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Changing the gendered dynamics of refugee classrooms in West Africa:

Introducing female classroom assistants¹

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¹ This paper is now being further developed for a book chapter on the topic of ‘Structure and Agency in Women’s Education’.

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Introduction

The Classroom Space in West African Refugee Schools

Refugee schools in West Africa tend to be dominated by men, with even early years classes taught mostly by male teachers. There are very few female teachers and even fewer female head teachers or education administrators. Although enrollment in the lower classes is more or less gender balanced, by the upper primary level, many of the Liberian refugee girls studying in Sierra Leone and Guinea have dropped out of school and boys greatly outnumber girls. This situation can mean that lessons are oriented to boys' needs and experiences, that girls are discouraged from participating actively in class and that they are deprived of female role models and women who will encourage them in their studies. It can also mean that girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by teachers, often in return for good grades and help with lessons. Although the gender/power dynamics of classroom spaces in the west have been well-documented and theorized, there is little detailed research from development contexts, from Africa particularly, and specifically from refugee schools.

Since 2002 the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been implementing an innovative program of training and deploying female classroom assistants (CAs) in the refugee schools it supports in West Africa. In the long term it is hoped that there will be more women completing teacher training and entering classrooms as teachers, but in the meantime, the classroom assistants are a female presence in Grade 3-6 classrooms. They

have an explicit mandate to mitigate against abuse and exploitation of students, but more broadly they support a girl-friendly school environment and student learning. CAs monitor girls' attendance and follow up on absences with home visits, help girls with their studies, support extracurricular health education and social club activities for girls such as needlework, games and sports and maintain the log-book with students' grades. This helps to avoid situations in which teachers can manipulate and exploit girls for sex in exchange for altering their grades.

The article draws on data collected during fieldwork in Guinea and Sierra Leone in October/November 2004 for IRC's Healing Classrooms Initiative². A feminist theoretical framework is used to analyze the ways in which the CAs impact the gendered space of the classroom within the school as a whole. This framework is grounded in the theories of the classroom as a gendered space in which gender roles and identities and sexualities are constantly being formed (Anderson-Levitt et al, 1998; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Thorne, 1993). Most importantly, the classroom is also a hegemonic male space (Mirembe & Davies, 2001) and a number of recent studies in Africa indicate that it is often one that is infused with gender violence, particularly targeted at girls and women (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Leach, 2003; Leach et al, 2003; Omale, 2000). Our analysis is also informed by feminist educators such as Walkerdine (1990), Munro (1998), Grumet (1989) and McWilliam (1996a &b) who describe the situation of women in classrooms as inherently 'tricky', problematic and even 'impossible'. We also draw on feminists

² As part of the IRC Healing Classrooms Initiative, comprehensive program assessments were carried out in both Sierra Leone and Guinea. These consisted of individual interviews, and focus group discussions with students in target classes from Grade 3-6. These were conducted by research assistants, as far as possible of the same sex, in a quiet spot on or close to the school premises. Additionally, Jackie Kirk interviewed a total of 46 teachers and 32 CAs, using a semi-structured interview method. Questions relating to the CA program were also included in a questionnaire completed by 44 teachers in the two countries.

scholars of gender and development, particularly Goetz (1997), who helps us to understand the gendered relationships within institutional structures, and to analyze and describe initiatives set up to improve women's participation in such institutions. We will suggest that the CA program is making a significant difference to the lived experience of the students, and is helping to create more girl-friendly schools and classrooms, yet the underlying gender /power dynamics of the school, and the classroom in particular, remain unchallenged. We recognize that in the contexts in which it has been implemented, the program is indeed a radical one, and the CAs, as agents of change, have had to be brave to even implicitly challenge the hegemonic male power prevalent in the classrooms. The classroom space may remain male-dominated, with the CAs working to help the girls fit into this space, yet shifts in attitudes and behaviours of some of the male teachers are highly significant, giving us hope that with careful reorientation of the program, possibilities for greater empowerment of women and girls in schools exist.

After a brief introduction to the CA program in IRC schools in Sierra Leone and Guinea, the article discusses how the CAs are helping to create more gender equitable and particularly more girl-friendly school spaces. Then highlighted are some of the challenges of trying to bring about such changes in the school environment.

The IRC Classroom Assistant Programs

