an environment for honest dialogue. Following the completion of data collection, we proceeded to work together again as consultants, and we are currently in the process of co-publishing on our experience of conducting qualitative research. The opportunity to discuss the emerging analysis with my research assistants and Dr. Doubogan was invaluable to ensuring that I was properly situating the findings in the local and national context.

5.7 Distinctions Between the Northern and Southern Regions of Benin

My research was completed in two research sites. The first was in Nokou, a town in the north of Benin and the second was in Sokossa, a village in the south of Benin. Considering the research sites were in two regions with significant differences, it is important to provide a broad overview of what distinguishes. The map below shows the division of the country between north and south.

Figure 12: Map of Southern Benin

5.7.1. Northern Benin

In the north, much of the region is focused on agriculture. The major crops are cotton, groundnut, cassava, cashew, and yams. The population in northern Benin depends on agriculture to sustain their livelihoods. Agriculture is typically practiced on farms, with an average size of one to two hectares, where farmers combine crop growing with raising small livestock such as poultry and pigs. For the most part, crops produced by rural communities in Northern Benin are used for direct consumption. If there is a surplus, it is sold wholesale to traders or on local markets at a very low price. Many of the adults in Northern Benin have been raised while working in the agricultural sector, and have not had access to formal education, making communication in Benin's lingua franca, French, difficult. Only 14% of women in Northern Benin are literate, and low socio-economic status correlates with low school attendance (INSAE, 2013).

Northern Benin is also particularly characterised by poverty. Extreme poverty[14] affects 64% of the population of Northern Benin, specifically the Department of Atacora, Donga, and Alibori (INSAE, 2013). It is important to note is that the fertility rate in the north is double that of the south– for example in Littoral. This is linked to the lower access to contraception pills in the North of Benin. Likewise, there is a much lower percentage of women receiving prenatal and maternity care in the north than in the South, and child mortality is higher in the north (INSAE, 2013).

The majority of the population in Northern Benin are Muslim. Islam is perceived as a way of life, and the society uses religion to perpetuate women's low status. Religious and local cultural values are indistinguishable in Benin. Islam is interpreted in ways that often deny women their basic human rights. Most Islamic preaching encourages women to stay at home, be submissive, quiet, patient, and tolerant, for it is believed that only submissive wives give birth to powerful children. Rural women accept these rules, which keep them from participating in decision-making in their families and their communities, as granted. Given that Northern Benin is predominantly Muslim, there are a number of Koranic schools in each village.

In recent years, there have been increases in migration from neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria. The main languages spoken in Northern Benin are Bariba, Dendi, Fula, and Somba.

5.7.2. Southern Benin

Approximately 65% of Beninese live in the southern part, which is densely populated. An estimated 220 to 442 people per km^2 live in the south of Benin, compared to 22–24 people per km^2 in the north. Most of the people in Benin live in or around large cities, such as Cotonou and Porto Novo. Southern Benin includes the following departments: Littoral, Ouémé, Atlantique, Mono, Couffo, Plateau and Zou. In the south, much of the region is focused on fisheries and vegetable crops such as corn and cowpea. Similarly, given their close proximity to the Nigerian border, many engage in informal trading and are involved with providing transport to Nigeria.

[14] According to the World Bank, extreme poverty means spending less than $1.25 USD per day.

As mentioned earlier, Southern Benin has customarily been supplied with more amenities—such as educational institutions, government offices, and private-sector institutions providing employment opportunities to citizens—given that the capital and largest cities are located in the south. Although Christianity is the main religion followed in the south, many practice Christianity along with Vodun. The main languages spoken in Southern Benin are Fon, Yoruba, Mina, and Aja.

In Benin, it is common practice for public servants (health workers, educators, government administrators, military officials) to relocate from the south to the north as a requirement for their work term. Many branches of the public service have strict policies on the time one must serve in northern or rural regions (Sene, 2015). This causes many tensions between populations of the south and the north, given that those from the south are from different linguistic/ethnic groups than those in the north, leaving no other common language (outside of French). In the next chapter, I will go into more detail on the specificities of each research site and their social context.

Summary of the Chapter

This research describes a collection of qualitative methods, including participant observation, fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews, member check interviews, and digital storytelling. The research fieldwork was guided by my desire to do the most good and least harm, and to find ways to respect local knowledge systems and create a space where participants were engaged to reflect on important issues in their lives. Ensuring that reflexivity and participation inform all stages of this research, my methodological approach has sought to find alternative ways of doing traditional research and providing opportunities to support participant-produced constructions of knowledge. Key to all of these processes is understanding of the researcher's perspective and positionality in shaping the lens through which the research is understood; efforts were taken to validate the initial results and analysis with participants as well as broader community members. The methods designed in this research were chosen to reflect both the analytical perspective of the researcher as well as to bring forward the voices, knowledge, experiences, and values of the participants.

Chapter Six: The Village and School Contexts

During my fieldwork in each site, I lived in the school communities, participating in social activities such as attending Parent Association (PA) meetings, Mothers' Association (MA) meetings, engaging in Friday prayers at the mosque, attending Sunday mass at the church, celebrating Beninese holidays, shopping in the market, visiting with women leaders and community members after school hours, attending MA activities, greeting students in the street, and learning to cook local dishes. This integration helped build my familiarity with each community and provided a nuanced context to my research project. Chapter Six gives an outline of the key governing institutions in Nokou and Sokossa. Understanding the village and school environment is crucial to contextualizing the organization and work of the MAs. This contextualization helps discern the structures of power in place at the school and community level, and how members of the MAs navigate the various power structures and institutions. This chapter begins with the overall social context of each school (the community and regional characteristics), followed by the administrative structures within the school, and ends with the characteristics of each MA.

Nokou

Regional context.

My first research site was in Nokou, a rural village in the Alibori department of the north of Benin (250 km from Parakou, the second-largest city in Benin, and 650 km from Cotonou–the largest city in Benin).

Figure 13: Map of Administrative divisions in Benin

The Alibori department is predominantly rural and had one of the lowest poverty rates in the country at 43% in 2012 (IMF, 2015). Nokou sits within the commune of Kandi, which was founded by the Bariba Kingdom. As such, the people in surrounding towns and villages are mainly of Bariba ethnicity with some Dendi people who fled the wars during the foundation of the Oyo Empire (Deschamps, 2012). In 2010, the population of Kandi

was estimated at 117,547 inhabitants (INSAE, 2013). Kandi's climate has two contrasting seasons, rainy from April to October and dry from November to March. December, January and February form the season of Harmattan, characterized by a dry and dusty wind.

The commune of Kandi is the second biggest cotton-producing commune in Benin. Thus, the majority of the population either work in the cotton fields or on other crops (e.g. yam, cassava, corn). In recent years, many younger people have left the area, as they became disenchanted with farming and travelled to Nigeria to seek employment (Trillo and Hudgens, 2018). There were one bank, one hospital, one pharmacy, one police station, ten mosques, one cathedral, and 58 primary schools in Kandi. Kandi had one market that occurred every Thursday. Women from the various villages came to Kandi to sell their crops.

The commune of Kandi has ten *arrondissements* of 48 villages and towns. My research took place in the *arrondissement* of Kassakou which has an average family size of eight (INSAE, 2013), with approximately fifty percent of the population under 14 years old. The RNIE2[15] highway passes through Kassakou, connecting it to the town of Kandi several kilometres to the north. Most of Kassakou's residents participate in subsistence farming, and whatever crops they had in excess, they sold informally in their community. Within the *arrondissement* of Kassakou, there are three villages. The village where I stayed to do my research is Nokou, where there were two primary schools, one mosque, one health centre, and a small market to buy condiments or small vegetable crops. However, for bigger errands, people in Nokou went to Kandi, about a fifteen-minute drive. During my time in Nokou, I stayed in a complex approximately 10 minutes away from the school.

Village context – People, administrative, and organizational structures.

When I first arrived in Nokou, the Director of Alma (the local NGO), along with the President of the MA introduced me to the *chef de village*. Prior to meeting with the *chef de village,* I learned some phrases in Bariba and chose to address him in Bariba. This

[15] RNIE 2 is Benin's national highway. The main north-south highway, it runs the entire 785 km down the country's centre from the Niger River to Cotonou.

helped reduce any uneasiness with my arrival. I explained my study and the purpose of my visit to Nokou. I told him about the work that I would be doing with the MA of Nokou and my experience, having lived in Benin in 2008 and in 2015. The *chef de village* was supportive of my research, spoke highly of the MA's work and then wished me good luck with my project. Next, I set up a first meeting at Nokou Primary School which was facilitated by the project officer from Alma, with the members of the MA, the School Director, and the secretary of the PA. I introduced my project, my research assistants, and my previous experience in Benin. Following my introduction, the members of the group introduced themselves and explained some of the work they have been doing to advance girls' education. I gave the participants time to question me about the project. For much of the meeting, participants shared stories about the work they did at the school and in the community.

The estimated population of the village of Nokou was 4,750 (M: 2270, F: 2480), with an average family size of seven (INSAE, 2013). Some 50% of the population was 0-14 years of age and 45% of the population 15-59. The language most spoken in Nokou was Bariba, with very few women speaking French. Approximately ninety percent of the village population participated in subsistence farming (INSAE, 2013).

Within Kassakou are various administrative structures that have power socially, politically, and economically. In Nokou village is one traditional leader who supports the population in difficult times through traditional healing methods, spirituality, and providing guidance on traditional practices. The traditional leader also plays a role in development efforts, and is highly respected and trusted by the community . Along with the traditional leader, Nokou village also had a religious leader, who was Muslim. Given his spiritual leadership and the dominance of the religion in the area, the religious leader in Nokou had significant influence and authority over the community. Nokou is administered by a *chef de village* elected by the local council and who reports to the *chef d'arrondisement* in Kassakou. The *chef de village* represents the government in the village and administers documents such as resident certificates. He is responsible for issues in the public domain related to government administration, while the traditional and religious leaders are responsible for issues in the private domain. Therefore, in Nokou, political power is exercised not solely by official political authorities (such as the

chef de village), but also by officious ones (such as traditional leaders). Traditional leaders in rural Benin have significant power, specifically around mediating land issues and resolving disputes in the private domain. The traditional leader in Nokou had been in power for over 30 years, so the population had a closer relationship to the traditional leader.

Although a *chef de village* is a government functionary, it is important to note that village politics operate through a multiplicity of institutions, legitimacies, rules, and actors. This fluidity of power in institutions means that local populations–to a certain extent–can choose the institution they approach to resolve an issue. For example, with a theft, the community can take the case to the *chef de village*, the religious leader, or the police.

Other institutions with power in Nokou are the civil society organizations that have been implementing projects across various sectors (health, education, agriculture, environment, sanitation, infrastructure). Over the past ten years, Kandi, along with other northern communes, has become an epicentre for INGOs running development projects. These INGOs are funded by donors such as Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the USA. INGOs do not work directly with the community. Many are based in Parakou and fund local NGOs to deliver and facilitate project management in Kandi. These local NGOs have been collaborating with various community institutions (e.g. local councils, village associations, religious leaders) to facilitate projects across different sectors. There were 19 INGOs and 15 local NGOs working in Kandi to enhance the commune's development at the time of my research.

The most prominent local NGO working in Nokou was Alma, which has been in place since 1997 and had 23 employees at the time of this study. Alma works in marginalized areas to support the most vulnerable children and families. Their projects seek to improve local development across various sectors (health, education, water, hygiene, food security, women's empowerment). They initiate projects that take a participatory approach, advocate, mobilize communities to put pressure on decision-makers, and organize training to enhance local capacity, knowledge exchanges, and community sensitization. For the past two decades, Alma has been working with MAs, PAs, community leaders, local governments, and community members to enhance local

development across the various sectors. Much of their funding comes from donors (as listed above) through INGOs (World Education, CRS, MenEngage, CARE, Plan).

The approach taken by Alma with MAs is to mentor and build a relationship that continues once project funding has ended. Working with the MAs, Alma provides training, facilitates community dialogue around priority issues, and uses radio programming to spread awareness around issues such as girls' education, child trafficking, early/forced marriage etc. Alma supports the MAs in their self-initiative activities and local projects (e.g. repairing classrooms, purchasing school furnishings, digging wells) with grants of up to $1,000 USD to provide funds for 80% of an MA-identified priority project, if it can be completed in three months or less. The community is then required to contribute 20% to financing the project.

Schooling.

Within Kassakou, there were four public primary schools and one secondary school. Each primary school had six classrooms with approximately 50 students each. Each primary school had a PA and two of them had a MA, both of which were funded by Alma. Within the schools, there was a mix of community and public service teachers. As mentioned earlier, in Benin, teachers who graduate from teachers' college are public service members. Community teachers, however, have not completed teachers' college, nor do they have formal teacher training. Most community teachers had completed only secondary school (in some cases, only primary) and proved ill-equipped to teach. Community teachers fill the gap created by large student enrolments and are paid significantly less than public service teachers. At Nokou Primary School, there were seven classes (grades 1-6 plus a pre-primary) and seven teachers (M: 5, F: 2). Three of these teachers were public servants (one from the South, who did not speak Bariba), two were on a temporary contract, and two were community teachers. The ratio of teacher to student was approximately 1 to 60. Grades 1-4 had approximately seventy students per class while grades 5-6 had about forty.

Nokou Primary School had no wall around the school, but many trees that offered shade. The school building was made of concrete. There was a public, deep

well about 100m from the school, so potable water was available. The diagram below outlines the school's layout.

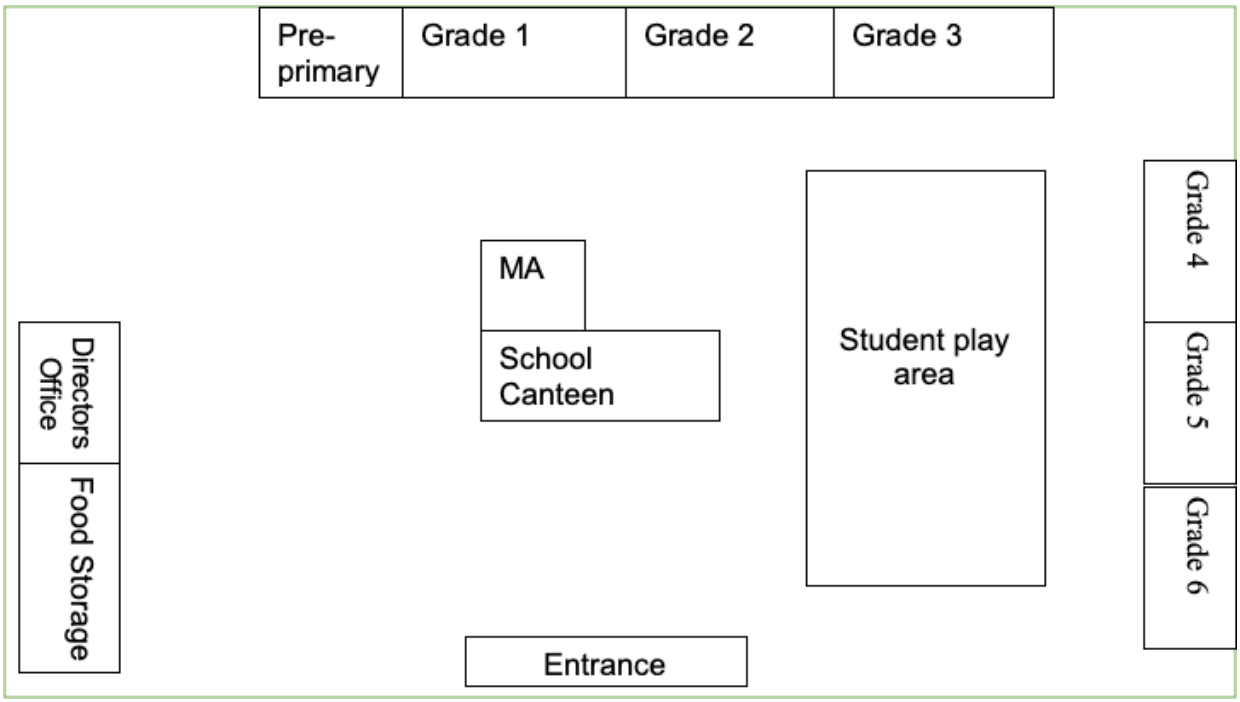

Figure 14: Diagram of Nokou Primary School

Nokou Primary School has been funded by various NGO projects to support its infrastructure, including tables and benches, the school canteen set-up, and classroom chalkboards. The school had one school Director who had been at the school for five years and worked closely with the various NGOs and the PA. The PA at Nokou Primary School had approximately 20 members, mainly older men. Their work included management of funds from NGOs, building infrastructure (tables and benches) at the school, and hiring community teachers.

In the 2018-2019 school year, Nokou Primary School had 332 students (M: 150, F: 182) enrolled. This was approximately ten percent more than the previous year, which had 303 students (M: 146; F: 157). Notable is the increased enrollment of girls. Indicators of the quality of Nokou Primary School are not encouraging. In the 2017-2018 school year, 42 percent of the students were repeating grades, and only 28 percent

passed grade 6 and went to secondary school. One reason for this could be the limited resources teachers had. I observed in Nokou Primary School that each teacher had one curriculum textbook, and wrote the curriculum exercises from the textbook on the chalkboard. Students did not have a copy. Thus, each student was required to replicate the material in their personal notebook or use their individual chalkboard and chalk to answer exercise questions. The style of the teachers was often authoritarian, and I observed that most students feared teachers and their use of corporal punishment. Another teaching mechanism for teachers in Nokou Primary School was the use of rote learning. This method is common across schools in Benin. Students are given a national exam at the end of the school year to determine eligibility until the next year. Teaching during the second half of the school year (January-June) is often tailored to preparing students for the national exam.

Contrary to what is often observed in rural classrooms, teacher absenteeism was not high. During my fieldwork in Nokou, I observed on only a few occasions teachers absent at school, often because of either a funeral or family emergency elsewhere. When teachers were absent, often an older student (usually grade 6) would be designated to oversee the classroom and the students would be given time to do homework or to review the lesson from the previous day. One reason for the low teacher absenteeism was that many were community teachers, and therefore lived close to the school. Secondly, the PA, along with the MA and with support from the NGO, had built housing for teachers. Three of the teachers lived there.

In Nokou Primary School, the teacher was responsible for taking attendance and reporting the number of students present in class each day to the school director. This was for national statistical purposes (the number of students enrolled, who attend, and are eligible for the school feeding program). Although Nokou Primary School had relatively good infrastructure (classrooms for each grade, desks and tables for each student, chalkboard and chalk), the limited resources for teachers and their poor training led to the poor schooling children receive. Although children were being encouraged to attend school to enhance their opportunities, the education they received at Nokou Primary School was framed in terms of ensuring adequate literacy and numeracy skills, rather than ensuring students were engaged, had critical thinking skills, or learned 21st-

century skills. The table below outlines the typical daily schedule (except for Wednesdays, when there were no afternoon classes).

7:30-8:00	Students at school, cleaning school grounds, preparing the classroom
8:00-8:15	Raising of Beninese flag, national anthem
8:30-10:00	First subject
10:00-10:20	Recess
10:30-12:00	Second subject
12:00-3:00	Lunch hour, students and teachers go home
3:00-4:30	Third subject
4:30-5:30	Fourth subject
5:30	Students go home

The PA at Nokou Primary School consisted of ten members, mostly older men who supported enhancing the development of the school (infrastructure, community teacher, holding the school administration accountable to funding). The PA had an executive committee consisting of the president (in the role for twenty years), the treasurer, and the secretary (also secretary of the MA). Their main functions were the logistical management of the school, co-managing the school funding with the school director, monitoring children's educational activities, and contributing to school maintenance.

Sokossa

Regional context.

My second research site was in Sokossa, a village in the Oueme department in the south of Benin (10 km from Porto Novo, the capital of Benin, and 50 km from Cotonou, the economic capital).

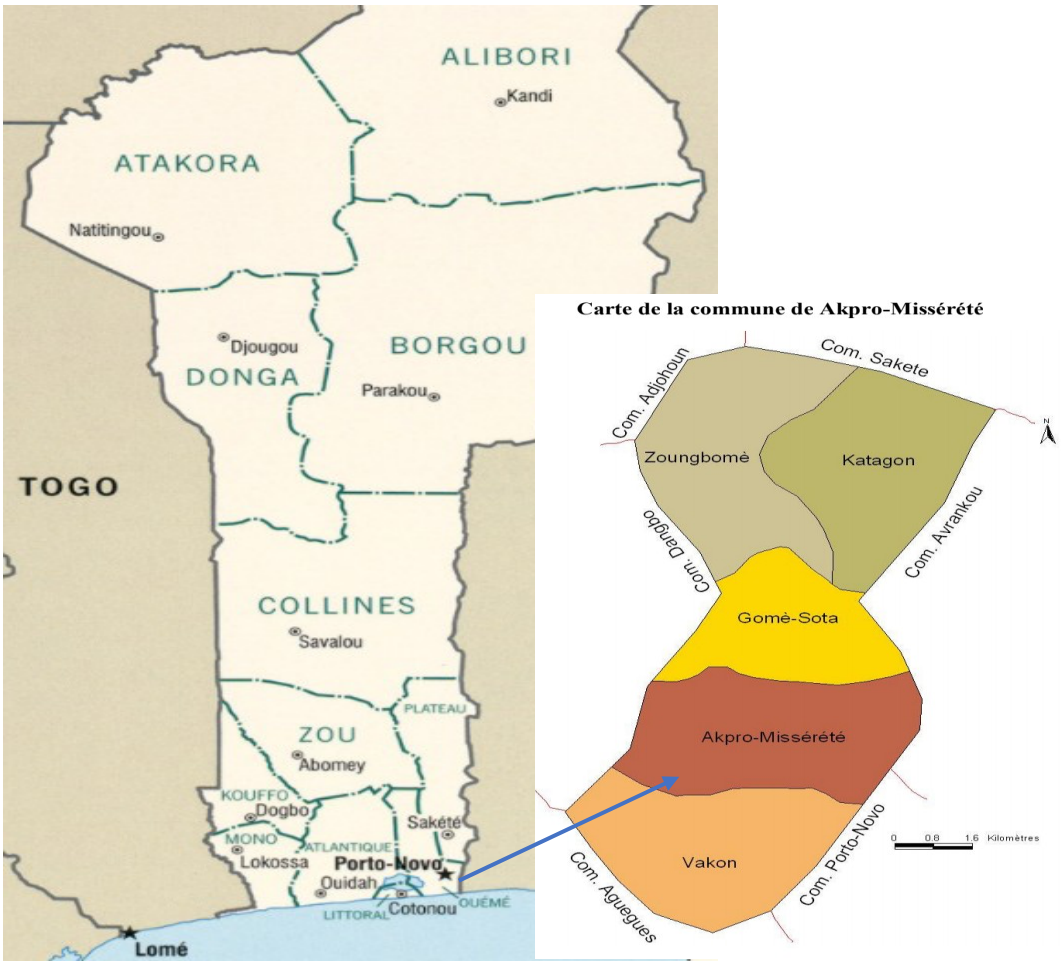

Figure 15: Map of Akpro-Misserete

As of 2013, Ouémé held 14 communes, five *arrondissements*, and 488 villages (INSAE, 2013). Within these 14 communes, there were 70 health centres and 14 maternity wards (INSAE, 2013). A significant barrier for the population was that only 55% of the population had easy access to drinking water. The poverty rate of 33% in Ouémé was one of the lowest in the region (INSAE, 2013). Economic activities in Ouémé varied significantly based on the commune. For example, in the capital of Porto Novo, most economic activity was in trade and lodging, whereas in the commune of Akpro-Missérété, the primary economic activity was agriculture and fishing.

Sokossa sits in the *arrondissement* of Zoungbome within the commune of Akpro-Missérété. The estimated population of Zoungbome was 13,581 (M: 6429, F: 7152), the majority Catholic; 40% were under the age of 15 (INSAE, 2013). The three main ethnic populations in Zoungbome are Fon, Goun, and Yoruba. Zoungbome's climate is

characterized by four seasons: two rainy and two dry seasons. The long rainy season lasts from March to July and allows a first cycle of harvesting, followed by a dry season from July to September. The short rainy season, from September to November, allows a second harvesting. This is followed by the Harmattan from December to February. The *arrondissement* of Zoungbome had one health centre approximately a ten-minute drive from the village of Sokossa but with limited supplies. For serious injuries or concerns, people in Zongbome travelled approximately twenty minutes to Akpro-Missérété to visit a better-equipped health centre.

In the *arrondissement* of Zoungbome there were ten primary schools and one secondary school. The *arrondissement* had eight PAs, four contractual workers, and 15 community teachers.

Village context – People, administrative, and organizational structures.

When I first arrived in Sokossa, I was introduced to the *chef de village* and he gave me a walking tour of the community. The *chef de village* taught me some history of the community and the residents. My research assistant introduced me to the school director at Sokossa Primary School, and I explained my project to him. The director outlined some of the challenges of the school such as no potable water, families removing children and moving to Nigeria, and limited support from the community for school materials. He also gave me a context of the MA and the PA, discussed below. Following this conversation, he invited me to meet the MA. I set up a meeting with the MA and my research assistant. At this meeting, the School Director introduced me to the MA and briefly summarized my research. I then explained my research further to the MA, and noted what I would be doing at the school. Seeing that the MA did not have much experience with visitors coming to their school, unlike the MA in Nokou, many members were confused as to why I was in their community. Over several weeks, I and my research assistant continued to explain my project to them, why I was interested in their work, and why I was there.

The estimated population of the village of Sokossa was 2,027 (M: 947, F: 1,080) with an average family size of seven (INSAE, 2013). Forty percent were 0-14 years of age and45 % 15-59 years old. The language most spoken in Sokossa was Fon, with

very few women speaking French. Approximately ten percent of the village population participated in fishing, 40% in petty trading, and 16% in cement manufacturing (INSAE, 2013). Given their location close to Nigeria's southern border, much of their fishing catch was exported to Nigeria, where many families buy supplies to trade at a higher price in the Beninese market. Those who worked in agriculture grew rice, palm nuts, cassava, and vegetable crops. Access to potable water was very limited in Sokossa, with only 40 percent of the population having close access to a well (INSAE, 2013). During my fieldwork, one NGO was working with the village chief in Sokossa to provide potable water.

Similar to Nokou, Sokossa has various administrative structures that influence the community's social, political, and economic functioning. Sokossa had one traditional leader who was well versed in Vodun, a West African religion, and provided support to the population regarding Vodun practices, spirituality, and guidance. There was a religious leader in Nokou who was Christian Celeste, an African-initiated Christian sect. The religious leader had much power and influence within the Sokossa community, as members of the village were very religious. Along with these traditional and religious leaders, Sokossa had a *chef de village* who came into power in 2015, elected by the local council of Akpro-Missérété (INSAE, 2013). Administrative leaders and traditional leaders in Sokossa had built a close relationship and often collaborated, especially in areas of promoting cultural heritage and organizing festivals for holidays. There were fewer NGOs working in Sokossa, or in Akpro-Missérété, in comparison to Nokou; five local NGOs were working in Akpro-Missérété to enhance the commune's development. Although NGO assistance, funded by INGOs, focused on local development in the village, none of it was directed to the MA or the school.

Schooling.

Sokossa had two public primary schools, each having grades1-6. The school is made of cement. It has a front entrance, but similar to Nokou, does not have a wall around the school. Consequently, a constant parade of animals came in and out of school grounds. Two big mango trees provided shade. Sokossa Primary School had ten classrooms; however, only six were for students and teachers, and one was occupied

by the kindergarten class. Each classroom had wooden chairs and tables, where students sat in groups of four to six. The other two classrooms were empty (but often used by the PA or MA for meetings). The diagram below outlines the school layout:

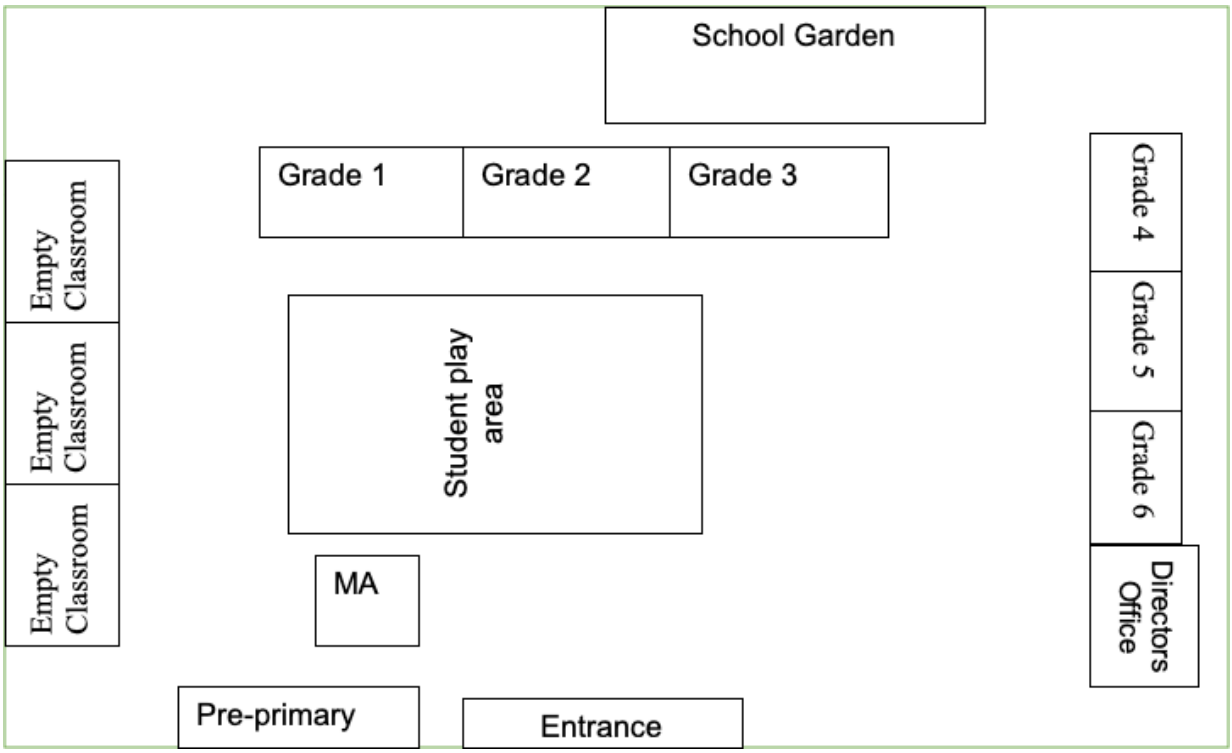

Figure 16: Diagram of Sokossa Primary School

In the 2018-2019 school year, approximately 387 students (M: 193; F: 194) enrolled, an increase from the 2017-2018 school year (approximately 350 students, M: 190, F: 160). Sokossa Primary School had six teachers, all male. The teacher-student ratio was approximately 1:60, except for grade 1 where the ratio was 1:76. The quality of education indicators at Sokossa Primary School were below the national average. In the 2017-2018 school year, 56 percent of the students were repeating grades; only 19 percent of students passed grade 6 and went to secondary school. One reason was that the months spent preparing for the national exam that determined whether students would go to the next grade coincided with when Beninese in the South often travelled to Nigeria for trading. Often, parents took their children, who would miss significant school days designated to prepare them for the national exam. Although the students were

given exams by the teacher and assessed on the material they learned, it was the national exam that determined whether students would repeat a grade or move to the next grade.

Another reason for the high repetition rates and low transition-to-secondary-school rates was because of the minimal learning materials available to students. As at Nokou school, only the teacher had the textbook and students had to copy material using their notebooks or personal chalkboards. The kindergarten classroom was run by a community teacher and had no teaching materials, only one large desk. As such, kindergarten students were often unengaged and were often roaming around the school grounds. The role of the teachers at Sokossa Primary School, was often authoritarian which is common among Beninese teachers, As in Nokou, most students feared the teacher and their use of corporal punishment. This was apparent in their fear to respond to the teacher when asked a question about the lesson. In fact, they seldom had the confidence to share their answers (even if their answers were correct), and students often spoke softly when engaging with the materials. One reason for this fear was that if students hesitated, or got the answer wrong, they would be hit by the teacher. During the rainy season, often the downpour was intense and loud, and given that the classrooms had open windows, it was hard for teachers to teach. Therefore, students would put their heads on the table and wait for the rain to stop so the teacher could continue teaching (sometimes 10 minutes, other times an hour). The Director of the school was also one of the teachers. He taught the Grade Six cohort and was quite active in Sokossa village, such as in an environment association and a water association. A typical school day (except for Wednesdays, when there was no teaching in the afternoon) at Sokossa Primary School was:

7:30 – 8: 00	Students at school, cleaning school grounds, preparing the classroom
8:00 – 8:15	Raising of Beninese flag, national anthem
8:30 – 10:00	First Subject
10:00 – 10:20	Recess
10:30 – 12:00	Second Subject

12:00 – 3:00	Lunch hour, students and teachers went home
3:00 – 4:30	Third subject
4:30 – 5:30	Fourth subject
5:30	Students went home

The PA at Sokossa Primary School consisted of seven members, mostly young and very active in supporting the development of the school (enhancing infrastructure, funding the school garden, advocating for the school canteen program at the commune level). Their main responsibility was logistical management of the school. In Sokossa Primary School, the Director of the School worked closely with the PA. Taking into account that he was also a teacher, he understood the struggles in the teachers' and students' experience, and advocated to improve the school circumstances. At the time of the study, the PA was working with the School Director to prepare for implementation of the national school feeding program. Although the government of Benin had implemented a policy to operationalize school feeding programs across Benin, at the time of field work a school feeding program was not yet established at Sokossa Primary School. Rather, they were preparing the materials to be approved for the school feeding program.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter outlined general details of both Nokou and Sokossa to contextualize the research project. I have mentioned the prominent institutions and leadership in each research site and the fluidity of power among leaders. I have also described the organization of the school, the quality of the schooling received, and the context in which MAs operated. Although there were many similarities between Nokou and Sokossa, the differences (such as the dominant religion, number of NGOs present, number of students per school) will help the reader better understand the activities of the MA, the various power structures and influences in each community, as well as why certain barriers to education were harder to address in one community than the other. The next two chapters provide an overview of the MA in each village.

Chapter Seven: Mothers Association in Nokou Village

7.1 The Organization of Nokou's MA

The MA in Nokou Primary School was formed in 2009 by World Education. World Education's main objective in starting the MA in Nokou was to increase women's participation and voice in PAs. The MA in Nokou Primary School was designed as an informal space for women to discuss why some children were attending school and others were not, to get involved in the education of their children, and to participate in making decisions for girls' education. World Education trained staff at Alma, a local NGO, to support the launching of the MA of Nokou Primary School. Alma trained members of the MA and helped them build their association's organizational capacity. When the MA at Nokou Primary School began in 2009, Alma used a participatory process that involved community stakeholders and members of the PA to recruit women leaders they had identified in each village. According to Alma, the criteria for choosing the members of the MA were: first, ensuring representation of each neighbourhood; then establishing the women had children or grandchildren at Nokou Primary School; and that the women were present in the community, not traveling often. Although Alma tried to be inclusive by having women representing different villages, many of the women moved to Nokou from neighbouring regions when they married their husbands. Therefore, members recruited for the MA in Nokou Primary School spoke a variety of languages (Adja, Nago, Yoruba, Bariba) which made their communication often difficult.

The first woman identified by Alma staff was Salamatou, a very active member of the community. Alma invited her to serve as MA President. They then identified nine other members and created the Nokou Primary School MA. Members of the MA stated that their main reasons for joining were to be more involved in their children's schooling, specifically their daughters, and to give their daughters a future the members never had. In addition to these motivations, I observed that there were also economic gains from joining the MA. Members sold goods for breakfast and snacks on school grounds and generated income from these sales. Likewise, monthly, each member of the MA received 3L of cooking oil from Alma. Members of the MA were also invited to many CSO activities and were paid per diems for their attendance at these activities. Although

the economic compensation was not a lot, it did motivate some members of the MA to join, as well as created some tensions among women in the community who were not MA members. This tension was the topic of conversation at numerous General Assembly meetings with the PA. Women from the community often thought that the MA members were receiving significant economic compensation for their participation. The members of the MA at Nokou Primary School, with support from the PA, often pushed back by stating that women were welcome to join and spend a day doing the work that they do to see how much work they do in comparison to the compensation. In one case, they invited a woman in the community who was complaining about compensation to join, and after three days she no longer returned to the school.

During their initial set-up meeting, the MA members elected a secretary and treasurer as official. The president was responsible for guiding the MA and encouraging the members in the various activities they run. The secretary of the MA took notes during MA meetings, and reported their activities (to Alma, the school director, and the PA). The treasurer had to manage the MA funds (microproject funds, savings group funds, income generating funds). I observed that the same remained in these three leaderships since the MA's inception and they held on to their titles of Secretary, President, and Treasurer. There is no yearly election for these positions; the only members to have changed were in non-executive positions (for reasons such as moving to another area, or being busy with agriculture). I observed that the members in official roles did not change because other members were not literate and could not serve in those capacities. Given their official role, the president, secretary, and treasurer of the MA often attended meetings with donors, government representatives, local NGOs, and community authorities.

The MA at Nokou Primary School is an informal association; as such, it does not have formal mandates or written statutes. The members organize themselves according to their own priorities, and function under the larger, legally recognized PA. Generally speaking, the MA's mission is to strengthen women's participation in managing school affairs, promote children's schooling, strengthen equal opportunities for girls and boys in access to schooling, monitor the children's educational activities in and out of school, maintain a healthy school environment, and keep children in school. To achieve these

objectives, the Nokou Primary School MA acts to improve school conditions, learning outcomes, and academic success, all of which will be outlined in the next section.

The Nokou Primary School MA received support from Alma. At first, Alma worked with MA members to support them in the organization's management, functioning, the roles, and activities. After the first year, and as members of the MA got comfortable in their role, Alma set up training sessions. These covered topics such as how to support the school director and teachers in monitoring class attendance, managing proper hygiene, diminishing corporal punishment, and good nutrition. Alma also provided seed funding to set up micro-projects. An Alma facilitator did the training and met with members once to twice a month to set up the sessions or discuss concerns.

In 2018, Alma's funding from World Education ended and the MA became self-organizing, with occasional visits from the Alma facilitator. The MA continued to implement activities to recruit girls, monitor girls' school attendance, organize remedial classes, and speak with community members about gender roles. Although Alma stopped funding the MA through projects, the Alma facilitator often visited to see how the MA was progressing. The school feeding program continued at Nokou Primary School and was funded by different INGOs (World Education, CRS) but managed by Alma. Hence, there were many opportunities for Alma to stay connected with the MA (through school feeding program auditing, ensuring members of the MA got updated hygiene training to run the school feeding program, etc.).

The MA and PA of Nokou Primary School work closely together. Since the same person is secretary of the MA and of the PA at Nokou Primary School, there is a strong link between them. Likewise, members of the MA attend the PA General Assembly meetings. The MA often consults with the PA executive committee (specifically the president) to identify strategies, get input on decisions, or get support with implementing new projects (e.g. changing the delivery of the school feeding program, setting up a handwashing station, delivering training for students and teachers). Both the MA and PA members at Nokou Primary School attend external meetings with donors, ministry representatives, and INGOs. Considering Nokou Primary is the first school in Nokou to run the feeding program, representatives from World Education, such as the country director, along with donors and representatives from various Ministers would often visit

Nokou Primary School and request the presence of MA members. Although the MA and PA have a close relationship, it was equally evident that MA members were not independent. In other words, if members of the MA were invited to a specific meeting, so were the members of the PA. It was not clear whether this collaboration was authentically equal or a form of domination by the PA to ensure that the MA would not reduce their authority or replace them.

Seeing that the MA at Nokou Primary School has existed for over ten years, it has built relationships with different groups in the community (e.g., village leadership, the community at large). With the village leadership, MA members have gained respect and prominence because of their volunteering that supports the *chef d'arrondisement*'s work (for example, helping distribute birth certificates to the community, monitoring children at community events). Through their distributing birth certificates and helping raise awareness around community development, MA members have had many opportunities to work with the *chef de village* and the community at large. In supporting community affairs, they have reduced the village leadership's workload (for example, ensuring all community members are registered with the *chef d'arrondisement)* and this has allowed them to build their relationship with village leaders. This relationship has permitted them to do door-to-door campaigning and sensitization activities because the *chef de village* knows the work they do and passes the message to the community.

At the time of the study, there were ten active members in the Nokou MA. The table below outlines background information for each of the MA members in Nokou:

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Years in School	Literacy	Age Married	Position in MA	Years in MA
Abibatou	60s	Bariba	0	low	15	Member	3
Azarat	60s	Bariba	0	low	15	Member	3
Aziza	50s	Bariba	0	low	16	Member	3
Baké	50	Bariba	0	low	15	Vice-President	10
Bona Yari	46	Bariba	0	good	18	Secretary	10
Dama	60s	Ajda	0	low	16	Member	6
Gnaki	60s	Ajda	0	low	17	Member	5
Nafissatou	70s	Fulani	0	low	16	Member	3
Naguibatou	45	Fulani	0	good	18	Treasurer	10
Salamatou	55	Bariba	2	good	16	President	10

Table 2: Background information Nokou Members

Of these ten, two were original members (Salamatou and Bona Yari), five managed the school feeding program and were at the school daily (Bona Yari, Baké, Naguibatou, Gnaki, Dama), and four came to school approximately three times a week to sell snacks (Nafissatou, Aziza, Abibatou, Azarat) while supporting MA efforts in the village such as ensuring children in uniform went to school, and did not wander around nearby shops. Salamatou was very active in the village, yet did not come to school on a daily basis. The members of the MA have changed over the years, as some members left the association to focus on agriculture.

Generally speaking, in Nokou, the members of the MA who managed the school feeding program came at about 6:30 a.m. to begin preparing the noontime meal and setting up their snack sales tables. To prepare the noontime, they sent students to collect wood and water as they prepared the hot pot. Before students went to class, members of the MA sold breakfast items. The members making the noontime meal went to the food storage room, which is opened and monitored by the school director. They took the supplies needed that day and wrote in the book how much food they took. This was often done by Bona Yari, the literate group member. This was then signed by the school director. Once class began around 8 a.m., they visited classrooms to identify absent students. Next came visits to absent students' homes to inquire about their whereabouts. These were done three to four times a week, often by members not preparing the school food program.

By 10 a.m., during recess, members were selling their snacks and generating daily income for themselves. At 12 p.m., the MA distributed the noontime meal to each student. Originally students stood in line in front of the school canteen, but to improve sanitation, Alma decided it was better for the MA members to distribute the food in the classroom. The school was on break from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. During these three hours, the students went home for a break and the executive committee of the MA often stayed to discuss specific school issues, their funds, and different activities. Afterwards, the members of the MA went home to their farms, or to the market and did not return to school. MA members who were not at the school every day supported the MA efforts by finding students in uniform wandering the streets and sending them to school.

7.2 Life Stories of Individual Members of the MA

The status of women in Nokou is influenced by their socio-economic position, the education they received, their networks, and their geographical location. As mentioned earlier, most women in Benin live in rural areas, and they are largely involved in agricultural production as subsistence farmers. Rural women's extensive hard work for survival makes them the most vulnerable members of the society where they live. Their vulnerability has been reinforced by their lack of access to, and control over, productive resources. Growing up, Nokou MA members were socialized into a culture of silence, submission, obedience, and dependence. One key theme that emerged from my daily casual conversations, observations, and in-depth interviews, was the collective experience of inequalities lived by MA members and their desire to ensure their daughters do not experience inequalities to the same severity they did.

As I spent time in each village and worked with each MA, I identified specific individuals within each who were the most dynamic and the group leaders. This section provides the life stories of four MA members, which outline the inequalities they experienced growing up, the social expectations placed on them, and discrimination's impact on their lives. I selected these women because they were key informants during my research process. As I grew closer to the individual members, I spent more time with them after our mornings at the school, observing them in different settings: in their homes, during income-generating activities, at the market, at community events and meetings, and on the farm. I selected these members as the most vocal and active, and their stories provided a wealth of information about their lived experiences, role in the MA, and perspectives on transformation.

Bona Yari

Bona Yari was 46 at the time of this study. She was born and raised in a rural community in the North of Alibori, the seventh child and the fourth daughter of her father. He worked on a cotton field and was away from home for months at a time. In the absence of her father, her grandfather or elder brothers would make family decisions. She grew up working inside the home, taking care of her younger siblings, and doing farm work. Her education was shaped by traditional Beninese and Islamic

values. She observed the five daily prayers and she was carefully scrutinized for good behavior. When asked about her childhood, Bona Yari stated:

> Every child has the right to have a normal childhood… Hum … I did not…It was a busy life. I did not even have enough time for sleep. My mother had 14 of us and I was the sixth. You understand how busy my mother was and how she needed help with the children. I was like a second mother to my younger siblings. I made sure that they were neither dirty nor hungry. Even at night I had to put them to bed. (Interview, December 08, 2018)

Unlike her brothers, Bona Yari dropped out of school after the first year because her parents were afraid that no-one would marry her if she were educated. Her father always said that men were scared of educated women because they did things their own way and did not listen to their husbands. Rather than going to school, Bona Yari supported her mother in the household. She stated:

> My mother went to the market every day. My older sister and I cooked, cleaned, fetched water and took care of our younger siblings when our mother was away. We used to do everything. Some days we would join mother at the market and help her. Some afternoons, when we finished doing our chores and after mother was back, we would join the Islamic School and learn the Koran. (Interview, December 08, 2018)

Bona Yari has six children. Four attended Nokou Primary School and the other two are married off. Bona Yari always referred to her illiteracy while growing up and being a mother as a setback. She stated:

> My illiteracy has always been my shame. I always felt below everyone else. In the village I was not expected to be literate, but I always felt the shame. I never want my kids to feel that shame or the embarrassment. I worked really hard to change my situation. I worked hard to become literate as an adult. I had to build my confidence and believe in myself to make something for myself. But now I am working to make sure the village does not expect my daughters to be illiterate. That is why we work with the school, but we also work with the parents, to change their expectations. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

During our digital storytelling workshop, Bona Yari expanded on her experience with her illiteracy. She stated:

> I remember the first time my kids came home from school and brought me their report cards. The teacher required me to read it and sign. But I

> couldn't do it because I dropped out of school at a young age and never learned how to read. I was ashamed to tell my kids that because I couldn't read, I couldn't help them. My illiteracy removed my self-confidence and I felt useless to my family and my community. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

Bona Yari got married to her husband at the age of eighteen and moved to her husband's village in Nokou to live with him and her in-laws. Given her illiteracy, she supported her husband on the farm and engaged in small entrepreneurship to contribute to feeding her family and paying her children's school fees. At the time of the study she was her husband's only wife.

She has been a Nokou MA member for over ten years and sits on the executive committee in the Parent Association, representing the voices of the MA. She was also a member of the village choir and of a micro credit association. She said her involvement with the Nokou MA gave her a chance to see the world from a different perspective, because the courage she got from members of the MA to take the opportunity to go to adult literacy classes changed her life. She highlighted:

> An NGO came to our neighbourhood to register adults for literacy classes. I registered immediately because I thought if I am literate, I'll be able to help my kids. On my way to class, young men would harass me, shouting 'You didn't gain anything from formal schooling when you were a kid, so you won't gain anything from this either'. The members of the MA, which I was a part of, encouraged me to ignore them and to continue going to class, so I went every day and after three years I received my diploma. One day, the mayor of the community held a meeting in our village and requested volunteers to help distribute birth certificates. The village chief asked the crowd, 'If you are literate, step forward.' With pride, I stepped forward. I was the only woman. I was responsible for delivering birth certificates to families in our village so that kids could register for secondary school. As the representative, I helped over sixty students in my village get their birth certificates and register for school. Realizing the importance of literacy, I organize classes for women in my neighbourhood and advocate for kids to not drop out. My literacy is my empowerment. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

When asked why she joined her organization, Bona Yari reported that a lack of education, poverty, and the desire to be with her peers motivated her to join. She said

that she was previously totally isolated from her neighbours and that the Nokou MA gave her the hope and joy to be in contact with other women with whom she shared her problems. Bona Yari always mentioned that all the children are like her children. Often, when I would visit her at her home, she would be surrounded by her children as well as the children of her neighbours. Her perspective on the children in her community underpinned a lot of the hard work she did to support girls' education.

Baké.

Baké was 50 at the time of the study. She was raised in a polygamous family. Her father had two wives and her mother was the first wife. Baké was the first child in her family. Growing up, she worked at home on household chores and took care of younger siblings, to prepare her for all the skills she needed for her marriage. She told me that she did not like working on the farm, but she occasionally did it and helped with cattle breeding because her parents said a village woman could not survive without these skills. Baké mentioned that, from early childhood, she knew what her role was in the family. She stated:

> Village girls and women are born to suffer. Work never ends. I started work when I was young by helping my mom cook and clean. I did everything inside the home. My mom would be the first person to wake up to go to the field, and the last person to sleep. She woke me up every time she was up. We did most of the work together. I would help her prepare millet, wash dirty clothes, and take care of my younger siblings. I was the oldest of the siblings, and I did everything my mother did. I never had time to rest. I always had to take care of something. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

Baké followed a traditional Beninese education shaped by cultural and religious values. She was required to remain silent, passive, and tolerant for her to get a good husband and have a sustainable marriage. Baké's parents arranged for her to be married at 15 to a friend of the family much older than Baké, who already had a wife and children. When Baké got married, she joined her husband in Kandi and shared the same compound as her co-wife. She tried to get along with her co-wife, despite the fact that they sometimes had disagreements and misunderstandings. Baké said her co-wife was sometimes jealous because she always thought that since Baké was younger she

was receiving more attention from her husband. Baké gave birth eight times, but had five living children (three girls and two boys). Two of her girls are married and they have their own children. She enjoyed being a grandmother and used the money she made from farming and small entrepreneurship to help her family and pay her grandchildren's school fees. Baké's husband died five years ago and she has been supporting her family since then.

Baké has belonged to various women's groups in Kandi. She told me the importance of these women's groups:

> When I was growing up, I was a member of a girls' group in my birth village. The goal of our association was to provide a helping hand to each member of the group. We supported each other with farming and whenever we had social activities in our families. We worked on the farm of each member's mother in turn. My mother did not have money to pay people to work on her farm. The group helped her a lot. We are all married now with children and some like me with grandchildren. We do not see each other often because we all live in different places. A few live in the city and when I go to the city, I can meet them if I want. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

When asked what motivated her to join her organization, Baké said it was the struggle she experienced in her life. She spoke about the regret she held in dropping out of school, and her desire for children's education:

> I'm struggling by all means to do something with my life. More than anything. [...] I desperately wanted to see them in school, just to have a chance at making something of themselves and their life. [...] I wanted to see them being successful and earning respect. The only way to do this is if they are educated because if you're not a professional, life is very hard. It is a struggle. [...] I became active in my children's school and joined the MA. Because we had all dropped out of school, we all held the same regret. I struggled to make it and I want to try to lessen the struggle for my children. We are helping each other grow and make something of ourselves. We work together to make sure other kids do not drop out. If there was a MA when I was growing up, I would never have quit school. Now, I am doing everything I can, so kids don't live with the regret that I do. (Interview, December 02, 2018)

Baké continues to be active in Nokou and tells women in her community the various lessons she has learned through her training and association with various NGOs.

Naguibatou.

Naguibatou was 45 at the time of this study. She was born and raised in a polygamous family in Parakou. Naguibatou's father had two wives, with her mother as the second wife. Naguibatou moved to Nokou with her mother and older brothers when she was about ten. After her father passed away, her mother could not afford to provide for the family. The family decided to move back to Nokou, her mother's birth village, hoping that life would be cheaper and easier. She sold merchandise in its market to make an extra income for her family. She stated:

> Instead of going to school, like my brothers, my dad encouraged me to sell peanuts in the village until I got married. I sat in the boiling sun, day after day, trying to sell my peanuts and to make enough money to find something to eat. Every day it got harder. I couldn't take care of myself because I couldn't read or write. To get anything done, I needed others to help me.
>
> I always wanted to go to school, but I never did. I used to cry every morning when I saw my peers go to school. None of the girls in my family attended school. My father never went to school, but he tried to give my brothers an education. They all completed primary school and went on and found petty jobs in the city. I wish I had been in school to complete primary school myself. I am convinced I would do well in school. I know that as a young girl, it was necessary that I learn how to take care of a home and be taught the things I needed to know to take care of my own family in the future. I also know that I was needed at home to work. However, that should not have prevented me from going to school. I had a happy childhood, but I really resented the fact that my parents did not send me to school. Our parents wanted my sisters and me to marry early. We all got married between 15 and 17 years of age. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

Naguibatou has three children, two of which attend Nokou Primary School. She lives in a compound with her extended family. The father of her children left when the children were young and Naguibatou was forced to support her children alone. She was born with a she deformity in her left leg which caused her to walk with a limp. Although had a disability, she never let that disability define her or how people treated her. She is very fierce, speaks her mind, and pushes back against injustice. She stated:

> Because of my disability, I do not want people to think I am weak. Kids used to laugh at me when I was young, and I always had to fight back. I

> do not let people to use my disability against me; I am stronger than all of them. (Casual conversation, November 04, 2018)

As a result of her powerful personality, she was also the most vocal in the MA and in the community with regards to girls' education. She uses her experience to advocate for girls to complete primary school. Naguibatou, discussing her own experience, stated: "Sometimes I feel like I am a lost person. A person who has never been to school is like a blind person." She added:

> Somebody like me cannot do many jobs. All I can do to earn money is trading and cooking... These are hard jobs. Many people have come to our village looking for people who have been to school and who can read and write, and who can do some office jobs. Most of us here cannot have those jobs because we've never been to school. We do not know formal schooling, because at that time, that is, when we were children, we did not go to school. Today we are doing all we can to participate in the school system because we know that it has benefits. I wish I had gone to school, because learning is good for every human being. When you see a person who has an education and a person who has never been to school, you'll see the difference right away in the ways in which they do things and carry themselves. If today nothing seems to work in our lives, it is because we are illiterates. But it is never too late to learn literacy, like Bona Yari did, and it's never too late to better your life. (Casual conversation, November 18, 2018)

Naguibatou added that the best knowledge comes from a circle of women because women always share useful information:

> I am happy with the knowledge I receive through the MA. We do not always need to sit in a classroom to learn. The knowledge I receive from the MA is different from what I could be taught in school. We have learned skills that have made us stronger and have worked together to learn those skills. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

Salamatou.

Salamatou was 55 at the time of the study. She was born and raised in a rural village in Kandi. Like any girl of her village, she grew up helping the women in the family with household chores, cooking, cleaning, and doing farming, and caring for her little

brothers and sisters. Salamatou dropped out of school after two years. In the digital storytelling workshop, she shared:

> I remember I had enough of the beatings. After getting hit on the back for not reading properly, I ran home and decided I would never go back to school. I told my parents “I am done with school.” At the time my parents did not know the importance of education, and they agreed that it was a waste of time. So, I became a domestic labourer and helped my mom in the house until I got married. One day, in the big market, I met one of my old school friends. I saw her get out of the car. I decided to approach and greet her in Bariba [the local language] to see if it really was her. The lady kissed me and told me that she has become a public servant. She asked me what I did, and I was embarrassed to tell her I couldn’t even speak French. When I went home, I had a lot of regret in my heart for not having continued school to become like her. I decided to become active in my children’s school and joined the MA. Because we had all dropped out of school; we all held the same regret. We decided to work together to make sure other kids do not drop out. When parents don’t have money to pay school fees, we all contribute to pay their fees. When parents use their daughters as domestic labourers, we visit them and educate them on the importance of sending their daughters to school. If there was an MA when I was growing up, I would never have quit school. Now, I am doing everything I can, so kids don’t live with the regret that I do. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

She talked about the importance of parents supporting their kids through education:

> No girls in my family attended school. Our parents did not see any reason for sending girls to school. They viewed educating girls as a waste of time and resources. They did not understand the importance of school because they were not educated. I always wanted to go to school, but I could not because no one supported me. I struggled so much with their decision. I cried every time I saw my brothers going to school. If I were educated, my life would have been different, and my children could benefit. (Digital Story, February 08, 2019)

Although Salamatou did not attend formal school for long, she did go to Koranic school where she learned a few verses to be able to say her daily prayers. She learned by repeating verses after the facilitator, but never learned how to write or read what was written in front of her. She said she never understood the meaning of what she was saying. Salamatou was married to a son of her father’s friend at 16 and moved to Nokou to live with him. She has six children, two girls and four boys. All her children

went to school and now she was supporting her grandchildren at Nokou Primary School.

Salamatou is a prominent community member and lives with her children and grandchildren. She is well known as an activist and leader of the women in her community. At the time of my fieldwork, she was President of the MA, a title she reported she had held for ten years. She had gained the respect and trust of members of the organization, thanks to her leadership skills and the significant role she played in mobilizing her female peers when the MA was first introduced in her community. Salamatou is a strong and active woman who trusted her own intelligence and capabilities to improve her family's lives, and thus has played a significant role in her community. She asserted:

> I never got a formal education. I did not read or write as a child. I wish I could read and write and do the things you do [she was referring to me] and go places you go to. However, just because I am illiterate does not make me someone of lesser value than those who had the chance to go to school. It does not make me stupid either. There are things that you can only learn in schools. However, there are many other things that life teaches you. I was born in a poor family where nobody went to school, but that does not mean that I did not want to accomplish something in life. I also have dreams for a better life for my family. I am a woman, I am illiterate, but I did many things for women in this community and for the entire community. I cannot read or write in French, but I am informed and aware of everything that is going on in our country. I was born an activist. It is just who I am. (Interview, January 08, 2019)

Salamatou reported that not only did she become a member of the MA in Nokou right at the onset of its inception, but she was actively involved in recruiting other women in the community to the MA. She argued that as mothers, women had the obligation to set good examples for their children. She explains:

> When I decided to join the MA, of course I was doing it for my own good, but when I think about it, I joined the school for my children. I have always played an important role in my children's education by encouraging them to stay in school and by investing as much as I could in their education, even before the MA. When they see me, their own mother at their school, my hope is that they will learn from me and not play with their education. A child learns from her mother. (Interview, January 08, 2019)

Salamatou further recognized the importance of schooling and that it would have provided her with better opportunities than anything else. She stated:

> We live in a world where, if you do not have any schooling, people will not listen to you. Knowledge is the greatest wealth. Nowadays, it does not matter any longer what your lineage is, whether you are a descendant of kings and queens, or whether your ancestors were fishermen or blacksmiths. Knowledge is the most valuable wealth. (Casual conversation, November 02, 2018)

Based on the stories she shared, an intrinsic motivation for her to participate in the MA was that she wanted to set an example for her own children, especially her daughters. Salamatou regretted that, growing up, most girls in her community did not attend school. She reported that over the past ten years there has been much improvement in girls' school enrollment in her community, but she stressed that more efforts needed to be made, and she works hard to make sure they happen for her community.

7.3 MA Activities

My observations and the narratives of participants expressed similar perceptions of the MA's role in addressing numerous barriers to girls' education. Some of the barriers identified by the MA, the school administration, and community members, are girls not having official documents to enrol in school, being required to support the family at home or in the farm, having a dangerous walk to school, being sent to work as domestic labourers in the capital region, and not being given sufficient time to study when they get home. Given that the barriers to education for girls occur both in and around school, the MA's activities also take place both in and out of the schools – in spaces where they have identified obstacles for girls. One of the unique attributes of the MAs observed during the study is that the group identifies and diagnoses the specific education-related barriers of both girls and boys in their community. Once these are confirmed, MAs organize to brainstorm solutions to these problems and then mobilize to address the problems, especially as it relates to girls' education. However, it is important to note the involvement of Alma in supporting the MA activities. Although the MA would identify the issues, dialogue and brainstorming was often guided by the Alma

facilitator who helped them think about the solutions that they could manage. To support the MA, Alma set up weekly training sessions with the members of the MA and monthly sessions with the executive of the PA to provide training around the various issues identified. In an interview with the facilitator of Alma, she stated:

> We hold sessions with them. Sometimes twice a week, but often it is only weekly. The training sessions cover different topics such as: how to monitor children in school, how to support the school director and teachers in running the school, how to maintain good hygiene practices, how to keep the food area clean, how to speak to parents about gender roles. We work with them to encourage them in their efforts to support girls' education. (Interview, January 27, 2019)

In this section, I will outline how the MAs mobilize to support girls' education, the specific activities they have implemented, and their collaboration with PAs, school directors, parents, and teachers to enhance school outcomes.

7.3.1 MAs supporting learning and enhancing achool outcomes

Through its activities, both in and around the school, the MA at Nokou Primary School has become a support to enhance the learning outcomes of girls. These include recruiting more girls to school, ensuring that they attend regularly, and working with parents to raise awareness for the importance of school.

Activities to Recruit and Enrol Girls in School

In Nokou, one of the main activities of the MA is to ensure families have the information and documents to be able to enrol their children in school. This process is done months before September (when the school year begins). As the new school year approaches, MA members conduct house visits in the community to identify which children are of school age and should be enrolled. Prior to the formation of the MA, this was the role of the PA along with school administration. However, with the formation of the MA and the close ties the members of the MA had with being in the community (whereas the men were often away farming) they were able to have more direct conversations with families around their girls' school, and took the load off the PA and school administration. Bona Yari mentioned that it is her responsibility to make house visits, write down the names of all school aged children, and verify whether the parents

have the birth certificates to enrol the children. Members of the MA were also responsible for ensuring families in their community were sending girls to school at the right age. They do so by talking to families and raising awareness around the appropriate age children should be enrolled. Granted that Nokou Primary School has a community teacher who teaches pre-primary, they let parents know that children as young as four are able to enrol. MA members use their networks (their participation in different associations, and community groups) to inform community members about sending their children to school.

Often, members of the MA connect with the parents and convince them that with their children in school, they can get more work done in the market, at home, or in the farm. As a result of the home visit process, and through discussions with the community, members of the MA realized that a reason why many students, especially girls, did not enrol in school was because they did not have a copy of their birth certificate, which is a requirement for school enrolment in Benin. As a result of this observation and realizing how many girls failed to enrol due to not having a copy of their birth certificate, in 2016 the MA decided that they would make it their responsibility to collect the birth certificates from the *chef de l'arrondissement* for students who did not have them. In one of their meetings, the MA nominated Bona Yari to be the member responsible for going to the *arrondissement* office, collecting the birth certificates, and distributing them to the families so that children could enrol in school. The reason Bona Yari was nominated was because she was the only member who was literate in French, as a result of the adult literacy courses she took. Therefore only she was able to read the names on the birth certificates to distribute them. The efforts of Bona Yari to get the documents required for children to enrol and provide the names to the school director, reduced the workload of the school director, and resulted in higher school enrolments in 2017 and 2018. As the school director explained:

> [Bona Yari] distributes the birth certificate and civil status documents to people. She goes to the municipality and sorts the birth certificates she recognizes and delivers them to their owner. This has helped many parents enrol their children in school. The list she gives me at the beginning of the school year shows me how many children are eligible to be enrolled in comparison to how many are actually enrolled. With this list,

> we can often follow up with families. (Interview, December 12, 2018, Nokou)

The process of delivering birth certificates could take anywhere from one week to a couple of months (if documents are missing). Thus, Bona Yari does this throughout the school year. Once all students who need birth certificates receive them, Bona Yari drafts a list for the school director. Given her consistent attendance at the *arrondissement* office, Bona Yari became known as "Maman Arrondissement" within Nokou and became the point of contact for the *chef de l'arrondissement*. As such, Bona Yari was often invited to meetings by the *chef de l'arrondissement* with other members of the community to discuss village issues. The constant appearance of Bona Yari at the municipality office led to her recognition in the community and increased her comfort in speaking with different people in positions of power and to issues that were of concern to women and girls. When I asked members of the MA in Nokou in what ways they thought they had more public voice within the community, Bona Yari mentioned:

> We do have a voice in this community and everybody in Nokou knows that; you know, people listen to us. How did we change from people who would just sit at home and be informed by our husbands, fathers, and uncles after everything was decided at the village assembly, to people who would actually go to the village assembly to listen to others and give their opinions on things? Well, we did not go to the assembly place to demand the right to have a say in community affairs. That right came to us. It came to us thanks to our hard work and numerous contributions in our community. Being at the school every day, working in the community to ensure girls are going to school, we are recognized as having knowledge and being aware about what is going on, so our voice is valued. (Casual conversation, November 18, 2018, Nokou)

The home visits conducted by MA members to enrol students for the forthcoming school year, are also opportunities for the MA to sensitize parents on the importance of education, asking them why their children are not enrolled, and informing them that their children need time at home to study. This last point was a recent issue the members of the MA were working to address. Through Alma's facilitation, members of the MA were taught the importance of ensuring girls have time for homework and were not busy doing housework. The facilitator worked with the MA members to help them understand

the questions they could ask parents, the reasons why time at home was important, and the importance of an equal division of labour.

Members of the MA told me that when they became more consistent with their weekly, sometimes daily, house visits, they observed fewer students who were absent without justification. Parents started either to let the teachers know the students would be absent or to ensure that their child would come to school. Dama stated:

> We are trying to get the parents used to making school a priority and not optional. Before if their children were absent and they didn't let the teacher know, no one would notice until months went by when they would tally the number of absent students. We are trying to prevent this by making weekly visits, so parents know we will be there if their child is absent. They will not go unnoticed (Casual conversation, November 12, 2018, Nokou).

Similarly, in an interview, the school director in Nokou mentioned that members of the MA had a close relationship with the teachers and they would keep track when students were not consistently coming to school. He stated further:

> […] if for example there is a child who does not come to school regularly, the members of the MA will go to the child's house and pick them up, especially if they observe the absences are consistent for certain children. They really have made my job easier because I have [fewer] students who are absent. They also know which kids don't come often. It is the vulnerable ones such as the orphaned ones they keep their eye out for during recess to make sure they are at school. (Interview, January 26, 2019, Nokou)

The house visits were also opportunities to sensitize parents about the importance of school. In one example, MA members in Nokou noticed that girls were being sent to Nigeria as domestic labourers. The MA deplored this situation because often when children were moved to Nigeria, they no longer continued with school. In this specific case, the MA told me that when they noticed one of the older girls was absent for a long period and this was not justified, they met with the parents to advocate against this practice. In this case, they were also joined by members of the PA, and together they worked to stop this practice. Although they could not bring the daughter back to Benin, they advocated for her to be enrolled in school in Nigeria because an educated girl would have better opportunities. (Field note, January 24, 2019, Nokou)

Although the MAs noticed that their consistent efforts in daily house visits help reduce student absenteeism, this was not sustainable in the long term as the women would have to spend a long time going to each student's home. As such, home visits were often done around religious holidays, traditional events, in situations where the MA noticed a significant number of students missing, or if a particular student was missing for long. They reduced the frequency of their visits, but continued sensitizing parents when they saw them. In fact, their recruitment activities with parents raised much attention at the school and at the community level. Members of the MA were recognized by the *chef de village, chef de l'arrondisement,* PA, and school director for these efforts. In an interview, the president of the PA discussed the activities of the MA:

> Ah! they go from neighborhood to neighborhood to make parents aware of the importance of schooling. They ask parents not to let the children become like us. This is why our enrolment rate is so high, compared to schools in our area. This is why we have so many students in the school. We get so many visitors from the South, NGO workers, members of the ministry, donors, because of the work we are doing. The sensitizing of parents, the follow-up on school absenteeism, the remedial classes, these are all reasons why we are seeing high enrolments. (Interview, February 08, 2019, Nokou)

In their conversations with parents regarding the enrolment of school-age children, the MA members always drew on their lived experience of either not having gone to school at all, or not having completed primary school, to emphasize the importance of education. They often associate their unemployment with not having gone to school, and make contrasts with the opportunities of those who moved to the South, a direct result of their having been educated. Although not having an education is not the only reason for their current status, all of them (as outlined in the excerpts shared above) believe that it is the main cause of all the difficulty in their life. This reliance on their own experiences has made their discussions more powerful and allowed them to convince parents to enrol their children because they identify women they know who have received an education, and outline all the opportunities given to them.

The heavy emphasis of the MA members on informing parents about education as a mechanism for empowerment for their children stems from their belief that if their own

parents had not let them drop out of school, they would have finished primary school and had better lives. Almost all members of the MA regret dropping out of school or never having enrolled in the first place. All the members reported that their lack of or limited access to formal education has had negative effects on their lives. They argue that access to formal schooling is a prerequisite for girls to become empowered women because it enables them to respond to opportunities, challenge their traditional roles, and change their lives. Bona Yari mentioned in an interview:

> If we had gone to school, we would not have been in this situation. We would have been literate, we would have had businesses that made more money, we would have had more opportunities. But we weren't given that option we were taken out and that is why we are poor. (Interview, November 18, 2019, Nokou)

Most MA members associate their illiteracy with the cycle of poverty they have been living in all their lives. They believe that because they are illiterate, they are plunged in a state like blindness. Most women believed that not being able to read or write constituted an immense loss, reducing their opportunity to run a business, engage with others, and be independent.

Their struggle with illiteracy is one of the reasons members of the MA advocate for girls to stay in school. Ensuring there are no barriers to enrol girls in school is one of the main priorities for the MA, whether by following up with the *chef de l'arrondisement* to ensure all children have the documents to enrol, or using their lived experience to sensitize parents to the importance of education. Drawing from their experience of not having been educated, but seeing the impact education can have on the future of children, encourages other parents to enrol their children. The MA members strongly believe that sensitizing parents is one of the strongest mechanisms to achieve change. In a conversation with Bake, she mentioned:

> My parents never knew, they didn't know that their daughters needed an education, they didn't know how it could open doors, they just knew it was expensive and thought it was a waste of time. If my parents knew how it important it was, maybe our future would be different. (Casual conversation, December 04, 2019, Nokou)

This belief stems from their argument that parents need all the information they can get on the importance of school to justify the sacrifices they make to formally

educate their children, instead of using them for farm work or caring for younger children.

The members of the MA refer to their own past experiences as lost opportunities. Although unemployment rates are high in Benin, and getting an education does not guarantee employment, the MA members consistently told parents that having an education would allow for more opportunities for their children and for an easier life. They often recounted to parents that literate children would be able to advance farther in life because they could participate in the market, read medications and take care of their families, and talk to people outside the village.

Once girls have been recruited and enrolled in school, the MA collectively works to ensure girls stay in school. As a result of observing and identifying the various barriers that prevent girls from staying in school, as mentioned above, the MA implements numerous activities to keep girls in school. The section below outlines how the MA ensures girls are at school.

Monitoring school attendance.

In Nokou, I observed students being sent home either because they had not paid their school fees, their uniforms were not clean, or they did not have their classroom materials. In most cases, students returned to the school with their parents. The parents requested that the MA accompany them to speak with the teachers to address the issue. In one field note I observed the following situation:

> While we were working in the school canteen, a very upset mother stormed through the school and immediately came to see members of the MA. She requested that Bona Yari accompany her to explain to her child's teacher that her husband has already paid the school fees for her children. Bona Yari calmed the mother down and together they went to see the teacher. Bona Yari explained to the teacher that the father is currently in the farm but upon his return he will come and show the teacher that he already paid the school fees. The teacher agreed and the child returned to class. (Fieldnotes, December 18, 2018, Nokou)

In another example, a parent came to the school upset that the Director was imposing fees for the school feeding program because she could not afford to pay them. Before going to see the Director, the MA member intervened to explain to the mother

what the fees were being used for, how they were distributed, and why they were necessary. In this attempt to communicate information, Dama hoped the mother would understand how the money was being used, and why it was important to make paying the fee a priority.

One of the main issues that arose between community members and teachers is the collection of school fees. When school fees are due, often one-third of the students are sent home to collect unpaid school fees from their parents. In these cases, frequently parents returned with their children (who are often upset, nervous, or frustrated) and requested MA members accompany them to negotiate paying the school fees in instalments. In other cases, parents arrived at the school, gave the amount to the MA member and asked them to pay the teacher once the class was on break. More often than not, students did not return at all. This was observed weekly by community members and teachers. For example, on November 28, 2018, members of the MA noticed that half of the school population was leaving the classroom. When they asked the students where they were going, the students said they were being sent home for not paying school fees. Naguibatou was the first to raise her concern about the number of students being sent home. Immediately she went to the Director's office to complain that half the school was being sent home, and that the school shouldn't send so many students' home. She went on to tell the Director that if the issue was school fees, they needed to find another way to let the families know rather than sending so many students' home. The Director told her he would bring this up at the next PA meeting. Her ability to have a direct conversation with the school Director resulted from having built a relationship as a member of the respected MA.

However, I often found myself questioning whether the MA were genuinely concerned for girls attending school and were advocating against children being sent home because it would impact their learning outcomes, or whether there were economic reasons for their advocacy because more children present in school meant they had more demand for their products. I observed often that when the members of the MA advocated against teachers sending kids home for

non-payment of school fees, they would complain to one another, not because girls were missing school and not learning, but because they would not meet their income goals or would waste the food they made. In one fieldnote I observed a conversation between Naguibatou and Bona Yari

> At the end of recess, Bona Yari and Naguibatou came back all unhappy. They complained that they hadn't sold much. Naguibatou was frustrated that the teachers did not warn them that they were going to send the children home so that they could reduce the quantity of food they sold. Gnanki told the other two members “you have noticed that at the end of the month the teacher sends the students home to get the school fees for the next month, so why do you make the same amount of food. The teacher doesn’t have to tell you, we need to know and make the food according to what we know. Look I sold all my food today because I made half the amount. Next time make less food at the end of the month you will see none will go to waste and you will not lose money. Now try to go sell it in the street. Don’t worry” (Fieldnote, November 30, 2018, Nokou)

Another of the barriers around monitoring school attendance that the MA observed and sought to address was the dangerous daily walk to school. To access the school, most people have to cross the main road. It is six lanes wide and has cars, trucks, and motorcycles passing at high speed. Unfortunately, it does not have a pedestrian crosswalk or a bridge for kids to use. As such, many girls and boys fear crossing this road and therefore avoid coming to school. Prior to the MA intervention, girls would wander around, sit at the edge of the main road for the school day, or act sick to avoid coming to school. As a result of the danger of crossing the main road, this being a barrier for girls to come to school, the MA organized various activities to reduce the problem. The first activity was to nominate one member each morning to monitor the side roads and help girls cross the main road:

> I was on my way to the market when we noticed seven schoolgirls hanging around a sewing workshop at the edge of the main road. I spoke to them and then took all seven of them to school before heading to the market. (Fieldnote, December 18, 2019, Nokou)

They developed a peer network at school, through which older students (grades 5 and grade 6) would be responsible for walking with younger students after lunch when they all went home, to help ensure their safety. Despite the limited resources members of the MA had, they though of creative ways such

as serving as crossing guards, creating a peer network, and doing street walks to ensure girls stayed in school. Similarly, during school hours, the members of the MA who are not at the school managing the school feeding program monitor the streets for children who should be in school:

> The day before yesterday, I was in the village when I saw three children having fun with their backpacks, at around 4 p.m. I immediately put them on my motorcycle and drove them to school and sent them off to their class (Casual conversation, November 12, 2018, Nokou).

During the evening, members of the MA often monitored the streets if they saw school-going children (often in uniform) who are out late. Although I question how effective these methods could be in enhancing learning outcomes, I did notice that these activities provided MA members an opportunity to voice their concerns and to practice speaking up when they saw an injustice. For example, during one of the evening walks, Baké noticed that not many people were in the street. When she asked her neighbour, he told her the local council had been hosting an event since the day before and all the children and community members were there. This excerpt from my field note outlines that specific event and how Baké addressed the situation:

> There were hundreds of people at this event surrounding the organizer. We saw people selling different food items. It was already 9 p.m. when we arrived, and we saw a girl we knew. We asked her what time the music would end, and she told us they will be going until sunrise. I asked her when students normally go home; she said some leave around 12 p.m. others stay until 4 a.m. Baké was both disappointed and angry. She said to me, “You know the national exams are tomorrow; I can’t understand how the mayor would be irresponsible and host this event when the exams are tomorrow!”. Baké started approaching the children in uniform and telling them to go home and reminding them if they do not pass the national exams, they will have to repeat their grade. Some children listened while others walked to another side out of the sight of Baké. We left the event at 10 p.m. and on our way back Baké said she will get the MA to raise this issue with the parent’s association and to file a complaint with the village chief. (Fieldnote, December 13, 2018, Nokou)

Following this incident, Baké – accompanied by Salamatou and Bona Yari—spoke to the PA and the Director of the school to explain the impact of this situation on students. They decided they would speak with the *chef de village* and ask why the

school administrators were not consulted when deciding to host this event. Salamatou's confidence to address this situation and ensure the school took it up with the mayor's office was both the result of the support she had from the members of the MA, being the President of the association, and the alliances they had built with the PA and the School Director to support their work.

Remedial classes.

In Nokou, members of the MA have been working with the school to organize remedial classes for children on Wednesday afternoon because in Benin, schools are off Wednesday afternoon. As such, with the support of Alma and the PA and the MA, the MA in Nokou funds these classes. The grade 4 teacher comes to teach these remedial classes every Wednesday. On average, 40 students attend these remedial classes. In one discussion, Salamatou stated:

> Parents these days, they do not follow up with children at home. Some of them feel ashamed because they are not educated. They cannot help their children, so they do not talk about schoolwork at home. Others think they have done their job by enrolling their children in school and there is nothing else they need to do. There is no follow-up at home or at school. Because the children do not get the support at home, we have set up classes to support the children. A lot of them graduate, but still cannot read well. We need to help them to learn how to read and write. (Casual conversation, February 20, 2019, Nokou).

When the MA initially started the remedial classes, they received pushback from parents who wanted their children home after school or assisting them in the market. As a result, the facilitator of Alma suggested that the MA and PA speak with the parents to help them understand these classes' purpose. The MA and the PA let them know the remedial classes are for students who are falling behind and need the support to do well in school and complete the grade to avoid repeating it. The secretaries of the MA and of the PA met at the school with parents to tell them if the student did not receive the extra help, they could end up costing the family more in the long run.

During my time in Nokou, I observed many remedial classes. Although they provide an opportunity for children, specifically girls, to catch up on the lessons taught

that week, I noticed a significant range of students in the class. The 40 students that would attend on average were from grade three to grade six and the teacher would often teach the curriculum at only one level. I often questioned how useful these remedial classes were for enhancing learning outcomes and ensuring girls would be able to catch up and not repeat grades.

7.3.2 MA advocacy for the reduction of harmful gender norms.

As part of their objectives, the MA in Nokou has implemented various activities in their attempts to change harmful gender norms that prevent girls from succeeding in education. During my fieldwork, I observed the MA in Nokou working with teachers and students to change gender roles that reproduce inequalities in the school. They raised awareness about preventing teenage pregnancy, and working in the community to prevent cases of child marriage.

Gender roles.

Within the school, the MA in Nokou worked diligently with students and teachers to change notions of who is responsible for domestic duties and to interrogate the reproduction of a culture of domesticity created within the school. The MA told me that before, what girls and boys were responsible for in the school was very clear, and based on their traditional roles. From the moment girls entered the school in the morning until the moment they left, they interacted and re-enacted the social expectations of masculinity and femininity. As part of their school routine, students performed daily maintenance duties that were deemed appropriate for their gender. The girls were responsible for sweeping the floor, filling up the buckets of water, cleaning the desk, and bringing food for the teacher. For boys, their responsibility included raising the flag for morning assembly, ringing the bell during breaks, cutting the trees in the yard, and organizing the classroom furniture. These routine practices within the school were fundamental processes in the social construction of gender divisions. In other words, the gendered division of labour, which governs social relations in society, was clearly represented at the school. These structured gendered practices represent the introduction to a particular life and prepare students to fit into the dominant and subordinate positions of society.

Since 2016, members of the MA had attended various training sessions organized by Alma which focused on changing harmful gender norms, specifically norms around girls performing domestic duties. As a result of these trainings, the members of the MA worked to break gendered roles and to get boys and girls to serve diverse roles at school. As girls were sent out of the classroom to perform a gendered duty, members of the MA would often follow and intercept by sending them back to the classroom and then talking to the teacher. For example, on one occasion when I saw Dama intercept this activity, I asked the MA what was going on. Azarat replied:

> Before, girls were barely present in class; instead, they were always wandering around the courtyards, going in and out of the classroom, performing duties in the classroom, running errands for the teacher, and never focused on the lesson being taught. So, while girls were in school, they were never actually in the classroom. That is why a lot of them were in the remedial classes because they were not learning in school. So, we had to stop this. But it is hard because we have to not only work with the teachers, but also with the parents and the community to change this. It is this behavior change that is often hard. (Casual conversation, December 12, 2018, Nokou)

This was echoed by the NGO facilitator, who has been working with the MA in Nokou for two years:

> The parents say that boys do not have the obligation to work at home. Boys do not do domestic work; this is for girls to do. But thanks to the work of the MAs we are seeing change, we are seeing more boys give themselves to housework. (Interview, January 27, 2019, Nokou)

As a result of training they received from the NGO, the MA in Nokou was trying to change perceptions regarding domestic duties. The members of the MA realized that the burden of domestic work takes time away from girls they need, to study and do well in school. Accordingly, they explained to parents that it is important not only for girls to be sent to school, but also for them to have the time to study for school. They organized an awareness-raising workshop with boys and girls to train them around domestic work and learning how to do all the domestic chores (collecting water, cutting wood, sweeping, cleaning the courtyard) to change the perception of what is deemed as feminine and what is deemed as masculine roles. However, this is a deep-seated social

norm that will take long-term efforts, community buy-in, and community denunciation of the harmful norm for change to occur.

Over the last two years, the MA has begun the process of changing behaviours and gaining community buy-in by persuading parents and teachers to disrupt conventional gender roles. Yet their work has not been without resistance from both teachers and parents. The MA has implemented different awareness-raising sessions with teachers to highlight the importance of reframing gender roles so that both boys and girls are involved, and so that girls do not fall behind in school. However, teachers continue to reproduce gender inequalities in their classroom. In a story shared by Bona Yari, she stated that often when she does the class visits to monitor attendance, she sees the teachers send girls to collect water. Although boys volunteer to go, the teachers say that it is only girls who will collect water. When Bona Yari asked why boys who volunteer to go are not sent, the teachers laugh and say: “Even if we accept to share these duties between girls and boys, the fathers of these children will come and tell us they are not happy seeing their son collect water”. The feedback they received from the teachers made the MA decide that they needed to work with parents to be able to change gender roles and to start having a dialogue at the community level around domestic duties. In a casual conversation, Baké mentioned that she was chatting with mothers in her community about sharing domestic duties among all children:

> […] there are those who listen to us but there are some whose husbands do not agree that mothers use boys the same way as girls in the house. Some fathers say, "boys are not going to become girls" or they say: "It is not your boy child that you brought into this world so that you can give him jobs intended for girls". But among those that have accepted what we are telling them about sharing gender roles, we have seen a gradual shift, and there is some progress. But in these cases, it is not good that when we see change in the community, and girls return back to school, that the teacher makes them collect water, wash the bowls, sweep the floor, while the boy is studying in the classroom. (Casual conversation, December 12, 2018, Nokou)

The MA stated that they know changing roles will take a long time but having dialogue will help progress. Similarly, along with the dialogue they have with mothers in

the community, the members of the MA use their own family to set an example by having both boys and girls participate in domestic duties. Gnaki mentioned:

> My children do almost all the tasks at home like collecting water and washing the dishes. But it is only the washing of clothes that I forbid them to do because the boys do not wash the dirty parts properly. I have only one daughter and I have three boys, but they all do the same housework as my daughter. My older son makes the house food, and it is always so delicious. In my community, parents insulted me when my boy started to help me with the housework. They said that I was bad at doing it myself, that's why I had to ask the boys to do the housework. It is not easy to change old ways of thinking here. When the opportunity presents itself, I try to sensitize parents in my community, but it's not easy. Sometimes people in the community come and see my sons doing housework, [and] they give them women's names. For example, they call my son Bougnon [a Beninese women's name], which does not encourage my boys to help us because they get embarrassed by these names. (Interview, December 20, 2018, Nokou)

In another conversation with Salamatou, she indicated that in order to enhance gender equality within the community, one needs to lead by example with one's own family. Many of the members of the MA stated that they are trying to change gender roles starting with their own household, dividing the gender roles between their children and grandchildren, to then teach the parents in the community that they should also. Again, this has not been without resistance from the community. Although some community members mocked their efforts and resisted what they were teaching, members of the MA were encouraged by the Alma facilitator to continue speaking to their neighbours and showing them through their actions. The Alma facilitator mentioned:

> Some of the difficulties of the work they do in the community is that some people do not even listen to them; others mock them and say 'You have nothing to do, that's why you are here talking to us'. But I try to encourage them and remind them that while some people don't listen, others will, and their emphasis and efforts should be on the people who will listen. (Interview, January 27, 2019, Nokou)

The MA in Nokou has implemented activities and adapted its methods (such as first working with the school, and then working with the community, and then using their own families as an example for dialogue) to address gender roles that perpetuate

inequalities in the school and the community. Although their efforts have been resisted at different levels, they use the resistance and pushback from the community to consult and identify ways they can adapt their approach to get more buy-in.

Although the intentions of these awareness raising sessions and dialogue are to raise critical consciousness and ultimately to change harmful social norms, raising critical consciousness is not sufficient to make behavioural and structural changes. I observed that the efforts of the MA were concentrated at the micro community level and focused more on repeating the messaging they received from Alma training. During observations of the dialogue, I often questioned if the members of the MA truly understood the messaging and what it meant in different scenarios, or if they had memorized what the Alma facilitator taught in the training session, for them to repeat it in their conversations. Given that when challenges or reactions different from what they expected required them to go back and speak to the Alma facilitator, I always wondered if the training provided truly sought to raise critical consciousness, or whether it was reinforcing rote learning of specific messaging.

Child Marriage.

Another major barrier that prevents girls from succeeding through education is the belief that when girls reach the age of puberty, they are ready for marriage. The prevalence of child marriage has been one of the leading causes of girls not completing primary school in Benin, especially in the North of the country. One of the main activities of the MA is to advocate against child marriage. Bona Yari noted:

> Things have slowly changed. Before little girls who started to grow breasts would leave school in order to be married off, but now we plead with the parents and advocate for the importance of girls continuing their education. But it's because The Koran [Islam's Holy Book] says that girls should be married from their first menstrual period. So, when we try to advocate for girls not to get married, they tell us we are going against religion. But when we feel that we will not be listened to, we ask the *chef de village* to help us. We have already had two cases in which we have recovered the girls. There is the case of Douanri[16] last year and that of Maré[17] this year. In the case of Douanri, she came and confided in us, telling us that her parents are planning to marry her off. But in the case of

[16] Pseudonym.
[17] Pseudonym.

> Maré, we noticed that in the village they were distributing candies to invite people to a wedding. When we asked the community who was getting married, they said Maré, and we knew she was too young. (Interview, January 13, 2019, Nokou)

In Nokou, child marriage is a practice that is very difficult to address. Given the difficulty of stopping child marriage, the MA draw on their alliances and networks with the PA, the *chef de village,* and the traditional leaders to stop child marriage. Bona Yari explained this with the case of Douanri:

> She is a girl from a Peulh camp [West African ethnic group]. She was doing really well in school, but her parents started to prepare for her wedding. It was actually she who came to tell us. She ran and went to complain to the president [of the MA] about what her parents were doing and that [say] she did not want to get married; she wanted to stay in school. The president went to get her teachers and the school director. Together, they all went to Douanri's house to ask why the parents wanted to marry her off. The father said that in their house when a girl becomes the age of their daughter [12], she no longer lives with her parents. She goes to her husband's house. Together, with the village chief, the teachers, and the school director, they sat the father down, told him how well she was doing in school and that she needed to complete her primary school. Each person talked from their experience with Douanri and the potential she had and stated that they would not let the marriage happen. After negotiations, they were able to ban the marriage of the daughter until she obtained her BEPC [primary school certificate]. (Interview, January 13, 2019, Nokou)

In Maré's situation earlier in the school year, Naguibatou explained how they negotiated the delay of her arranged marriage to a boy from a neighbouring village, so that she could finish primary school before getting married:

> We noticed in the community that treats were being handed out to people and when we asked what the treats were being handed out for, they said it was for Maré's marriage. When the president found out, she said, 'This is not going to happen'. We went and spoke to Maré, and she told us that her family already had a wedding date, but she did not want to get married. She said her family owed money to another family, and as such they were marrying her off. We created a delegation of trusted community leaders, which included the religious leader who was going to marry them, along with the village chief. We sat her father down and the village chief negotiated with the father if there was any other way that he could pay the loan. The village chief also spoke to the groom's family and negotiated the loan repayment to delay the wedding. Our efforts were successful,

> however, only to delay the wedding until Maré was done primary school. (Interview, January 12, 2019, Nokou)

Although the MAs have not been able to stop child marriage, they have been able to use their alliances in the school and the community to delay child marriage or to negotiate other options so that girls can continue their schooling. Through Bona Yari's volunteer work with the distribution of birth certificates she has gained much respect in the community and has built a close relationship with community leaders. Similarly, through the work of the MA to support the school Director and the school experience, the MA has the support of the PA and the school director. They draw on these alliances to address harmful gender norms. The *chef de village* mentioned that in the 2017-2018 school year, five forced marriages were delayed until the girls had finished primary school, which according to him, was a success for their village.

Teenage Pregnancy.

One of the main reasons girls drop out of school at an early age in Benin is pregnancy. Members of the MA stated that if girls get pregnant, a community stigma prevents them from continuing their education during their pregnancy because the community believes they will be a bad influence for other girls in the school. Usually, when they are out of school for a year, they don't return once they have their baby. As a result of this barrier, the MA have implemented activities to ensure girls stay in school. For example, they provided awareness-raising workshops before the holidays, monitored night events to ensure girls and boys go home, and provided support to young mothers who have become pregnant to prevent them from dropping out. The MA also organized different classes on Saturday afternoons to give girls something to do. They began organizing these when they heard that girls were often having sex because they were bored. So they started classes such as dance, choir, and hair braiding in order to keep girls busy. Baké runs the choir and has a volunteer from the church run the choir, Chantale the dance class, and Gnaki the hair braiding class. Each woman alternates the week they are available to organize the class. Approximately 35 girls in grade 4 to 6 attend these classes. The MA received funding from Alma to support the costs associated with setting up the class (e.g. purchasing instruments, and hair

supplies). However, they used funds from their savings group to supplement any additional costs associated. On one occasion, I observed a young girl, approximately 15, who was pregnant and approached the MA to buy food at the school. This prompted a discussion of early pregnancy with the MA. Gnaki stated:

> In the past, we would have about five to six schoolgirl pregnancies per year, all around grade 5 or 6, but this year we still have not seen any pregnancy yet. Every year, before the school holidays–Christmas, Ramadan, summer–we hold a workshop with our girls to remind them how easy it is to get pregnant, the consequences of getting pregnant, how to know if you are pregnant, and the different contraceptive methods available to prevent pregnancies. We tell our girls, if you get your period, you are capable of getting pregnant. We also invite a facilitator from the community health centre to these workshops and she speaks to our girls about different family planning methods and how to use them to prevent pregnancy. (Fieldnote, November 28, 2018, Nokou)

In an interview, the school Director stated:

> We have seen a change with our girls. In the past there were some girls who would let themselves get pregnant by the young boys in our village. But the MA have been working repeatedly to sensitize girls. The girls are becoming more aware of how easily they can get pregnant and today this phenomenon is slowly diminishing. (Interview, December 12, 2018, Nokou)

In order to prevent teenage pregnancy, the MA in Nokou has also organized evening activities to monitor clubs and community events. These activities often happen once a week or when there is a specific community event is happening. Each member of the MA monitors her own area. When they observe young girls with older boys, they separate them and send the girls and boys home. In some cases, they pay older youth to go to clubs or events that run too late and send young kids home. One night I joined their Wednesday night street monitoring. A group of four girls were standing in the centre of the street where loud music was playing, and they were talking. We walked up to them and Abibatou stopped and questioned why they were out so late on a school night. Following the conversation, the girls were sent home. Although the members of the MA did these activities weekly, I found myself asking whether these spot checks have been effective in reducing teenage pregnancy and how sustainable the activity is in the long term. I came to the conclusion that the spot checks might not be effective on

their own; however, in conjunction with community dialogue, the activities can be supportive.

In instances where girls do become pregnant, and the girl does not want to keep the baby, the MA members serve as mediators between the girl and the boy's family. Bona Yari shared a story about a case where they made the boy responsible to pay the fees associated with having the pregnancy aborted.

> I once told you that in our school here a girl was two months pregnant and she came and told us what happened. She said she did not want the baby because she was not interested in marrying the baby's father and did not have the financial means to support a baby. We went to see the young boy's parents. We explained that the girl needs to go to school and she does not want to have the baby and she is too young to support the baby. We told the family that since we are the same [from the same community], we are not going to bring him to justice because it will create a lot of trouble for him, so they are the ones who know how they are going to make the pregnancy disappear before the new school year so that the girl resumes her lessons. The parents of the boy took the girl to the Kandi health center where she was able to benefit from a voluntary termination of the pregnancy. We saw her at the start of the school year and spoke to her. She thanked us and said she was no longer pregnant. She moved to Kandi after she received her BEPC and now goes to secondary school. We were able to support her to make sure she stays in school. (Casual conversation, December 05, 2018, Nokou)

This solution was possible in this case because neither family was Muslim, which is the dominant religion in this region, and which forbids abortion (unless the mother's life is in danger). Seeing that both families were less conservative, they were able to accept the abortion. However, given the conservative nature of the region, I am not confident that this solution would be feasible in other cases. The Beninese government has taken a major step towards advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and girls to reduce the number of maternal deaths. In 2017 they created a strategy focused on preventing unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions, and strengthening the legal environment for SRHR. As a result of their approach, which includes addressing abortion stigma through community awareness campaigns across the country and expanding abortion services to

rural health centers, the MA could send the pregnant girl to Kandi to have her abortion safely administered.

Although the government of Benin has strengthened their strategy to support the reproductive health and rights of women and girls, the stigma around abortions still exists. Although the members of the MA have not been able to eliminate these problems, they have made small inroads into consciousness raising and participating at the community level to support the larger change process. The MA at Nokou Primary School has been able to use its position within the school to have discussions around difficult subjects such as harmful gender norms, child marriage, and teenage pregnancy with different members of the community. Although these issues are often stigmatized, the MA has been begun the dialogue necessary to overcome the stigma.

7.3.3 MA income-generating activities.

Most participants did not learn income-generating skills while growing up due to their busy schedules in the homes. As a result of their involvement in the MA, the participants learned skills that helped them to generate income. Given their highly constrained economic and educational opportunities, members of the MA have used resourceful strategies to generate income. As a collective, they have become creative in the ways in which they created viable livelihoods for themselves and their family. For the most part, members of the MA concluded that they needed to resort to multiple strategies to earn their livelihoods. They found that their chances of survival and success were greater when they were able to utilize several income-earning approaches simultaneously. In addition, they saw building relationships and collaborating as integral to their success. As part of the MA, members participated in income-generating activities and in a communal savings group. The income-generating activities at the school taught the members of the MA skills that helped them generate an income for use out of school, such as negotiation, understanding supply and demand, how to process food, and how to market the items to sell. The income generated at the school was often used to pay for their children's school fees or contributed to their savings group.

Selling food at school.

At Nokou Primary School, each member is allowed to sell one item at break time and items could not be duplicated between the members. The items sold were macaroni, sweet potato, cookies, fruit juice, popcorn, rice and beans, and plantain. As a result of their experience of selling goods at school, MA members learned how to estimate the number of sales they would have during the day, to cook enough of their product for the number of students at the school, and to not have supplies that remain or expire. The skill of being able to adapt their products to the demand of the market helped them reduce their costs and make more profit. For example, in one field note, Gnaki discussed how she always cooks less macaroni at the end of the month because that is when students are often sent home for non-payment of school fees; therefore, there are often fewer students. Gnaki taught this to the other members of the MA:

> At the end of recess, Bona Yari and Naguibatou came back unhappy. They complained that they hadn't sold much. Naguibatou was frustrated that the teachers did not warn them that they were going to send the children home so that they could reduce the quantity of food they sold. Gnanki told the other two members, “You have noticed that at the end of the month the teacher sends the students home to get the school fees for the next month, so why do you make the same amount of food? The teacher doesn’t have to tell you; we need to know and make the food according to what we know. Look, I sold all my food today because I made half the amount. Next time make less food at the end of the month. You will see none will go to waste and you will not lose money. Now try to go sell it in the market. Don’t worry.” (Fieldnote, November 30, 2018, Nokou)

Gnaki had learned to observe the “market trends” at the school and adapt her business accordingly to meet her market’s needs and to ensure she profits from her sales. She used the opportunity to teach this observation to other MA members so that and enhance their earnings and skills for the following month.

Savings group.

As part of their MA, members organized a savings group among the association. The money the members of the MA contribute goes towards women’s economic empowerment by expanding access to basic financial services. The savings group allows members of the association to expand their businesses and become more resilient after economic shocks. In Benin, this pool of money is called ‘tontine’. Often,

members pay into the tontine weekly or monthly and, in return, receive the whole pool on a rotating basis. Another popular tontine strategy among rural women in Benin is dedicating the pooled money to a purpose, such as buying bulk foodstuffs at the end of the year and dividing them up among members, instead of dividing cash. The food usually lasts for about six months, depending on the size of the family.

In Nokou, members of the MA have two rotating savings group: one for advancing their personal business activities, the second for their advocacy efforts. In the first account, each member pays in 500CFA (approximately $1.50 CAD) a week and at the end of the month, one member takes 20,000 CFA (approximately $50 CAD) to advance her business. Women can also use the first fund to get a loan to advance their business. For example, members of the MA often buy products such as oil or cereal in bulk during low season when they are plentiful and store them to sell during off-season, when the supply is low and the demand high. Naguibatou states that the savings group was an extremely helpful way for her to save some of the income she earned from her trading activities:

> You see, petty trading is a very unreliable business. There are good days and bad days. Sometimes it is extremely difficult for me to come up with the money I am supposed to contribute every week. But this is the only way I could save my money and do something meaningful with it once it is my turn to get the lump sum. If it was not for the MA and the savings group, I would spend the money from my trading business as I made It. Since being part of the MA and the savings group, every day I put aside 100 CFA [approximately 25 cents CAD] for my contribution. Some days I barely make that amount of money. However, I can manage, and I am doing my best. So far, I have not had any problems coming up with the money for our weekly contributions. (Casual conversation, November 04, 2018, Nokou)

In the second savings account the MA has is to support their advocacy activities, they put 100 CFA (approximately 25 cents CAD) a week. This fund supports their advocacy efforts for girl's education: paying for flash cards, paying youth to monitor students at night, paying their share of the community teacher's salary, paying for soap. As a result of the income-generating activities and the savings group's work, members of the MA gained autonomy and participated in dialogue about finances from which they were often previously excluded. For example, the school received funding from donors

to build benches and tables for the school. They received 85 percent of the funds and were required to pay the remaining 15 percent. For this project, the PA paid 10 percent and the MA paid 5 percent.

The PA designated the President of the MA, Salamatou, to manage the funds and pay the three carpenters. However, in Benin women are not usually responsible for managing funds, so the carpenter tried to take advantage of Salamatou's position and the money she gave him. Considering Salamatou has been the President for ten years, she had the confidence to be vocal when injustices happen. In this specific situation, Salamatou gave the funds to the first carpenter and asked him to divide it and give their shares to the other two carpenters. When she found out he did not divide the money, she immediately went to him to address the issue. Here is an excerpt from my field note where Salamatou explained the situation:

> […] When the first part of the money came, it was me who went to get it from the NGO and I showed it to Martin [President of the PA] who asked me to give it to the carpenters so that they could start the work, and that I would follow them closely to ensure that the work was done on time. I gave the money to the carpenter who was a part of the parents' association and asked him to give the others their share so that everyone could get to work. A few days later, I went to see the other carpenters to see how the work was progressing and to my great surprise, there was nothing done [by] the other two carpenters. That's when they made me understand that the carpenter from the parents' association didn't give them the money, that they didn't even see him anymore. I was beside myself that day. I walked all the way out of town to his work. When I arrived, I just told him this: "if you think you are going to take over the market and benefit alone from this work, you are wrong, you are certainly going to make the tables and benches alone, but when the last instalment of the funds comes I will take 100 000CFA (approximately $230 CAD) from this money and give it for free to the other two carpenters, I trusted you and I gave you the money and you thought you were clever." After these words I turned around and he wanted to justify himself and I answered him again "I needed to tell you what I think so I came to you. If you want to talk to me, you know my home" and I left. [Talking to me] All these men think they are clever, but we are more clever. They always think we won't find out, but we will, and I will not stay silent. He was trying to get all the money for himself, but I showed him I have authority. He came to see me and apologized. (Casual conversation, December 11, 2018, Nokou)

The confidence members of the MA have achieved in addressing issues at the school and the ability to manage financial resources through their income-generating activities gave them the power to address issues that arise at the community level. Similarly, their perception of their economic empowerment has also shifted. Baké said:

> You know I can do a lot of things now. I have been able to make some more income, so I provide for myself and my children, and my children's children. I help pay for my grandchildren's school fees and school items. You know Azarat and Michael [referring to her grandchildren], I pay for all of their school fees. I am also able to buy and send palm nuts to my parents in Padé [neighbouring village], not all the time, but sometimes. Before I could not do anything like that. I am no longer going to the bush to cut grass or to collect rocks to sell. My grandchildren, including the younger children of my co-wives, listen to me and behave well because they know I can buy the things they like. (Casual conversation, November 12, 2018, Nokou)

Bona Yari added:

> Four years ago, I always had to go to my co-wives to ask them for spices, flour, salt, because I never had any in my house. Now I have enough money to buy the little things I need in my home. Now people come and ask me for those things, and I am so happy I can afford to give it to them. I am quite satisfied with myself, and the home I have. My life has completely changed since my involvement in the association. (Casual conversation, December 4, 2018, Nokou)

Their participation in the savings group has given women more power to make choices that affect their lives. In a discussion with Naguibatou, she mentioned that because she was able to save money and get guidance through training organized by Alma on how to manage earnings, she was able to use that money to invest in family planning injections to avoid getting pregnant. She stated:

> I decided I don't want to have any more kids right now and I don't have a husband. Salamatou told me that I can get these injections every three months to not get pregnant. When I went to the clinic, they told me it is 1500 CFA (approximately $4 CAD) for the injection. I was able to use some of the money I had saved from selling palm oil to pay the midwife. She comes to my house every three months and gives me the injection. If I didn't have the savings, I wouldn't have this option, or I would have to go ask my family and then they would tell me not to do the injection. Because of the money I had saved, I was able to get the injections and decide not to get pregnant. It is important for me to not get pregnant because, as a

> woman, I should not fall into the traps of a man and become pregnant with any man. I still want to have children. With the injections, I can now choose who the father will be. The next time I get pregnant with a child will be because I have chosen the man who is ready to take care of the child and, to a certain extent, take care of me. (Casual conversation, December 12, 2018, Nokou)

In other words, through their income-generating activities and communal savings group, MA members have been able to generate sufficient income to make choices independent of family input.

Nokou MA: Conclusion

The MA in Nokou has implemented different activities both in and around school to enhance learning outcomes and ensure girls stay in school. Although the activities supported learning outcomes (e.g. monitoring attendance, house visits, raising awareness), they were often done by the same key women (e.g. Bona Yari and Gnaki) because they were the literate ones. This is problematic as MA activities were often dependant on whether these two women were at school. If they were not at school, the class monitoring could not happen. This dependency on these two women often led me to question how sustainable their activities were and whether more members needed to be literate to be able to advance the effectiveness of the MA.

Similarly, Although the MA members were implementing activities to enhance learning outcomes for girls and support their learning, often a shortage of resources did not allow for the activities to improve learning outcomes. For example, given that the MA only had enough from their savings group to fund one teacher of remedial classes, often all kids requiring remedial classes would be grouped together. This meant that the teacher had one class with children ranging between ages of six-12 and at different levels of learning. As a result of the significant age range, the teacher often could not meet the needs of all students and focused on teaching one age group, while the others sat there. Given the lack of resources, the remedial classes could be counterproductive to the original aim of the program: making a space where children could get support in subjects, they were falling behind in. Rather, what I observed in the remedial classes were that children were learning material not appropriate for their age (or what they

were learning in school), going home later and still required to do housework, sleeping later yet required to wake up early to do chores before going to school, and therefore not being mentally ready for class the following day. Although the aims of the classes were respected, without the resources to fully support the needs of the children, they were not enhancing learning outcomes.

Despite the challenges in having enough funds to support such quality activities, the MA members built a reputation as “those that get stuff done” and as trusted entities in the community. This was observed in the cases where girls would confide to them about socio-cultural barriers (e.g. their families trying to marry them off, or having an unwanted pregnancy) preventing them from getting an education. They also built a reputation for being able to hold families accountable. Members of the MA have become advocates and have tried to implement activities to reduce the socio-cultural barriers that prevent girls from staying in school. By working with the community and using their critical alliances with men in positions of power to address gender inequalities, members of the MA have been able to start a dialogue around important issues, to eventually disrupt harmful gender norms. By using the advantage that men have in society to support the work MA members are doing, the MA has been able to advance its agenda of enhancing gender equality in and through education. According to Sweetman (2013), using the master’s tools can advance the cause of women because in many cases men command attention in male-dominated institutions, in ways women do not. The MA knows that they need the support of all community leaders to be able to make changes to attitudes embedded in cultural values and have used alliances they have built to address these inequalities.

Collaborative Approaches.

The most powerful theme resonating through the women’s narratives is the extent to which their predicaments are in fact shared, and thereby necessitate collaborative strategies and solutions. As they spoke with me and each other, these women grew cognizant that their experiences and the experiences of their daughters were gender specific. Their stories of struggle were continually accompanied by affirmations of their own resourcefulness, creativity and strength in overcoming them. I gradually began to associate this emerging consciousness among my participants of

shared difficulties, common resourcefulness, and commitment to a common good as the substance of a fledgling feminism. They were devising resourceful means of redressing the multiple social and economic difficulties they experienced first-hand.

Members of the MA demonstrated an understanding that for change to be achieved, action needs to be taken at multiple levels, at multiple sites, consistently. The most compelling theme resonating through the narratives as women discussed solutions to the predicaments of girls' education was the need for collaborative strategies in different areas (e.g. school, village centre, home) to ensure girls have access to school, stay in, and succeed through it. Often, their activities involved numerous members working together. For more difficult situations, such as child marriage and teenage pregnancy, members of the MA created strategies to collaborate with different members of the community to gradually enhance their power to foster change. The MA's notion of self-help encompasses the collective. Feminist elements to their collective bottom-up solutions were evident, including strategies relying on principles such as cooperation, self-determination, and liberation associated with feminism.

The success of the MA in Nokou, in action for over ten years with the support of an NGO, demonstrates how an MA can move from working on issues related to access to education to participating in formal governance structures such as the PA (where the secretary of the MA sits on the executive board). This has happened indirectly through the implementation of activities with immediate results (e.g. monitoring attendance), to build their confidence and reputation. Once they gained confidence through implementing these "easy" activities (requiring limited-time mobilization and minimal behavioural change), women could engage in more challenging activities (necessitating ongoing behavioural change by many individuals, such as changing gender roles around domestic labour, postponing child marriage). NGOs are important in this latter process through the training they have provided, the funding mechanism they create, and the dialogue they begin. My analysis indicates that Alma adopted a mediating role at the beginning of the MA's development into an association, giving rise to a "mediated empowerment" process (Rocha, 1997, p. 36). The training and dialogue sessions implemented by the NGO have provided the space for members of the MA to gain

knowledge and make informed decisions to mobilize and address the harder issues of gender relations. However, I did wonder whether the NGO was able to raise critical consciousness through their trainings with the members of the MA. Often, as previously stated MA members repeated the same messaging and discussed their activities in exactly the same way, as if from memorization. This observation made me question whether the members of the MA had truly gained the knowledge and believed the messaging they were taught, in turn becoming independent to make decisions based on this knowledge, and developing self-determination. Or, were they simply repeating what they were told and ultimately remaining dependent on the NGO to make decisions?

This last point is key, that the mediating process should guide local groups to take ownership of development and become self-reliant. However, given that Kandi has become an epicentre for development programming, the MA has been working with different NGOs for over ten years. With the large presence of NGOs implementing various development projects across all sectors, the population of Kandi – and specifically Nokou Primary School— has become accustomed to monthly (if not biweekly) visits from donors, government officials, directors of NGOs, program, monitoring, and evaluation officers. Although NGOs in Kandi provide support to members of the community who do not have access to basic services, their role has not been without issues. I observed that the constant flow of external partners through Nokou Primary School created a ‘beneficiary culture’ where certain practices (such as paying per diems to attend trainings) have become normalized in the community. Given that many community members knew to expect per diems, they often tried to attend as many trainings and meetings they could to receive payments. When attending training sessions, many community members have rehearsed verbatim messages to deliver to different representatives, and often the same people are selected to attend meetings, trainings, or community activities.

The funding MA members have brought to Nokou Primary School, with NGOs and donors funding infrastructure, school feeding programs, and other projects through the MA can be another reason why there is a strong relationship and collaboration between the PA, school director, and MA. One reason for their support for the MA activities may be that the school administration is aware that the MA brings in funding

for the school; in turn, they need to cooperate to ensure funding continues. This made me question whether there was authentic buy-in from school administration, and whether it would halt once all funding to the school ends.

Likewise, given the number of NGOs working in Kandi, often schools have been recipients of project funding from various NGOS. For example, to run the school feeding program at Nokou Primary School, World Food Programme supplied the food to the country; Catholic Relief Services managed the delivery of the food within the country; World Education funded the infrastructure for the school canteen; and Alma NGO trained the MA to run the school feeding program and monitored it for efficiency. In this example, four key institutions were involved in the school feeding program and representatives from these different institutions came to the school to evaluate progress. As a result, at times school members received contradictory directions and guidance on how to operate (e.g. serving food in classroom vs. serving food in the foyer) and these conflicting approaches caused tension among school members (school director, PA, MA). Therefore, a co-ordinated approach among the NGOs and institutions providing support would ease the tension and lead to better results.

Being seen: Greater status in the community.

Throughout the interviews and casual conversations, the MAs mentioned how they felt recognized by community members, school administrators, and community officials for the work that they did in the school and in the community. Seeing that many of these women had moved from their own village to the community where they married their husbands, they were often marginalized from the community, or never felt they truly belonged. The organization of the MA gave members the opportunity to be recognized as people playing an important role to improve the community. Through their reputation of being present at the school for many years, their knowledge of the school environment, their contributions to ensuring children succeeded through school, and being the point of contact when issues arose between the community and the school, or between teacher and students, MA members received the validation and authority required to provide input, suggest alternatives, and have their voices heard in conversations around education.

For similar reasons, members have gained a greater position and status in their respective villages. The women were very visible at the community level, and according to the participants and school administration, they were getting more involved in decisions concerning community affairs because they had built a positive reputation for themselves, as a well-organized and hardworking group who were trustworthy and loyal. This aligns with the arguments made by Ostrom and Walker (2003) who identify enhanced reputation as particularly important in stimulating collective action. Members of the MA in this study acknowledged the reputation they were building and the public recognition of their collective power. This contributed to a sense of accomplishment in education and motivated them to undertake collective action in other realms of society as well. Moreover, based on the data gathered, Nokou MA members had more voice in decisions concerning community affairs as they were getting involved in areas that had been exclusively the domain of male community members (e.g. managing funds for school projects, being invited to community meetings held by the municipal office, sitting on the PA executive).

For members of the MA in Nokou, their association with the INGO (receiving visitors from the South, or high-level ministers), gave them credibility in the community. Having been trained by Alma on different gender equality issues (such as the division of domestic labour), members of the MA were able to speak to the community with a level of confidence and authority, often stating that this was the training they received by Alma, therefore implying it is “legitimate knowledge”. The request by visitors such as donors, and government ministry representatives for MA members to be present at community meetings enhanced their status.

Based on both observations and on the stories shared by members of the MA, they had progressively gained a greater position and status in their community as a result of their activities and desire to support girls’ education. As Salamatou stated, the various rights they were beginning to enjoy and the greater role they were starting to have within the community were not things they demanded, but came to them as a result of their various contributions in their village, such as ensuring children got to school safely, educating girls on pregnancy, resolving issues of child marriage,

providing financial support to enhance learning outcomes, and organizing themselves and other community members to advocate for girls' education.

Chapter Eight: Mothers Association in Sokossa Village

8.1 The Organization of Sokossa's MA

The MA at Sokossa Primary School was formed in 2017 at the request of the school director who sought to include women in monitoring the school's children. Prior to starting the MA at Sokossa Primary School, the group members had been in a savings group in Sokossa for ten years. They met weekly to contribute to a pool of funds, known as a 'tontine,' and each month one member would take this pool home. In 2015, alongside their 'tontine' fund the members also contributed to an emergency fund which provided a safety net for the members in case of a health or family emergency. Their association was an informal, alternative financial institution for its members. For many women, it was the first time they could access flexible, hassle-free loans that enabled them to address their family's lack of food and income. Although the group's primary objective was financial, their meetings gave opportunities for socializing and networking among different women. The tontine had 20 members, who were also part of other associations such rice, palm oil, and/or yam associations.

Organizing as an MA at the school was natural for the women˜ because they already met weekly as a savings group and their children attended Sokossa Primary School. At the time of the study, the MA had eight active members. Only eight members joined the MA because many others in the savings group did not have time due to their farming commitments. Also, the needs of the school did not warrant a group of 20. All the members of the MA lived near Sokossa Primary School, the majority on the same road. To recruit members to start the MA, the School Director went to a meeting in 2017 and informed the members of the savings group that he wanted more women involved in supporting children's education at his school. This association was already using some of its funds to support orphaned children going to school. The School Director told the association that he was preparing the school to be the next pilot of the government school feeding program, which eventually the women would manage. The association accepted the School Director's offer to become an MA at the school.

Of the eight active members of the MA, only five members were present at Sokossa Primary School every day (Agomonnou, Gbedji, Zoutannou, Catherine, and Vacon). This was because these members sold food at breakfast, snack, and lunch time to students at the school. Unlike the MA at Nokou Primary School, the MA at Sokossa Primary School did not elect a President. Instead, as is the norm in the region, the oldest member of the group automatically became the President of the association and theoretically led the group. However, as we will see further in this chapter, Vacon played the leadership role for the MA and helped guide the group. When they were forming th MA, the savings group kept the executive committee the same as in the income-generating association. Therefore, Vacon was the Secretary, because she was literate, and Zoutannou was the Treasurer. All members of the MA spoke Fon. The table below outlines background information for each Sokossa MA member.

Participant	Age	Years of Schooling	Literacy level	Age at Marriage	Position in MA
Agomonnou	50	0	low	17	Member
Catherine	65	2	low	16	Member
Chantale	65	0	low	17	Member
Gbedji	55	0	low	17	Member
Hélène	60	0	low	15	Member
Mariama	70	0	low	17	President
Vacon	55	6	good	18	Secretary
Zoutannou	50	4	good	18	Treasurer

Table 3: Sokossa MA Members

The Sokossa MA is an informal association, without written mandates or statutes. Members organize themselves according to their own priorities, and function under the larger, legally recognized PA. The MA’s overall mission is to promote children's schooling, strengthen equal opportunities for access to schooling for girls and boys, monitor children's educational activities in and out of school, and keep them in school. To achieve these objectives, the MA conducts activities to improve school conditions,

learning outcomes, and academic success, all of which will be outlined in the next section. Yet, given their new role at the school, members of the MA were still in the process of understanding what their new role was and how they would achieve their overall mission. For example, during my time with the Sokossa MA, members were never invited to attend any PA meetings nor were they engaged in any decision-making at the school. They ran targeted activities to enhance access to schooling for girls and boys and ensuring children remained in school. Although the MA did not attend any PA meetings, they did have a relationship with the PA, and collaborated with them on certain tasks (e.g. setting up the school garden, supporting children in the community, providing classroom materials). As this section will outline, they have played a supportive role at the school, providing assistance to the school director to enhance girls' education, helping orphaned children who could not afford school materials, and running their income-generating activities.

Generally speaking, members of the MA came to Sokossa Primary School at around 7:30 a.m. to set up their tables and snacks to sell. Before students went to class, members of the MA sold breakfast items. Once class began around 8 a.m., MA members visited classrooms to identify absent students (this often only happened twice a week). Two times a week (Tuesday and Thursday), class visits were followed by distribution of chalk to students. Following the class visits, members visited the homes of absent students to inquire about their whereabouts. These house visits were often by members who were not preparing food for lunch. By 10 a.m., during recess, members were selling snacks and generating their daily income. Usually around 11 a.m., Zoutannou went to the school garden and checked the vegetable crops. At 12 p.m. MA members sold food for lunch. The school lunch break was from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m.. Although students and teachers went home, the executive committee of the MA often stayed for a few minutes to discuss specific school issues, their funds, and different activities. When they finished their meeting, members of the MA either went home to do domestic work, to the market to sell items, or to their land to cultivate. Every Wednesday night, MA members met at the school to run their rotating savings group and discuss other issues that arose during the week.

8.2 Life Stories of individual members of the MA

To better convey the context in which MA members at Sokossa Primary School functioned, this section outlines the three MA members' life stories. Women's status in Sokossa is influenced by their socio-economic position, their networks, and the number of children they have. The systematic subordination of women in Sokossa has led them to form associations to collectively support one another to meet their practical and strategic gender needs. These associations (rice, palm oil, savings) bring women together who share similar experiences and provide women a way to improve their economic position. One of the key themes from my daily casual conversations, observations, and in-depth interviews was the collective experience of inequalities by the members of the MA, and their desire to ensure their daughters do not experience these with the same severity they did. Each of their stories depicts the inequalities they experienced growing up, the society's gender assumptions, and the impact of discrimination on them. I selected these women because they were key informants during my research process. As I spent time in Sokossa and worked with the MA, I identified specific individuals who were the most dynamic, leading the group. As I grew closer to the individual members, I spent more time with them after mornings at the school, observing them in different settings: in their homes, during income-generating activities, at the market, at community events and meetings, and on the farm. These members were the most vocal and active and their stories provided a wealth of information about women's lived experiences, shedding light on their lives, role in the MA, and perspectives of transformation.

Vacon.

Vacon, a 55-year-old at the time of this study, was born and raised in an extended family in a small village in southern Benin. She was the fourth daughter and eleventh child of her father, but the first daughter and last child of her mother. Her father, a powerful man in the community, had three wives, Vacon's mother being the second one. Vacon told me that her father had so many children that she could not remember the number and names of her siblings, but she was certain that her mother had four children. Unlike most village girls, Vacon completed primary school and received six

years of education. Although she went to primary school, she regretted that she could not continue as she was required to get married immediately after sixth grade. She stated:

> My dream was not to go to “big schools.” I just wanted to get my diploma and have some training to be a secretary or do some simple job When I dropped out of school, I learned how to prepare bisap [a fruit drink], but I do this business only when a holiday approaches, because that is when I mostly receive orders. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Once she finished primary education, her father arranged for her to marry the son of a friend in the community. She was married to her husband for eight years and they had three children. Her husband passed away shortly after her third birth. Vacon then married her cousin, and they had two children together. He travelled between Nigeria and Benin for work, and after three years of marriage, he stayed in Nigeria with another woman he had married. After Vacon’s second husband left her, she struggled to support her five children and engaged in trading and small entrepreneurial activities to be able to support her family. She stated:

> I lived a very difficult life and I learned that to get out of it, you have to know how to be educated and know how to fight. My children are all that I have. I don't have any luck with my husbands, and I cannot stand seeing my children suffer the suffering that I experienced. I want them to be ready to defend themselves, both girl [and] boy. I believe there is not something a boy will do, that a girl if she wants will not be able to do it, so I make sure my girls and boys get the same education to be able to make something for themselves. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

When I asked Vacon why she joined the MA in Sokossa, she answered that she joined to help her daughters stand up for themselves and teach them to persevere and learn from their struggles.

> It makes us want more for our daughters, when we see beautiful ladies like you with their pen in hand, but it didn't work for us. We want to be like you, but it is no longer possible. That’s why, since it didn’t work with us, we joined the MA and are doing everything we can to get our daughters to do it. But we aren’t victims. We are good at what we do, and we work hard at what we do. I have learned that we have to persevere. When people say we can’t do something, we can’t listen to them. People say “no”, but we have to stand up for ourselves. ..So now we work hard to teach our daughters that they can also do what they want and not be discouraged.

> They can stand up for themselves too. (Casual conversation, April 02, 2019, Sokossa)

Vacon was active in the community, and in the MA. As a result of her education, she was one of the only MA members who spoke French and was literate. As such, she served as the Secretary of the MA in Sokossa. She believed that women's organizations are the best liberating networks for women like her, explaining:

> I am proud to be a member of women's groups. Before I joined other women, I was miserable, I was away from my birth family members, I lost both my husbands. I did not trust people and I kept all my problems to myself. Now I have many friends, I can even say many sisters, I can rely on. I appreciate the assistance of the women of Sokossa. It does not matter if you are a member of our association or not, if you are a woman, we are all the same. If there is a ceremony in Sokossa, all the women help in many ways. In the case of a death, women bring firewood, water, food. In case of a wedding or naming ceremony, women contribute money, soap, and/or clothes and plates or any cooking pots. We all stand like sisters in a big family. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Vacon believed that the organization improved her life by moving her away from routine household chores, which she often found boring and tiring. She stated:

> Life at home can be boring. You are always doing the same job all the time, with issues and the people in the extended family, the children, and the elderly. Some people do not want to see you rest, at all. They say you are lazy, and they always expect you to do something. The MA relieved us from working all day long. When we meet, we share our problems, laugh about our problems, and take them as nonsense. I no longer feel lonely. I know that I have similar problems with other women, and this gives me courage and strength to move forward.

Vacon confirmed that, because of her literacy, she has been very active in her village and had attended various training sessions in the village run by different NGOs and associations. As a result, she has been able to better support the MA and the children at school.

Agomonnou.

Agomonnou was 50 at the time of this study. She was born and raised in Zoungbome. Her father had three wives, Agomonnou's mother being the first. Agomonnou was the

first child and only daughter of the family. She and her siblings are all about a year and a half apart. Being the first daughter and child in the family, Agomonnou learned to do household chores at a very early age, and helped her mother take care of her older brothers. She said:

> I cannot tell you at what age I started doing chores. What I remember is that I was very young. My mother had a child every other year and I had to help her raise them. I do not remember anything about my childhood, except hard work. I started cooking before I was ten years old and washing clothes was a daily chore. That was what most girls in my village did. I was aware that I had to learn how to cook, take care of a home, and be taught all the things I needed to know to be able to take care of my own family in the future. (Casual conversation, March 22, 2019, Sokossa)

Agomonnou never attended school, because she was responsible for supporting her mother. She stated:

> Before I was even born, my dad had decided that he would send his boys to school and his girls to work. My sisters and I had a very tough life. We would help my mom sell akassa [fermented corn dough served with sauce] in the market. The money we earned would be used for our brothers' education. No one ever talked about the idea of girls going to school in our family, so I never realized how important it was. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Her parents arranged for her to marry a man in the village. Her husband already had a wife who did not bear a child. When Agomonnou was 15, she married and moved to her husband's family. She said she felt the pressure to have childrens because her husband's first wife was not able to. She got pregnant at sixteen and during a digital storytelling workshop shared with the group how difficult it was to be pregnant and not literate. She stated:

> When I was sixteen, I got pregnant. During my prenatal consultation, the doctor gave me a prescription and told me to go the pharmacy to get my medicine and pay my fees. When I went to the pharmacy with the prescription, I gave the pharmacist 300 CFA ($0.75). The pharmacist took the prescription and was offended with the amount I gave him. In disgust, he told me the amount due was 3,035 CFA ($7.00) not 300 CFA ($0.75).
>
> He said, 'You villagers, who are born in the village, it's only with

> akassa that you educate yourself'. No one had ever spoken to me like this. I was so embarrassed [that] I decided I would find a class and learn how to read and write. I looked everywhere in my village for a place that helps educate adults, but I found nothing. I was told, 'You can only learn reading and writing in school'. Twenty years later, I can still hear the words of that [pharmacist]. If my parents had just put me in school, like my brothers, I would never have been in that situation. I will never let my children experience the shame of being illiterate, and I will make sure no matter the situation that they get an education, whether they are girls or boys (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

She said that she realized how her parents' decision to not enrol her in primary school has affected all facets of her life, both in the public and private sphere. She connected her illiteracy with her inability to advance in the market (not being able to count money), to make decisions in her family, and to engage civically. She said that, during her pregnancy and childrearing, she always had fears about putting her children's lives in danger because she could not read. Agomonnou said:

> I rely on people for so many simple things that I sometimes feel worthless. For example, whenever one of my children is sick and I have to give the child medication, I seek the help of other people who can read the doctor's instructions. I get embarrassed when I ask people for help about these simple things, but I have to. I don't want to hurt my children. (Casual conversation, March 13, 2019, Sokossa)

She is well known in Sokossa for organizing women in her community and mobilizing around different activities. She was a great mediator in the community when issues arose. She stated:

> I have not received any formal education, but I know how to deal with issues in this community. Old age is wisdom. When you live longer, experience becomes your best friend. Experience provides the best knowledge. As a member of the MA, I have increased my experience and improved my knowledge. I am more confident and self-reliant. I am learning French. I am a slow learner. I have not reached the level of many women. As you know, younger people always learn faster. I am sure I will get there one day with my determination and persistence. (Interview, May 04, 2019, Sokossa)

Zoutannou.

Zoutannou was 50 at the time of this study. She was born and raised in a polygamous family in a small village in Zoungbome. Her father, a well-known farmer in the community, had two wives, Zoutannou's mother being the first wife. Zoutannou's father did not have many children, compared to other rural men. She was his seventh child and first daughter. She lived in an extended family with grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles and their families, aunts, and other close relatives. She went to school until grade four, then was taken out to prepare for marriage. She worked hard at home helping her mother and aunt with cooking and other household chores and looking after her younger siblings. Her parents did not believe in girls' education. She told me:

> My early childhood life was shared between the school, the farm, household chores, and taking care of my siblings. I did not do well at school because I did not have time to do my schoolwork. I missed a lot of school days. I went to school only when I was not needed at home. Later I dropped out of school because I could not pass my exams and my parents wanted me to get ready for marriage. (Interview, May 18, 2019, Sokossa)

Reflecting on her childhood, she added:

> We village women work continuously during our lifetime. My earliest memory is of me cooking and cleaning. My parents wanted me to learn these skills to prepare me for marriage. I remember my mother telling me the more dishes you can make, the more options you have for your future family. I would struggle to wake up at sunrise to help my mom cook and go to sleep way after sunset, finishing household errands. I had to always be available to do what needed to be done. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Zoutannou married at 18 following the decision of her parents. She stated:

> My parents thought that when a girl became educated no man would marry her; that's why they did not even send me to school. My father believed that a girl had to be married before she hit puberty. Otherwise, it was a sin. My parents said that all I needed to know was kitchen skills and […] how to behave well toward my husband and my in-laws. They married me at a young age so that I did not dishonour the family by becoming pregnant before marriage. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Zoutannou had four boys and two girls with her husband. To support her family, she made income from selling peanuts. Zoutannou stated that her lack of schooling made

microentrepreneurial activities very difficult because she could not keep records or track her business expenses. She further added:

> I do not have a regular business of my own, but I help my husband run his shop. Some days, if I have some time before I go to the school, I prepare dumplings and various other snacks and sell them. This enables me to have some cash for my small needs. I help my husband a lot, but he would never let me manage the store by myself, because I cannot read the weight machine, and sometimes I cannot figure out the amount of change I should give back to the customer. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

Zoutannou emphasized that since she has joined the MA, she has felt a solidarity and unity among members. She stated:

> What I like about our MA is that during our social gatherings, members stand for each other and they do their best to help one another. Women bring firewood, cook, clean, and contribute money and other gifts. Besides all this, what I like is the fun part. During a wedding or a naming ceremony, the women sing, dance, and make your ceremony enjoyable. If there is a death in a family, the women come, bring food, fetch water, and bring firewood. They also comfort you and your family. We support and assist one another emotionally. We don't have to worry too much when we experience a difficulty because we have the support of the group. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

The MA members at Sokossa Primary School, for the most part, grew up without formal schooling. One reason for this is that very limited government investment in rural areas was, and continues to be, a factor in their lives. Another reason for the lack of formal schooling of the MA members is their parents' socioeconomic status. Most rural parents' decisions to keep girls at home from a very early age to run households and take care of their younger siblings can be understood by the fact that parents have little if any choice. When people struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet, sending their children, who represent considerable labour, to school constitutes a luxury most rural dwellers cannot afford. These findings are corroborated by several studies on women and education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Acheampong, 2014; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013; Egbo, 2000). These findings show that the opportunity cost of sending girls to school is one of the main factors affecting women's low educational level in Sub-Saharan Africa.

However, across the stories shared by members of the MA, the theme of personal growth and change resonate. In their stories, many women highlighted the extent of their childhood struggles that led to hardships within family, education and the economy. The participants often described their lives in terms of struggle and suffering. Their own discourse about the challenging situations they confronted in their lives implied that struggle is an inevitable part of growth and change. They did not portray themselves as helpless victims, but instead reaffirmed their own strengths and victories. Most of them stated that as a result of their experience, they have worked as adults to ensure that their children do not have to struggle as much. Most of the participants mentioned that as a result of their lived experience, and the hardships they endured, they worked hard to move their life forward and help others in the process. Each of them saw their personal growth as a means of facilitating change for others, especially their daughters.

8.3 MA Activities

My observations of the MA at Sokossa Primary School and the narratives of each member revealed similar stories concerning the MA's role in working together to address some of the barriers to education for girls. Major barriers for girls' access to school as emphasized by the MA, the school administration, and the community members are that: girls are required to support the family at home or in the farm, girls are sent to work as domestic labourers in Nigeria, and girls are not given sufficient time to study at home, therefore end up repeating grades and costing the family more money. Considering barriers to education for girls occur both in and around school, the MA activities also occur both in and around the schools–where they have identified obstacles for girls.

8.3.1. Activities supporting girls' education.

Monitoring school attendance.

One of the main activities for Sokossa MA was to monitor the school attendance of children, especially girls. I noticed that members were always observing the streets and monitoring for classroom attendance. Whether at school, in the market, or at home,

they watched for students who should be at school. One of the reasons the MA started monitoring school attendance was because members noticed that while teachers take attendance, they would not follow-up with parents of absent students. Thus, when girls did not show up for class, there was no one to inquire why they were absent and encourage them to come to school. This was a barrier identified which they wanted to address. During this time, members of the MA were asked by the PA to distribute chalk to students in the classroom. The chalk was funded jointly by the PA, the MA, and the School Director as a way to give learning materials to students. Students at Sokossa Primary School have a mini chalkboard on which they write down the answers to exercises. MA members combined their chalk distribution to each classroom on Tuesdays and Thursdays with class visits to monitor who was present or absent. The class visits were often done around 8:30 a.m. They started with kindergarten, and then visited all the other classes, recording the names of absent students. Agomonnou distributed the chalk with Vacon. Vacon was necessary for the class visits because she was the only literate MA member, therefore, was able to write down the names of absent students. It also meant that if Vacon was not at school, the class visits did not happen. I observed many times that when Vacon was away, the chalk distribution proceeded, but the teacher was not asked if students were missing; members did not monitor absenteeism. I often wondered how sustainable this practice was, given that it was so heavily reliant on Vacon being present.

The daily class visits, and the classroom presence of the MA to monitor attendance held students and their parents accountable to ensure children were in class. Those who were absent were required to notify teachers of the reason. In cases when teachers were not notified, and the child was absent for numerous days, members of the MA did house visits to inquire where the student was. These house visits happened once or twice a week given that often student absenteeism was justified (e.g. parents would notify the school that the student was sick or out of town). The members of the MA would focus their energy on doing house visits after holidays and weekends, when parents often visit Nigeria or other regions of the country and girls do not return to school.

I accompanied the MA on some of their house visits. During these visits, when children were absent without providing a justification for their absence to the school (e.g. being sick, out of the country), the MA often found the student at home. In most cases, the parents of the child had travelled to Nigeria for work and the child chose not to come to school. In these cases, the members of the MA (each week, one member would be delegated–often the member who knew the family of the student who was missing) waited for the child to put on their uniform and take them to school. In other cases when parents were home, the MA talked to the parents about the impact of missing school. In an interview, Agomonnou mentioned:

> The parents know to expect us. They know if their child is not at school for numerous days, within one hour we will be at their homes looking for them. We are from this community, so we know where most of the children live. It is easy for us to find them because they are all so close. Sometimes we go and the parents say they sent their children to school, so we know the child is somewhere hiding on the street and we go look for them. Other times the parents have sent their children to the market or to do agriculture, so we use the opportunity to tell them why schooling is important, and they are not helping their children by having them miss school. Because they know we will come to the house or we go in the road to look for them, you can see not many children miss school. You can talk to the Director and he will tell you how it was last year. Lots of children stopped coming to school because their family would travel to Nigeria or Togo and they would be alone so they would choose not to come. But now we go looking for them. It usually only takes 20 minutes to find the students because we divide the work. This year, other than for illness, kids are mostly coming to school. It has been a great improvement. (Interview, June 05, 2019, Sokossa)

This was corroborated by the School Director. He asserted that fewer students were absent in the 2018-2019 academic year. He mentioned specifically, that since the MA have been doing house visits, it has become rare for students to have unjustified absences. He also took credit for choosing members of the MA who lived close to the school and were quite embedded in community life (by being members of different associations), therefore, in contact with members of the community to be able to support dialogue around the importance of education with them. Specifically, the School Director mentioned that girls in grade 4 and up usually had more unjustified absences

because they would be pulled out to support their families. As a result of this barrier, members of the MA along with members of the PA would visit families before holidays (Christmas, Easter) when most would travel to Nigeria or Togo to visit extended families. These visits sensitized parents to the importance of schooling and reminded them that the girls should return to school after the holidays. The School Director mentioned he attended one sensitizing session before Christmas and the members of the MA, along with the PA, told the families they knew would be going to Nigeria, that they would be looking for their kids in January. He mentioned this tactic scared the parents and it was the first year where they had almost all their students return back in January. This was an initiative in which the PA joined the MA, and their collaboration gave a stronger message to the families.

Members of the Sokossa MA also monitored the school grounds to ensure children were in class. I observed numerous occasions when they intervened when they noticed students lingering around the school grounds. Given their location at the school, right beside the entrance, they were always aware of movements in and around the school grounds. Often, if students came to school late, they would delay going into class out of fear that they would receive corporal punishment. They often waited until the recess bell to blend in with other students and then enter class. The MA members were aware of the students' fear, so they monitored students to accompany them back to class. For example, Vacon mentioned:

> At school, there are children who are afraid of the teacher and as soon as the teacher raises the whip, they run out of the class because of fear. But when we collect them, we bring them back and they stay there to work and the teacher often puts away the whip. There are some who are really afraid to a point when even if the teacher raises a notebook, out of fear that they will be hit, the student runs out of the classroom. When we bring them back, we explain to them that they must engage in the lessons the teacher teaches and listen to what the teacher is telling them. We tell them to not be afraid of the teacher. We give them advice on how to behave in the classroom, that if they don't understand they should try to repeat what the teacher says, and if they are afraid, they should come talk to us. (Casual conversation, June 25, 2019, Sokossa)

During the interview, I questioned to myself the usefulness of the advice the MA gave to students, to not fear a teacher who uses corporal punishment. I also found myself asking whether this advice or support in fact helped enhance learning outcomes for students. Did it simply reproduce the authority the teacher had in the classroom to implement unsafe pedagogy? I observed corporal punishment on numerous cases. Teachers often resorted to it when students forgot their class materials, when students would hesitate to respond, or when students got the wrong answer. When students would forget their classroom materials, they would be hit and then instructed to go home and bring their classroom materials. For example:

> During the same morning, the teacher hit and sent home four kindergarten students (three girls and one boy) for not bringing their chalkboard to class. Zoutannou approached the children as they left their class to comfort them and ask them to run home quickly to collect their chalkboard before their parents left for the field (Field note, April 26, 2019, Sokossa).

Seeing that the teachers have whips to discipline the children, I often wondered how much staying in the classroom actually benefitted them. If children are sitting in class in fear that if they get the wrong answer they will get hit, or if they hesitate, or if they talk to their classmates, they will get hit, I asked myself how much the children were learning. I observed that while the MA was focused on ensuring children were physically in class, members were less concerned with what happened in the classroom and whether children were getting a quality education. Considering the MA were a new association in the school, it was difficult for them to know how to even start with addressing a deep-rooted cultural norm such as corporal punishment. At the time of the study, the focus of the MA was to be responsive when corporal punishment occurred, rather than being preventative. As such, this left me wondering whether children really better off being in class?

Remedial classes.

Another MA activity was to ensure that girls did not repeat grades. The MA felt that a barrier to students succeeding was that parents did not always support the education of girls at home, because household chores took precedence. Given that one

of the status markers of women in Sokossa was how many children they had, families in the region often had six to seven children. Older girls supported the mother in taking care of them. When children went home after school, they were responsible for household chores, rather than focusing on their schoolwork or catching up on their weak subject areas. As a result of this barrier, the MA organized remedial classes to give time for older girls to enhance their learning. Through their income-generating activities and with financial support from the School Director, the MA paid 100 CFA ($0.25 CAD) each week to an older youth to organize remedial classes at the school on Wednesday for students who had fallen behind. The MA paid an older youth rather than a teacher because most teachers in Sokossa spent their Wednesday afternoons working at other jobs (such as tutoring children, or a side business). Also, given the small payment offered by the MA, no teacher would have accepted it. Zoutannou discussed these remedial classes in an interview:

> Our goal is to make sure children can read. We asked students from secondary school who can read and write well to help the younger students by creating neighbourhood study groups. We pay the youth a small amount and the youth tutors the students in the neighbourhood. Vacon has cut out cardboard letters and written out the alphabet. These are used by the youth to help children read and to study. (Interview, April 18, 2019, Sokossa)

These remedial classes target girls because the MA knows that girls are often drawn to domestic work when they get home and thus fall behind in doing schoolwork or preparing for exams. The remedial classes were set up to help girls catch up on schoolwork or provide extra resources for those who have difficulty in the large classrooms, to ensure girls stay in school, do well on their exams, and finish primary education. In Sokossa, one member of the MA often attends these remedial classes and supports the older girls, by keeping them calm and focused. Although Vacon prepared flashcards for the remedial classes, often it was older girls who attended the classes; therefore, the tutor would focus their time reviewing grammar and math, rather than on using the flashcards. Approximately 10 girls attended these remedial classes on Wednesday nights. The remedial classes took place around 4:00 p.m. and finished

before sunset. I observed that the girls who attended the remedial classes lived close to the school and had a walk home. Those that lived further away (who might need the support) did not come to class because parents did not want them walking home when it was dark.

8.3.2 MA income-generating activities.

As members of the MA, women participated in income-generating activities (school garden, selling food) and in a communal savings group which helped them fund some activities for the school as well as helped them in their individual advancement.

Selling food at school.

Similar to the MA in Nokou, the Sokossa MA sold food items at the school. However, unlike Nokou Primary School, Sokossa Primary school did not have a school feeding program. As such, the MA was able to sell food items for breakfast, snack, and lunch. The members used the funds from these sales to support their microenterprises outside of school. In Sokossa, MA members decided to extend their income generating activities by starting a school garden, where they grew various vegetables and sold them in the market or at low cost to members of the group for consumption in their homes. The members of the MA asked the School Director for funds to set up a school garden. As a result of their advocacy, the PA used some of their funds to cultivate some of the school land and to turn it into a garden. Running a school garden project requires not only horticultural knowledge but also planning, managing, finding resources, and getting help and support. As a group, members of the MA took turns maintaining the school garden each morning. The garden is located behind the school; four women are responsible for watering the garden, removing weeds, and monitoring the vegetables' growth. They check on the garden after recess and report to the group on its progress. Once vegetables are ready, the MA members prepare them to be sold in the market. In a field note I documented this experience:

> Once the members of the MA came back from the garden, they announced to the group that the vegetables were ready to be picked. The vegetable that was ready is called 'soman'. They took the opportunity to tell me about the qualities of this vegetable, which they say is the best

> vegetable in Benin. Vacon claimed that she does not eat the stems of this vegetable. The others replied that it is the stems that make this vegetable rich. Vacon says that she only eats the leaves, which is why she buys them in quantity and thinks they can sell them in quantity too. Zoutannou advised her to cut the stems of the vegetables into thin layers before they packaged them. The members began cutting the vegetables, separating the stem from the leaves, and packaging them in bags to prepare for the market. Vacon told the members how to wrap the leaves so that they look more appealing in the market.
>
> The MA started by selling the packages of vegetables to each other. The money was immediately given to Zoutannou, the treasurer. The money pays for the chalk they distribute to school children twice a week, to help the poorest ones who have no money for their school fees, to pay for medicine, and for their supply of water. The rest of the money is used as micro credit for women to support their income-generating activities. Once they sold the vegetables to each other, Zoutannou took the remaining ones to the market. One hour later, Zoutannou came back to tell the group the amount made. She put half the amount into the savings group account and the other half in the account for school activities. (Field note, May 04, 2019, Sokossa)

Speaking about the skills developed with the school garden, Zoutannou stated:

> Thanks to the association, I know how to do many other things. I never knew how to manage a project and now I am managing the school garden, monitoring our sales and ensuring the vegetables we grow are of interest to the people in our community so that we can sell them. We noticed people are interested in palm nuts, so we bought palm seeds and are now trying to grow palm nuts and grow our income. We are making money out of these activities that help us take care of our family. (Interview, June 04, 2019, Sokossa)

During both rainy seasons, the members of the MA were able to generate lots of vegetables for sale, however, during the Harmattan, there was very limited items they could grow. As such, the members of the MA had to organize their funds and plan their activities around when they would gain the most income from the school garden and learn to save amounts for when they did not produce as many vegetables.

Savings group.

Sokossa MA members have continued their savings group. The money they pool in the savings group increased thanks to food sales and the school garden. They used the rotating payments from the savings group so members could expand their own businesses.

MA members met with the original income-generating association every Wednesday night at the school. As part of their meeting, they collected funds for the savings account. Originally, members of the MA told me that they met every Wednesday night to discuss the issues that arose at the school, and to run their savings group. However, what I observed at these meetings was simply women running their savings group, with no specific discussion on issues of girls' education or how to support girls through education. Their meeting was to run the savings group, not to support the efforts of the MA. This made me wonder whether the MA was created only to support a hidden intention of the School Director, for the school to become a pilot for the school feeding program. Also questioned that maybe their lack of focus on girl's education issues was because the MA did not receive any training from external stakeholders (e.g. NGOs) on what their weekly meetings should encompass.

For the savings group, the members of Sokossa Primary School were expected to deposit 300 CFA (approximately $0.75 CAD) a week into the first savings account and 100 CFA (approximately $0.25 CAD) a week into the second savings account. The treasurer went through the accounting notebook every Wednesday to identify those behind in their payments. An excerpt from my field note:

> Zoutanou took out the contribution book and started by recording the paid contributions as members paid her. She explained to me how she does it. Every day a column line is made at the date following each member's name. Once a member has paid her contribution a symbol of X is placed by her name for that date. This is how she can track who is up to date and how much each person needs to pay. (Field note, March 21, 2018, Sokossa)

Vacon explained in more detail the purpose of their savings association:

> I am member of two savings associations. One is the largest association in Sokossa. We used to meet and contribute monthly to be able to buy food in bulk in December. The other association is with the MA; we are about 15 who participate. We meet every week. Every time we meet, we each

> contribute the same amount of money for one member to take at the end of the month until all the members receive their money. After a round is complete, we start over. Also, when a member has a ceremony in her house, each member will bring the member money or other useful things. (Interview, April 4, 2018, Sokossa)

Vacon adds further:

> Being a member of the savings group is not easy, but whenever I receive a lump sum, I am reminded of its importance for us poor women. The last time I received my money, I bought clothes for my children, paid off my children's school fees, bought some food in bulk, and kept some to be somehow at peace for a while, because when you have family, you should keep something aside if you can, because you never know when you might need it. You see, it does not cost me anything to be a member of the association. We the members, we all trust each other and there is peace and solidarity among us. The lump sum from the savings group is good but being together in peace and harmony does not have a price. We help each other in every way we can. (Interview, April 04, 2018, Sokossa)

The savings group has given women the credit they require to advance their business and to build the autonomy to have a say in household decisions. During the digital storytelling workshop, Gbedji mentioned that with the sum loaned from the MA, she was able to build her palm oil business, generate income to support her kids through school, and thus have some power within the house. In an excerpt from her digital story, she recounted what led her to the savings group:

> I was 30 when my husband decided to send our daughter to live with family in Porto Novo. She is our youngest child, but he decided that she would be better off with them because they live in the city. He promised they would take care of her.
>
> After some time, I found out that my daughter had run away. I asked my friend who lives in Porto Novo what happened, and she said the family treated her poorly. She told me that my daughter was being used as domestic help and they always hit her when she made a mistake. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My friend said, "Your daughter goes to sleep hungry and doesn't even have shoes to wear." I decided I was going to get my daughter back. My husband opposed me and said he would not be responsible for her. I said, "We made this baby together, but now you won't care for her?" He insisted that if I wanted her back, I would have to use my own money. It hurt me so much that he would let our daughter suffer.

> It took me three days to find my daughter and bring her back to the village. I knew I had to find a way to support her education on my own. So, I decided to contribute to the women's savings group at the school. I used the loans to buy and sell materials in the market. The savings group helped me grow my palm oil business and I now earn enough money to support my daughter's education. Since I joined this group, I have joined my husband in making decisions in our family. I am making sure my children have a better future. (Digital Story, June 27, 2019, Sokossa)

The savings group allowed women to build the skills to manage their funds and to be self-financing as a collective. The women believed that gaining an income gave them a chance to be financially secure in their homes and their community. They said that learning income-generating skills enabled most of them to be self-sufficient, not depending on their husbands and other people for their living. Agomonnou perceived empowerment as being able to stand out and be recognized in the community. In an interview, she commented:

> When I was poor, people did not notice my existence. Because I am not from this village I always felt ignored by the community or […] an outsider with nothing to contribute. Today, thanks to the MA, I can buy clothes for my children and myself, I can have celebrations for my children. I can satisfy my needs. I can make decisions for my children and for myself. I don't feel stuck anymore. I do not depend on him [husband] anymore. He provides the food and I take care of little things. I can go to the market and buy the things I need. I can get involved in the community. (Interview, April 18, 2019, Sokossa)

Gbedji shared similar views:

> Today, people respect us because we are no longer wearing old clothes like before. In our families, we are no longer a burden to anybody like before. We are not rich, but we are different. Thanks to God! Today we can do little things with the skills we learned and make money to help our families. We can take care of people rather than being taken care of. (Interview, April 02, 2019, Sokossa)

The members of the MA reported that economic independence had empowered them to be autonomous and had given them the freedom to make decisions about their lives without consulting anybody, even if they have little decision power in family

matters. They said that money was the key that opens doors to freedom, and without money, a woman's choices were very limited. Abibatou stated:

> Today, the world is all about money. If a woman does not have money, she has few choices; but if she has money, she has more freedom to make choices about her life. Because of the money we generate, the MA has given us a chance to make choices about our lives. We can buy the things we need or want. If we want to buy nice clothes and wear them, no one can stop us from doing so. A lot of poor women in the community who do not participate in our association cannot make the choices we can make. (Casual conversation, February 09, 2019, Sokossa)

The examples of the selling vegetables from the school garden, preparing baked goods to sell at school and in the market, and organizing different savings groups for themselves and the community demonstrate how members of the Sokossa MA combat their own poverty and that of other people. This involves incredible commitment and collective action to meet practical needs. They receive little direct assistance from the PA, the umbrella organization. Although the savings group has brought the members of the MA at Sokossa Primary School closer together over the past decade, it has also caused some tensions among women in the community in certain situations. For example, one of the purposes of the savings group is to provide support to students who experience an emergency. In one case, a student at the school had an accident on a motorcycle, causing a deep cut on his foot that had gotten infected. The parents could not afford the city hospital and the members of the MA, along with the PA and School Director, decided to provide financial support. In this case, the savings the group had were not sufficient and the treasurer of the MA asked each member to contribute another 100 CFA (approximately $0.25 CAD) to provide support. All the members agreed except one member who refused and said that she did not believe the purpose of the group was to provide emergency funding to a student whose mother was not an MA member.

This caused tension among members in the group as the secretary advocated that the women work in solidarity and must be there for other women

in situations of need, while this specific member disagreed. The tension led to this member not contributing to the emergency fund and the members of the MA stating that if anything happens to her children, she should not expect the support of the MA. I observed that this tension around the purpose of the fund and who was eligible for it did not lead to a deeper conversation about solidarity and the importance of the collective working together for the community wellbeing.

Sokossa MA Conclusions

Integrated Approach

Although I initially questioned the School Director's intention for creating the MA at Sokossa Primary School, and wondered whether it was solely to participate in the national school feeding program, I realized that in fact integrating the MA with a pre-existing savings group can have the potential for better school outcomes and gender dialogue. One reason for this was the pre-existing solidarity that exists among the members of the Sokossa MA. Their strength as a collective differentiated from the MA of Nokou because the MA of Sokossa had previously been a savings group association. They are all part of the same community, they all speak the same language, they have worked together to enhance their financial income, and as a result have a stronger level of trust among each other. Integrating their savings groups with other development interventions, such as forming an MA to enhance girls' education, has in fact helped the MA at Sokossa Primary to be able to have more natural conversations when sensitizing parents around ensuring girls are not sent to Nigeria as wage labourers. Seeing that as a longstanding savings group, they have gained social capital in the community and have built different relations with community members, as they mature into a MA, discussing issues of girls' education will be relatively easier.

Passageway between students and teachers.

My daily observations of the activities and role of the MA at Sokossa Primary School proved that the MA members served as the passageway between the students and the teachers: they would accompany students when they entered the classroom late, and they would question students who left the classroom. One of the reasons why

they were able to play this role is their location on the school grounds. This, and their daily presence at the school, have given the MA a heightened awareness of what is happening at the school. They are always the first ones either to notify the School Director or community members of situations that occur on school premises. An indirect effect of selling food at the school and being at the school daily is that they have become a watchdog entity. In other words, the MA members are aware at all times when students are sent home or arrive late, when teachers leave classrooms, when corporal punishment is occurring, when students are engaging in domestic work, and when anyone visits the school administrator's office. Their ability to monitor movements on school grounds and student's knowledge that the women are monitoring school grounds has resulted in less student absenteeism.

Similarly, members of the MA in Sokossa stated that their presence and involvement at the school, and their ability to see and hear all the activities that occur on the school grounds, has created more accountability and transparency from the school director and teachers. Given that members of the MA notice everyone that goes in and out of the office they are aware for the most part when education officials, village leaders, and members of the community come to speak to the Director. Likewise, when administrative problems occur the members of the MA are aware. Considering the Director knows that the members of the MA can see all the activity, they are covertly being held accountable by them and the community.

Gender-sensitive response to girls' education.

The majority of participants shared similar childhood memories, and therefore had a collective bond based on their shared lived experiences. They grew up as illiterate or semi-literate rural girls busy with home responsibilities, taking care of young siblings and/or working on farms/markets. Given the struggles they experienced and having witnessed firsthand the opportunities for their classmates who did complete their education, members of the MA realized that if they had received an education, they would have had better opportunities to get jobs and earn independent incomes.

The narrative of their MA focused on ensuring girls had access to school, because most members did not have this access when they were growing up. However, as my observations unfolded, I realized the narrative did not center on ensuring girls

were learning in school, that they were in an environment where they felt safe, or an environment that promoted gender equality. The MA at Sokossa Primary School focused only on monitoring school attendance and ensuring children were physically in class. Less focus was on the corporal punishment occurring in the classroom, and whether the girls were learning and prepared to learn, with adequate resources. Often the members of the MA focused on consoling children once they got hit, rather than trying to change the environment that created the violence. One reason for this could be that during their childhood most of the MA members did not attend school, and those that attended dropped out shortly after. To them, girls simply being in school and graduating was a huge win. If girls do not feel safe in school and are unstimulated as a result of limited educational material, then we can understand why they would be absent or why parents would choose to keep them at home.

Although the MA has implemented remedial classes to improve the learning of girls who are falling behind, given their limited resources, and the concern parents have for girls being at school late, often only ten girls would come to the remedial classes, of varying ages. Consequently, I questioned how useful these remedial classes were in helping girls improve their learning and pass the national exam.

As I have noted, the MA at Sokossa Primary School was only formed in 2017. During the time of my field work, they had been in place for only a year and a half and were still learning their role in the school, how to support girls' education, and how they would function as a school entity. In contrast to Nokou's MA that had substantial NGO input and training, the MA at Sokossa Primary School was still in its infancy, learning how to work with the PA and school administration. Given that they were never invited to PA meetings, nor consulted on decisions about school affairs, the position they had within the school remained limited. This was obvious in the fact that their weekly Wednesday night meetings functioned as they did prior to their forming as an MA. As the members of the MA become more certain about what their role at the school is, more involved with the PA, clarify their mandate, and receive training in skills that could help them, they might have a more substantive impact on girls' education that moves beyond access and towards equality.

Chapter 9: Discussion

Introduction

The women's movement in Benin is diverse, heterogeneous, omnipresent and works to meet both practical and strategic needs. By bringing us back to the research questions (RQ): (RQ1) how do MAs in Benin mobilize to enhance the prospects of gender equality in education and community life? (RQ2) how do the lived experiences of members of the MA influence their activities for girls' education? (RQ3) what are the strategies MAs select to navigate gender inequalities embedded in community life? (RQ4) has the participation of MAs in school activities had an impact on their members' empowerment in other realms of their lives; this chapter will outline how MAs have built solidarity and influence to increase access to resources, education, and opportunities for women and girls. However, the organization of women does not come without constraints. Their ability to move beyond access, and towards addressing their strategic gender needs, has been limited. As such, this chapter will also outline the critical role of both internal and external alliances in helping women mobilize towards meeting strategic gender needs and to begin to address harmful social norms. In this chapter, I will begin with key lessons learned from the study of two MAs, followed by general conclusions regarding the MAs, the road towards women's empowerment, and further research.

Part 1: Key Lessons Learned

The organization of women into MAs and their efforts at the community and school level have led to the development of knowledge and skills which have been used to implement collective activities. In thinking about RQ4, the participation of MA in school activities has led members of the MA to gain valuable experience and confidence in both leadership and membership tasks. These activities have fostered the development of self-esteem, competence, and autonomy, which has empowered the members both individually and collectively. However, the process of fostering self-esteem, competencies, and autonomy has had constraints. Although my study found that the role of empowerment was constantly evolving within the context of the two case

studies, I also observed both internal and external constraints to women's collective empowerment in both of the locations. For the MA in Nokou, these were a result of their relationship with the local NGO and INGO that supported the work that they do, whereas, for the MA in Sokossa, constraints were internal, based on the individuals' capacities. This section will analyze the dependency created as a result of these constraints and how this dependency can limit the role of the MA.

The history of the MA in Nokou, whose members have organized for over ten years with the support of an NGO, demonstrates how an MA can move from working on issues of education, to participating in formal governance structures such as the PA (where the secretary of the MA sits on the executive board). This has happened indirectly through implementing activities that have immediate results (e.g. monitoring attendance), to build their confidence and reputation. Once they gained assurance in implementing these "easy" activities (that required limited-time efforts and minimal behavioural change), women could engage in more challenging activities that required ongoing behavioural change by many individuals or that challenged power structures. One reason for this, according to Foucault, is that the dispositf – that is the various institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures—are always inscribed in plays of power. In other words, the enhanced reputation that members of the MA received was in fact stimulating collective action and enhancing their collective power. NGOs are important in this latter process, through the training they have provided, the funding mechanism they create, and the dialogue they begin.

My analysis indicates that the NGO supporting the MA in Nokou adopted a mediating role when they created the MA, giving rise to a "mediated empowerment" process (Rocha, 1997, p. 36). The training and dialogue sessions implemented by the NGO provided the space for members of the MA to gain knowledge and make informed decisions to mobilize and address the harder issues of gender relations. This mediated empowerment process encompasses the goal of providing access to knowledge, expertise, ideas, and resources required to support individual or collective decision-making and action. Analyzing the differences between the MA in Nokou and the MA in Sokossa, I can see the impact of the mediated empowerment process, in which members of the MA in Nokou were guided through various trainings and dialogue on

gender equality, community development, and gender relations. These helped the MA in Nokou develop a clear mandate and objective and implement activities that address their strategic gender needs (e.g. efforts to change the gendered division of labour), whereas in Sokossa the MA members were still in the process of understanding their role. Their activities focused on getting girls into school. However, as Monkman et al. (2007) argue, this mediating process with NGOs must be flexible, responsive, and more than anything, temporary, if local communities are to develop the capacity for self-determination. However, for the role of NGOs to be temporary, work needs to be done both at the individual level but also at the structural level. Changes in behaviours and attitudes, as well as in harmful gender norms must accompany all activities so that self-determination is possible.

This last point is key, that the mediating process should remain temporary so that local communities are guided to take ownership of development. However, as mentioned earlier, Kandi has become an epicentre for development programming. Therefore, members of the MA in Nokou have been working with different NGOs for over ten years. Given the large presence of NGOs implementing various development projects across all sectors, the population of Kandi—and specifically Nokou—has become accustomed to monthly (if not biweekly) visits from donors, government officials, directors of NGOs, program officers, and monitoring and evaluation officers. Although NGOs in Kandi provide support to members of the community who do not have access to basic services, their role needs to be critiqued. I observed that the constant flow of external partners through Nokou created a ‘beneficiary culture’ where certain practices have become normalized in the community. For example, many community members in Nokou know to expect per diems for attending training sessions; therefore, attending training session has become a priority for members of the MA and the PA in order to receive the per diem but members do not necessarily engage during the training sessions. Likewise, after having attended many sessions with the MA and various external stakeholders, I noticed that many members of the MA and PA had practiced verbatim messages to deliver to different representatives, and often the same members of the community were being selected to attend meetings, trainings, or community activities. This made me question how participatory the approach taken by

NGOs was if the same community members were attending the meetings as "representatives" of the community and were trained to deliver the same message. Was the goal of NGO support really to enhance community development or was it to get more external funding from donors? Likewise, I sometimes questioned the motivations for members of the MA and whether there was true "buy-in" from the school director or members of the PA. Did members of the PA collaborate with the MA because they knew the more legitimate the MA was, the more donors would come to their community and implement activities or give them per diems to attend training?

Another important theme that emerged from the findings is the role of the NGO in guiding the work of the MA and the need for a co-ordinated approach among the various NGO and INGOs to support community development. At the time of the study, numerous NGOs were working in Kandi. Often schools received project funding from various NGOs. For example, to run the school feeding program at Nokou Primary School, World Food Programme supplied the food to the country, Catholic Relief Services managed the delivery of the food within the country, World Education funded the infrastructure for the school canteen, and Alma trained the MA to run the school feeding program and monitored the program for efficiency. In this example, four key institutions were involved in supporting the school feeding program and representatives from these different institutions would come to the school to monitor the progress. While the school feeding program benefitted from this support, at times school members received different directions and guidance on how to operate (e.g. serving food in classroom vs. serving food in the foyer) and these conflicting approaches caused tension among school members (school director, PA, MA). In this perspective, a co-ordinated approach among the NGOs and institutions providing support would ease the tension and lead to better results.

Although the goal of the NGO in Nokou supporting the MA was to foster a mediating process, they in fact created a client-patron relationship between the NGO and the MA which could lead to socioeconomic co-dependency. Similar to Maclure's (1995) research concerning externally funded NGOs and village society in neighbouring Burkina Faso, this client-patron and socioeconomic dependence that had become intrinsic to civil society, had also penetrated the MA of Nokou. In this context, I found

that members of the MA in Nokou always waited for guidance from the NGO facilitator to organize their activities or to set in motion their efforts. Their perspective was that the NGO had more power and resources needed to guide them in resolving the barriers they identified. In other words, although the members of the MA were building their collective empowerment, they still found themselves depending on those agencies perceived to have power and claiming to champion the interests of the poor.

As Maclure (1995) argues, these client-patron relations are often unavoidable initially, and what NGOs must reckon with is that, by initiating arrays of projects and non-formal education programs in resource-scarce locales, they are bound to create or exacerbate situations of dependence. People who have been relegated to conditions of powerlessness and impoverishment, as a result of historical, cultural, and political reasons, often look to benefactors not just for acquisition of the skills, but also for extensive support in maintaining new skills, and in sustaining new social and organizational arrangements that will enable them to manage change (Kabeer et al., 2008; Gheen, 2005). Although we cannot expect members of the MA to fully determine their own destinies or to improve their position in society by relying solely on their own capacities, NGOs must play an important role in creating a mediating function to support local women's groups with the resources they need to address their solutions and to advocate for larger systems-level changes. Monkman, Miles and Easton (2007) argue that the difference between NGOs creating a context of empowerment, versus a context of dependency, is embedded in the ways that NGOs provide support or mediation. When control shifts from the NGO to the villages, the NGO's role needs to change to providing support only when requested by the villagers. For example, participants who want to share their experiences with participants in other villages may need transportation to facilitate that sharing (Monkman et al., 2007). Therefore, the role of the NGO in the mediating position could be to meet these costs or provide information and referrals when participants request it. In this method, change is not handed down at the direction of the NGO, but is pushed forward by the local community (Monkman et al., 2007, p. 460).

Another area of potential dependency that I observed, specifically in the MA in Sokossa, was the reliance of MA activities on members who were literate. Although this

dependency is unavoidable, given that only one member of the MA was literate, it caused an internal constraint because most group activities could only occur if that member was present. This meant that when that member was not present as a result of being in the market or at the farm, the MA at Sokossa would not be able to do their classroom check-ins and, as a result, their community follow-ups. Although this poses its own challenges, such as sustainability of the group's work (which we will discuss in the next section), it also reinforces the emphasis on collective empowerment (Badejo et al., 2017). In light of the fact that only one member of the group was literate, much of the work that members of the MA did in Sokossa had to happen as a collective, which enhanced their ability to build a stronger collective identity.

Sustainability and Legitimacy of Organization

In thinking about RQ1, the MAs have implemented different activities both in and around school to enhance learning outcomes and ensure girls stay in school. Although the activities supported enhancing learning outcomes (e.g., monitoring attendance, house visits, raising awareness), they were often done by the same key women (such as Vacon, Bona Yari) because these were the only members who were literate. This was problematic as the MA activities were often dependant on whether these two women were at school. As mentioned earlier, if these members were not at school, the class monitoring could not happen. This dependency often led me to question how sustainable their activities were and whether more members needed literacy to advance the activities of the MA. Taking into account that the Nokou MA have been functioning for over ten years, and that the Sokossa MA have been organized for a year and a half (and as a savings group for ten years), the group is sustainable as an association. However, they could function in ways that address girls' education holistically and confront gender inequalities, if more members were literate and could take on leadership roles.

The constraints with regards to literacy and dependency on external stakeholders made me query whether the MAs would be sustainable. I argue that in their role as the passageway between the school and the community, the members of the MA in both communities have been able to establish a stronger connection between the school and the community and begin their process of building a positive reputation in the

community. Unlike the PAs, which predominantly focus on administrative affairs of the school, logistics, and supporting infrastructure and school development, members of the MAs have focused on addressing social issues as they relate to school children and involving members of the community to do so. Given that they have become the points of contact between the community and the school, and are aware of all school activities, members of the MAs have used this role to disseminate information broadly in the community and provide support to the community to ensure girls stay in school. As a result of this bridge, community members frequent the school more often, are more aware of school activities, and have a way to direct concerns they have with the school.

In thinking about RQ3, I noticed that as a result of the activities they implement both at the school and around the school, the members of the MA have increased their visibility at the community level, which can lead to a more in-depth approach to addressing gender inequalities. By creating a strong foundational bridge between the school and the community, their efforts demonstrate that they do not perceive the school as isolated from the community, but rather embedded within the community. Due to this, they work as mediators between the community and the school to ensure dialogue remains open when issues arise and to transfer important information to the community. This supports the arguments made by feminist education scholars, who argue that schools do not function in isolation from community dynamics and, if gender inequalities are not addressed at the community level, they will be reproduced in the school environment (Mama et al., 2005). This framing of the school as embedded within structures of the community is supported by feminist scholars who argue that girls' formal education does not exist in isolation from broader social, political and economic forces (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Therefore, support to girls' education must look beyond the issue of accessibility and towards methods that challenge gendered power relations inherent within social structures and the educational experience. By building a bridge with members of the community, MA are building their presence, trust, and authority required to support action against gender inequalities.

Mobilizing for Practical vs. Strategic Gender Needs

The process of and potential for achieving gender equality rely to some extent on the ways in which women's groups can interact with both practical and strategic gender

needs. As mentioned in the literature review, practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessities, such as water provision, health care, and employment, whereas strategic gender needs are identified by women because of their subordination to men in their society. These relate to gender division of labour, power and control, and may include issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages, and women's control over their bodies (Moser, 1993, p. 40). Although strategic gender needs are important for achieving gender equality, it is also important not to create a hierarchy of needs or a dichotomy between practical and strategic needs. In the literature on women's organizations, many authors insist that women's grassroots groups and community-based organizations have been too focused on "social welfare" or "development" projects in meeting the practical needs of rural communities (Badejo et al., 2017; Moser, 1993). They insist that true equality and empowerment will not be achieved without larger political or economic changes. This reveals that a higher value is placed on "strategic interests" such as women's entry into the "male-dominated" spheres of formal education, employment, and participation in politics and public decision-making. This bias resonates with another critique of the practical/strategic dichotomy, "that it implies a hierarchy of women's issues, that strategic interests show more evidence of a 'feminist consciousness' and therefore are more politically advanced" (Moser, 1993, p. 13). My research found that in fact both practical and strategic gender needs must be addressed. Facilitating empowerment requires the process of going back and forth between practical and strategic gender needs.

My study found that the MAs have the capacity to address both practical and strategic interests because their objectives focus on social welfare by supporting activities that assist with school fees for children, start-up funds for small businesses, and overall community development. They provide for these initiatives through their savings program which is embedded in all the work that they do. By analyzing the field notes around the activities of each of the MAs, I argue that the MA in Nokou, through the support of the local and international NGO, is able to implement activities that meet the strategic needs of women (starting to focus on changing social norms around issues of teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and control over their bodies), whereas the MA in Sokossa has only been able to implement activities that meet the practical needs of

women (focusing on food, water, shelter and health care, as well as anti-poverty initiatives and small business development) . As such, the former is able to provide support that is gender responsive, while the latter supports an approach that is gender sensitive (Moser, 1993).

Given their varying levels of experience as an MA in a school, with the MA of Nokou working for ten years and the MA of Sokossa for one and a half years, there are significant differences in how the MAs interacted and engaged in activities of girl's education and empowerment at the school. In their approach to addressing girls' education from a gender responsive framework, the MA in Nokou was able to implement activities at different levels. Some of their activities focused in the realm of the school, others the community, and others in the household. Members of the MA in Nokou realized that, for change to be sustained and achieved, their activities have to be at the level where change needs to occur and at the level where they have the power to make the change (school, community, home). Emphasizing that their efforts need to be maintained within these three spheres is how the MA members in Nokou have been able to build a reputation for their collective organization and been able to see glimmers of hope in improving gender equality. Their activities and practices reinforce the notion that people do not exist in a social vacuum, but encounter different environments throughout their life that influence their behaviour. This realization was amplified when the MA in Nokou tried to make changes to the gendered division of labour in the school. During this activity, the teacher responded that he could ask a boy to go fetch water and perform more "feminine" gender roles, but then the father will see the teacher doing this. The father will put the teacher in his place for teaching his son "feminine" roles. This conversation reinforced for the MA in Nokou that they need to continue their work at the community level and target the whole social system that influences the gendered division of labour. Thus, they targeted their activities by first seeking to make changes in their home, then through dialogue with the community, and then with continued efforts at the school.

In thinking about RQ1, unique to the activities of the MA in Nokou is that they focus on short-term, medium-term, and long-term efforts for sustainable change. For example, in their efforts to prevent teenage pregnancy, members of the MA in Nokou

monitored the night clubs to ensure girls would not be lingering there. This effort has a short-term effect in that it seeks to prevent an immediate action (girls having sex). However, these efforts were complemented by more long-term activities such as information sessions for girls on how they can get pregnant and contraception methods available to them, followed by dialogue with the community to change the norms around teenage pregnancy. Their ability to try to capture change in various environments (e.g., home, school, community) and at various levels (e.g., short, medium, long-term) led me to believe that their activities can enhance meeting the strategic needs. The potential for transformation in gender relations is evident in the way that the MA in Nokou organized to address gender inequalities in education. The members addressed gender needs collectively, and devised systems that define responsibilities and processes for enforcement (e.g., with child marriage and teenage pregnancy). As they built their experience and confidence at the school, they were able to engage in dialogue to address more long-term, systemic change. This is similar to Kabeer's (1994) observations concerning strategic gender needs that are "likely to emerge only through a process of struggling 'against the grain' of common-sense notions about gender inequality" (p. 299). Moreover, my study found that the MA in Nokou did implement activities that target changes in gender norms and roles, specifically making changes to the gendered division of labour. These activities can be framed as addressing the strategic needs of girls as they seek to change their subordinate position and the unequal structure and nature of relationships between girls and boys (men and women) that produce inequalities.

Unlike the MA in Nokou, who were supported by both a local and international NGO, the MA in Sokossa focused only on getting girls in school and ensuring they remained in school. Although they were recognized for their efforts in the realm of enhancing gender parity in education and reducing student absenteeism, their activities rarely went beyond organizing for gender parity. I argue that much of this is the result of not receiving clear directives as to their role and mandate at the school, other than supporting girls' education. Similarly, they were not trained in understanding how they could support girls' education beyond measures of parity. Therefore, they used their lived experiences to inform their approach. Seeing that the majority of the members did

not have the opportunity to go to school or to stay in school, their efforts focused on ensuring girls did have that opportunity. In my analysis of the activities of the MA in Sokossa, I see that the MA focused on achieving practical gender needs which includes issues related to access to school (e.g., paying school fees), monitoring classrooms to ensure students were not absent, as well as enhancing their income-generating activities to support their livelihoods. Although paying school fees ensures children can access school, these changes only require a change of habit, not of structure. As such, unlike in Nokou, much of the MA's work in Sokossa focused on changing habits and not structures.

Progress with practical needs helps women fulfill their gender role whereas meeting strategic needs is critical for women to improve their social position and gain gender equality (Worthman, 2016; Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1993). In their efforts to monitor classroom attendance and to ensure students are not absent, the MA in Sokossa is enhancing girl's enrolment and ensuring gender parity in the classroom, thus ensuring the practical needs are met. This approach to practical needs is often framed as a gender-sensitive approach to girls' education. Many reasons could explain why the MA in Sokossa has only been able to take a gender-sensitive approach to girls' education: lack of information (through lack of external support/training), the short time they have been organized, and, in particular, structural inequalities that limit their ability to impact various levels of the social system.

Paying attention to starting from "where women are" is important in identifying both practical and strategic gender needs. To "start where women are" demands that women's issues and struggles are defined by women themselves and must include practical concerns that are related to women's daily lives, including food, water, housing, work, health, sexuality, reproduction, emotions, and spirituality. Practical and strategic gender needs are interconnected in the process of transformation. For example, "changes in the ways that women organize to address their everyday needs invariably produce changes in gender relations" (Walters & Manicom, 2006, p. 13). Both the MAs' income-generating activities may not only help members gain cash needed for daily household needs, but could also produce empowerment by reducing women's dependency on men within their families and communities. In fact, women can only

begin to address issues of gender inequality by starting with concrete reference to their practical needs, rather than abstracted notions of capitalism, patriarchy, or distant power structures. The experience of addressing practical gender needs through collective action provides members of the MAs with valuable experience in participatory change, thus "build[ing] up enabling infrastructures" (Kabeer, 1994, p. 301) that make more challenging goals and processes possible (Monkman et al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, strategic gender needs emerge through the struggle with practical gender needs. In this struggle and dynamic process between practical gender needs and strategic gender needs, transformation can happen.

Part 2: Organizing for Empowerment

Girls' education

Although MAs were implementing activities with the objective of enhancing learning outcomes for girls and supporting their learning, often the shortage of resources did not allow the activities to in fact improve learning outcomes. For example, considering that the MAs only had the resources to fund one teacher/older youth to host remedial classes, often all children requiring remedial classes would be grouped together. This meant that the teacher had one class with children ranging between the ages of six-12 and at different levels of learning. As a result of the significant age gap between students, the teacher often could not support the needs of the students, and focused on teaching one age range, while the others sat there. Given the lack of resources, the remedial classes could potentially be counterproductive to the original aims of the program, to provide a space where children could get support in subjects, they were falling behind in. Rather, children were learning material that was not appropriate for their age (or what they were learning in school), going home later and still being required to do housework, sleeping later, yet required to wake up early to do chores before going to school, and therefore not being mentally ready for class the following day. Although the aims of the classes were respected, without the resources to fully meet the needs of the children, the classes were not enhancing learning outcomes.

Likewise, I found that the members of the MA were not in fact enhancing the quality of education at the schools (e.g., an environment that enhances learning outcomes). They were not advocating for increased school materials nor changes in teaching pedagogy to promote safe environments. Most of their work focused on ensuring girls were in school (access) and girls were completing school (retention). This limited focus on activities that enhance quality education made me question how transformative was the work that the MA members were doing. Much of their focus was on access and retention because these were the barriers experienced when they were girls, and that is the reality they wanted to address. However, as we see with the remedial classes, without addressing quality, the activities could in fact be increasing the burden on girls trying to complete school.

Although there were challenges in some of the activities the MAs implemented in enhancing quality education and ensuring their system was sustainable, the MAs did build a reputation in the community through the work they were doing. The MA had become a group that girls could go to and confide about the socio-cultural barriers preventing them from succeeding through education. They also built a reputation of being able to hold families accountable. Members of the MA in Nokou have become advocates and have mobilized to reduce the socio-cultural barriers that reproduce gender inequalities that prevent girls from staying in school. By working with the community and using their critical alliances (men in positions of power) to address gender inequalities, the Nokou MA members have been able to start having dialogue around important issues, which will eventually disrupt harmful gender norms. By collaborating with men and using the advantage that men have in society to support the work they are doing, the MA has been able to advance its agenda of enhancing gender equality in and through education. According to Sweetman (2013), “using the master’s tools can advance the cause of women because in many cases men command attention in male-dominated institutions, in ways women do not” (p. 25). The MAs know that they need the support of all community leaders to make changes to norms and practices embedded in cultural values. As such, they have collaborated with their allies (e.g., members of the PA, school director, village leaders) to address these inequalities.

Collective empowerment enables individual empowerment

To some extent, rural women in this study are perceived as individuals who strive for their own individual agency and well-being, but to a much greater extent and above all, they are all members of the same group whose agency and well-being resides in their communal endeavours to improve the life conditions for themselves and their community.

For this study's particular context, the findings show that the agency of women as a collective has led to and reinforced their personal empowerment and their empowerment at the family level. Based on the participants' stories, members of the MA mobilized daily to enhance gender equality in and through education. Doing this, they developed connections with other members of the community (such as the school administrator, PA members, village leaders), cultivating a feeling of community belonging and responsibility. They supported each other, developed links with other key people and institutions in the community (such as the village council), and acquired an action orientation to accomplish their own and other people's goals. They increasingly recognized their common power and strengthened their capability to assess contextual causes of their level of disempowerment.

In Nokou, the members of the MA had built confidence, initially through organizing small activities and then by representing and defending themselves in situations of injustice. Their collective organizing led to their ability to negotiate and influence community norms and rules, and to mobilize resources for community projects. In fact, the process of collective empowerment reinforced the individual empowerment of the members. Similarly, as a result of the collective work of the MA, members of the MA in Nokou gained the social capital to have reputation and status within the community, to attend community meetings and have a say in decisions around community affairs. Engaging in collective processes to enhance girls' education, and drawing from culturally inspired principles of cooperation gave women the confidence in their association to be able to advocate for change. In other words, through the process of working as a collective, Nokou MA members were able to, in some instances, begin to address deep-seated discrimination, given sustained reinforcement of group identities over a period of time. As argued by Rowlands (1995)

"while individual empowerment is one ingredient in achieving empowerment, at the collective and institutional levels, concentration on individuals alone is not enough. Changes are needed in the collective abilities of individuals to take charge of identifying and meeting their own needs–as households, communities, organizations, institutions, and societies" (p. 106).

In Sokossa, the MA members had been organizing for over ten years as a savings group and had built a collective identity. Given the strong bond they had created together based on trust and collective experiences, they were able to use this collective power to address issues such as gender-based violence. As Agomonnou shared in her digital story, when she tried to address the issue of gender-based violence alone, she was mocked, but when she addressed it with members of the MA as well as the PA, it was then that they had power. Moreover, for members of the MA, their notion of empowerment encompasses the collective in expressions such as "women standing up for women," and "as a group of women, we had the power." Each saw her own growth as a means of facilitating change for others. They always found opportunities to train other members in what they have learned (for example, if one member received a health training, they would share what they learned with others). Granted, their creative responses only marginally negated the lasting impact of patriarchal structures and practices in restricting their opportunities. Nevertheless, the feminist elements in their collective bottom-up solutions became apparent as all their strategies relied on principles such as cooperation, self-determination and liberation that are associated with many forms of feminism (Chilisa, 2012, Mama, 2005).

Community-level organizations of rural women are crucial in providing the individual with group support, collective articulation of common inequalities or problems, and as a base for bargaining. I observed in this research project that through their organizing as a MA and working together for a common goal, women perceived and experienced the strength of the collectivity. In other words, when vulnerable individuals organize around a common purpose (e.g., girls' education), opportunities for collective learning, mutual support, and group action emerge. The vulnerability of the individual is overcome by the strength of the many, the collective. As demonstrated in the digital

stories shared, one woman by herself has little power to confront harmful issues. However, women organized together can free themselves from unjust situations.

The empowerment that has happened among the members of the MA has to be understood as a process, not a state of being, and a collective one that is constantly evolving. As they take on new responsibilities and engage with different groups in the community, their roles, responsibilities, and capacities evolve. It is distinct from the measurement of achievement in areas such as levels of literacy, or control of economic assets. The MAs are associations that are constantly 'becoming'. Change has not been linear, but goes back and forth as women engage in a process of learning through experiences of their own, as well as through experiences of other women in the MA. Women's roles in defining the parameters of change and its pace have come about over a period of time (as seen with the MA in Nokou). Women's participation in the PA (in Nokou) is clearly part of a continuum of their social experiences of organizing to address school issues, which has helped them to acquire self-confidence and leadership skills, as well as a reputation for seeking change. The results of the study show that the organization of women into MAs with the purpose of enhancing girls' education, served as a nonformal learning forum for empowerment, where women can practice their communication, negotiation, and confidence. Through this nonformal learning forum members of the MA have gained a sense of empowerment which they then use to address other issues perceived as important to them in the wider community.

Growing sense of solidarity

Although women have organized in associations before the creation of MAs, these associations were for the most part determined by factors such as age, kinship, or friendship ties which help to strengthen them, as their functioning is mainly based on trust and loyalty. However, the MA, a model initiated by external stakeholders, brought women together in a non-kinship association with the objective of enhancing gender equality for girls' education. Although organizing as a non-kinship association has its strengths because it brings women together to advocate for one cause and has allowed members to mutually support one another, this has not been without its challenges. As with the case in Nokou, since members of the MA were chosen initially by the local

NGO, their selection was based on women who were active. Therefore. women were not from the same community and rarely met because of the distance between their homes. However, since the MA in Sokossa emerged from within the community, members of the MA lived close to one another and were able to meet regularly. All were from the same community, and met weekly

Many of the members of the MA believed that collective action allowed them to maintain solidarity, sisterhood, and friendship with one another. Based on the interview data, all the participants viewed the MA as a family. It is important to note that these perceptions of family and community are inherent to African traditions. Oyebade (2007) maintains that “the family is a socially recognized institution consisting of members who share common values and are committed to one another” (p. 118). This connection has built strong friendships, as the members have endured many experiences together. Members of the MA support each other by attending ceremonies (for example for births and deaths) as well as in emergencies. I observed that participation in the groups’ activities and decision-making was non-hierarchical, and no competition or claims to leadership or power were made. Members worked together and helped each other out. The solidarity they developed in their group eventually led to their collective empowerment in the community.

Part 3: Collective Empowerment and Critical Alliances

A common thread that traverses the various definitions of “empowerment” is the notion that it is not a one-time action, nor an object to be given to people, but is rather a transformative process that involves the mobilization of people, the building of capacity, the resisting of norms, and the creation of enabling environments. Empowerment rests on a deep foundation created as individuals and collectivities (Rocha, 1997) acquire the knowledge and skills, develop the attitudes, and engage in behaviors that are self-initiated and generated at the grassroots level (Freire, 1970; Kabeer, 1994). Members of the MAs have gained knowledge of basic health care, nutrition, hygiene, reproductive health, and processes of social change. Additionally, they have acquired literacy and leadership skills, as well as income-generating skills, all of which have led to entrepreneurship opportunities and improved livelihoods. In additional to the formal

skills acquisition, the members of the MA provided each other with invaluable support and assistance (through knowledge sharing, peer learning, and collaboration). These skills were among the most significant elements of the association.

In their efforts to enhance gender equality for girls in and through education, members of the MAs were able to build the resources (literacy, leadership, knowledge, capital) to create the conditions required to practice their agency both in the school and in the community. As a result of their efforts, they were able to achieve control over their economic resources, their bodies, they could participate in making decisions at the school, community and household level, and they increased their self-esteem and self-efficacy. The collective organization of women into an MA gave them the resources, agency, and achievements required to expand their ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 2001). As this study has shown, as they organized around the main objective of enhancing girls' education, members of the MAs were able to build skills and practice their agency to advocate for girls' education at the school. Their successful efforts led to building their reputation as "the women that get stuff done" and to claiming their identity as a group of women that seek change. This in turn has increased their confidence, legitimacy, and enhanced the solidarity they needed to be empowered to take action in the community.

A key element to the process of empowerment is that members of the MAs used their association and work at the school as informal platforms for empowerment, where they get to practice different skills and build their confidence to then address other problems that they perceived as important in the community. In other words, the collective organization of MAs to address gender equality in and through education creates a space for women to informally build and practice their empowerment. Their association contributes to their capacity building, confidence, and self-esteem required to implement micro projects in the school. These micro projects build their individual empowerment and their reputation in the school as agents of change. As a result of these projects, members of the MA gain recognition from the community and felt that they were being "seen". The confidence and reputation they build in the realm of the school and the activities they implement to enhance girls' education gradually led them to mobilize outside the realm of the school. They use their values such as collaboration

and cooperation to create practical solutions to implement projects in the community. Their visibility in the community led them to build alliances with people in positions of power (e.g., school director, teachers, NGO directors, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and *chef de village).* These alliances are critical for fostering incremental change. Having people in positions of power use their privilege to support the advocacy is key in making transformative change. The efforts by the members of the MA to prevent or halt child marriage were successful because they had the support of traditional leaders. These internal power alliances allow for gradual changes in harmful gender norms. The MAs ability to use their reputation and networks within the community to make changes exemplifies Foucault's (1978) claim that "power is everywhere" – power circulates and exists in various networks, relationships, and structures (p. 93). Therefore, power is not concentrated in the hands of institutions and trickled down the social hierarchy; rather, power animates local practices and is distributed through all levels of society.

This research found that one of the defining reasons for the success of MAs to remove barriers to education for girls is their ability to create critical alliances and partnerships with different community groups. Their ability to begin cultivating alliances with the PA, the school director, the local education office, and draw on the power of traditional and community leaders made their efforts to begin addressing harmful gender norms possible. Alliances and partnerships (locally, nationally, and internationally) are necessary to enhance MA collective empowerment, however only if the alliances create an enabling environment that allows women to assume different roles.

To strengthen the work of the MAs in Nokou and Sokossa and to enhance their collective empowerment, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on cultivating alliances with others (locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally). During the DST film screening with key stakeholders working in the realm of gender and education in Benin, many of these key stakeholders were shocked that they were hearing about the work of the MAs for the first time. During these discussions many opportunities for partnerships and alliances were discussed. Being able to create alliances in the community (e.g., with community and traditional leaders), more broadly with local government (e.g., with

the local education office), and nationally (with other national women's groups in Benin). These external alliances are critical to enhancing the mobilization efforts of women, creating solidarity for their movement of achieving gender equality, and cultivating their empowerment.

The research findings also show that efforts to eradicate gender inequalities in school cannot be designed in isolation from the broader efforts to eradicate gender inequalities in the community. The members of the MA noticed that working with teachers and school directors was necessary, but not sufficient to change attitudes. For example, in their attempt to change the unequal gender divisions of labour, they realized that they must work with both the school and the community as the cultures in both reinforce one another. As such, the efforts of the MA cannot be reduced to one facet of life, and as we saw with the associations, members try to work holistically both in the community and in the school to address concerns related to girls' education, confronting both practical and strategic gender needs. Water, food, and shelter are basic human needs. The MAs work involves a dialogue that reflects upon the assets of the community and focuses on areas that need improvement. This includes economic development, but also addresses culture, health, literacy, civil rights, peace and justice. Attacking the root causes of poverty is a key to uplifting women and addressing gender inequalities. Women's rights are not just political or strategic interests but must include economic and social needs. For these reasons, the members of the MA are constantly in a process of maneuvering between both practical and strategic needs.

Emergent Feminist Practices: MAs Organize Change

During my study, members of the MAs described their multiple struggles with patriarchal practices and structures, recounting the complex nature of their subordination. They highlighted both the pain and strength they experienced in their encounters with male power. In particular, they emphasized the importance of harnessing their own abilities to overcome these challenges, the importance of women standing up for women, and the need for internal alliances. Far from being helpless victims of patriarchal oppression, despite frequent reliance on external support, members of the MAs can be agents of change. Their agency and power are evidenced

by the culturally fitting solutions they create. Even if many do not overtly identify as feminists, I perceive in their efforts for personal and collective change a burgeoning feminism inspired both by dominant development discourses, and indigenous cultural values of cooperation and self-determination.

As a result of women coming together in regular and approved fora, women gained respect and an unprecedented level of authority, and became more significantly involved in community development and decision-making. This respect for the group, has given different individuals in the group the platform to raise their voices when they observe an injustice, negotiate for alternative processes, and have a say in changing harmful gender norms. Many women with whom I spoke and interacted developed practical responses to various experiences of gender discrimination within the school and the community. For many of them, redressing gender subordination was primarily a process of personal transformation, of recuperating their own power in order to ameliorate their own lives. For others, personal change was tied inextricably to collective change. For all of them, creating women-centered spaces and strategies was vital to their own advancement in a patriarchal society. The women-focused solutions they envisaged for their problems attest to the emergence of a feminist awareness. In their organization as a collective to enhance girls' education, members of the MA have embarked on a two-way process of empowerment: the first is cultivating their individual agency; the second is fostering their collective consciousness. The individual and collective changes accomplished by the members of the MAs reveal a particular sort of power that results from creating contextually fitting solutions that garner individual and community agency. The increased cohesion, confidence, and mutual accountability were among the group's most valuable achievements. This study found that when vulnerable individuals organize around a common purpose, opportunities for collective learning, mutual support, and group action emerge. The vulnerability of a single individual is overcome by the strength of the many.

Although recognizing that feminisms emerge from many different cultural and geographic contexts, feminism has historically been the banner under which many white women researchers have recolonized research participants in postcolonial contexts by portraying them as a singular oppressed group, ignoring their agency and heterogeneity

as well as the effects of racism, colonialism and imperialism in formulating oppressive gender and racial norms (Jhappan, 1996; Mohanty, 1988). In reshaping feminist qualitative research to respond to these critiques and address the intersectionality of race, gender, class and sexuality and other forms of oppression in international and local contexts, dominant questions are: whose knowledge is being privileged in the research in a specific context; how is it obtained; and for what purposes (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Creese & Stasiulis, 1996; Olesen, 2005). What I observed and found problematic during my reading of the literature on African women and gender equality, was that when speaking to the status of women, the literature surrounding this topic, dominated by Western feminists and academics, consistently refers to women as 'marginalized' or at the 'margins of social hierarchy'. In fact, simply using the term 'African women' often assumes a poor, powerless, and helpless group whose lives are different from those in the West. More importantly, the term homogenizes women with vastly different histories, cultures, and experiences, as though they are victims of 'their' cultures and share the same 'marginalization' (Mohanty, 1991). By defining women with concepts such as marginalization, this literature insinuates that women are not major players in societal functions and are powerless.

However, my research in Benin makes me criticize these designations and oppose these insinuations. Communicating with not only members of the MA but also women that worked in the market, in the farm, or in trading, revealed that hierarchies of power exist everywhere. Although women are bound by their political, economic, and cultural circumstances, they do have power within their own realm. They are using the power they have within their own realm to collectively and individually subtly undermine the harmful relations of power that govern their position within their community and in turn find avenues of empowerment.

By enabling collective spaces, reinforcing norms of equality and inclusiveness through debate and negotiation, building networks across villages and supporting each other through conflicts and confrontation, the MAs have demonstrated that, for processes of collective empowerment to transform, they cannot meet only practical gender needs, but must also address underlying strategic gender needs. As we have seen, NGOs are important in this process. Their mediating role with the MA in Nokou

supported local initiatives by providing access to knowledge, expertise, ideas, people, and other resources that helped them realize their strategic gender needs. As the mediating role of the NGO decreased, the members of the MA in Nokou became more self-directed and self-reliant, using continuing dialogue and their internal alliances to build critical awareness and plan for and engage in collective action. This increasing autonomy re-emphasizes the notion that it is the process that makes the difference. Addressing practical gender needs is necessary to improve women's life situations; however, strategic gender needs are critical for altering the underlying causes that give rise to practical gender needs. As Monkman et al. (2007) argue, strategic gender needs emerge through struggling with practical gender needs and this struggle and relationship prepare the way for transformation. NGOs help support this dynamic process, but as the MAs take more ownership, it is essential for NGOs to relinquish their control, and take on a more responsive role in order to allow for transformative potential.

This transformative potential is possible when issues or concerns are conceptualized in ways that resonate with local communities. Drawing on culturally inspired principles, cooperation and collaboration has made the members of the MA resourceful in accommodating the various challenges in navigating these structures. Conventional development discourses make the importance of such efforts invisible because of their massive emphasis on the importance of external intervention by the state and international agencies. What is needed is a new development discourse that honors the agency of those whom it purports to serve. Such a discourse will employ state or international intervention as strategies to augment the efforts of African women themselves to assert their self-respect and creativity in taking charge of their own lives.

Chapter 10: Final Thoughts

Mothers Associations in Benin teach us a valuable lesson about the evolution of gender and development through the lens of education. This study has examined how women's organizations operate within the context of supporting girls' education. We can see that the process of organizing in fact can empower women. As women become involved in organizations, they learn valuable skills in business, health care, arts, agriculture, and other practical lessons that improve the quality of their lives and their earning potential. They also gain the confidence they need to speak out, to confront injustice, to advocate for themselves and their communities, and to engage in the political life of the community. Capacity-building, the process in which individuals enhance their skills and knowledge, is a primary feature and outcome of MAs. The goals and objectives of MAs are accomplished when people come together in dialogue to transform their societies. However, for the MA members, the path forward will not be easy, given that the work is to change the consciousness and understanding of a wider community. This involves an uphill struggle in which they need to work with parents who are not always concerned for or convinced of the importance and value of girls' education. Considering they are functioning within structures that are still unequal, what is feasible and within their reach is quite limited.

Contribution to scholarship

An important contribution this dissertation makes is located in the production of knowledge. This study provides information on an understudied group with several important characteristics that, combined, explain why they are understudied. The participants in my research are often understudied because they are Beninese rural women not engaged in political activism, they are poor and illiterate women, they are primarily older women who are de facto heads of households, and they are part of an informal women's association that seeks to represent the rights of girls. As such, my research contributes to the production of knowledge concerning African rural grassroots women's organizing beyond the most studied groups. I hope that my study will expand understanding of other, new forms of women's movements in their specific contexts that are confronting multiple context-specific forms of oppressions.

Likewise, my research contributes to scholarship around participatory research methods as a tool for integrating participations as collaborators in the research project and providing ownership to participants to discuss issues that concern them. This study uses digital storytelling to specifically identify women's concerns about education, livelihood, and inequalities, challenging dominant hierarchical norms about who can know, who can speak, and who can do research. A key message advocated through the activities is that women's voices matter. The study generates insights about participatory visual practice in this context, which responds directly to participant recommendations that women and communities need to be involved in decisions that affect them, as well as the general need for education and awareness about gender issues. In the context of decentralization and yet questionable democracy, efforts to democratize the research process through visual methodologies helped to bolster the shift of power and knowledge by facilitating a wider engagement in, debate about, and sharing of the research findings across more diverse audiences than typically have access to research.

Implications for practice

The implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to work at community level are clear. Participatory methods are as important as ever for helping to equalize power relations between researchers and community members, and the potential of digital technologies being used in participatory ways is huge. As Relebohile Moletsane et al. (2009) point out, it is when the most marginalized themselves are engaged in identifying the issues that affect them and the possible solutions for addressing them, that the interventions are more likely to work. Given that women experience the inequalities and the marginalization, they are well positioned to identify the challenges affecting them and to mobilize efforts to address these challenges. By providing a space for women to come together collectively to identify challenges, through processes such as digital storytelling, feminist researchers can contribute to repositioning themselves in relation to their participants and destabilizing 'the gaze' to create new ways of looking and creating knowledge.

As a feminist researcher committed to collaborative methods and challenging the power dynamics between myself and the participants, my goal was to support

participants to take ownership over the research process, giving them agency and opportunity to identify challenges, and facilitate critical reflection and dialogue on social issues that are relevant to their respective communities, particularly as these relate to gender relations. Digital storytelling offers a promising way of engaging women in examining, reflecting, and questioning the challenges of their everyday lives. Participatory visual methods expose and make public the everyday challenges women face in the context of poverty, and by so doing, make visible the possibilities for solutions. As a research method of intervention, digital storytelling positions participants' agency as central for identifying, representing, analyzing, and addressing critical issues in their lives, in so doing it pushes the research process to interrogate questions about change.

Another implication for practice is the ways in which civil society organizations both international and national NGOs engage with women's groups to enhance their empowerment. In this study we can see that local women's associations do not exist within a vacuum. The web of transnational feminist organizations has spread throughout the world, from the most remote villages to the largest cities. Women's organizations emerge out of a long indigenous tradition of female solidarity groups – from rotating labor associations, through kinship networks, to secret societies. However, they also gain momentum and transform through contact with national and transnational networks. They gain resources, ideas, and training through their relationships with foreign donors, multinational corporations, and the Beninese state. Local women's groups also become exposed to foreign ideas about gender roles and women's rights through interactions at conferences for women and other spaces of transnational feminist organizing. However, women's movements can also be co-opted by these "partners." The foreign donors can provide necessary resources but can also change the agenda of women's groups to suit external demands and priorities. These tensions are complicated and must not be overlooked. This research found the ways in which facilitation occurs is important in the process of ensuring gender equality is mainstreamed effectively and sustainably. Development programs promoted by CSOs can raise expectations that cannot always be fulfilled or sustained. In communities such as those in this study, NGOs can elevate expectations (access to resources, economic

support) and create dependencies especially in situations when development organizations hold more power and control than the communities. Although CSOs are critical in the process of empowerment, their role must be supporting local initiatives (by providing access to knowledge, expertise, ideals, people). If women's groups are to develop the capacity for self-determination, the role of CSOs must be flexible and temporary. This research then implies that CSOs must focus on how they can play a mediating role rather than a dominant role in the development process and support women's groups to become more self-directed and self-reliant. As Rocha (1997) argues, this increasing autonomy is the process that makes the difference in empowerment.

Further Research

Future research is recommended to more fully concentrate on the role of critical alliances and partnerships (locally, nationally, and regionally) in enhancing the empowerment process for women. Likewise, how can MAs be more connected to transnational women's movements rather than as an isolated informal women's group. Although hundreds of MAs exist in Benin and many more throughout West Africa, these groups often work in isolation of one another, rarely connecting to understand best practices, joining forces, or collaborating on initiatives.

Another key avenue for future research could focus on women's leadership in education. Which women have been successful and upwardly mobile through education, and what factors helped them to succeed? How is the influence of mothers shaping their children's access and desire for education? More needs to be known about the "unsung heroines" who have worked and sacrificed to educate the next generation. Women have built girls' schools, raised money for bursary scholarships and school fees, broken the "glass ceiling" at universities and government offices, and worked as schoolteachers, administrators, and community leaders. These role models inspire their peers and future generations to support girls' and women's formal education.

Microcredit and microenterprise development are also an important area of research. African women's organizations throughout the continent have developed complex independent banking and savings and loan associations that should be better

understood and replicated. Although these savings groups have been around for decades, women still have not been able to use the credit and resources to enhance their position within their community. Women should receive more training in literacy and
numeracy, with a focus on relevant organizational and business skills like recordkeeping, accounting, financial management, saving, investing, and business planning. There is also an interesting area of research possible around combining microcredit programs with gender dialogues and the potential for these dual programs to change unequal gender norms.

My hope with this research is to draw attention to the work of grassroots mothers' associations in Benin, and their plight to enhance gender equality for their daughters, for themselves, and for their communities. In thinking through the process of organizing and mobilizing in Benin, this research sheds light on alternative methods to addressing gender and development, tapping into more local approaches and indigenous knowledge systems.

Moreover, this study affirms the importance of diversity that is so essential to feminist dialogue, discourse, and activism. In the age of globalization, it is essential to consider how to meaningfully include the voices and struggles of marginalized groups. The transnational feminist movement has to allow for differences of regional diversity, and to allow space for different priorities to be determined. The stage must be open to diverse women to have a voice and to articulate their own interests depending upon their cultural milieu. Feminists must not buy into the hierarchy of practical vs. strategic needs by implying that the issues of legal and political rights are more complicated or important than the basic and practical concerns that are essential to daily survival, such as food, water, shelter, land and other issues. Thinking through and picturing the issues in this study, it is my hope that women's concerns and solidarity remain central to understanding the gendered landscape of development. I also hope that in striving for more diverse and participatory engagements in public debate about gender and development, more complex and intersectional understandings inform the types of action required for more sustainable and socially just development programming.

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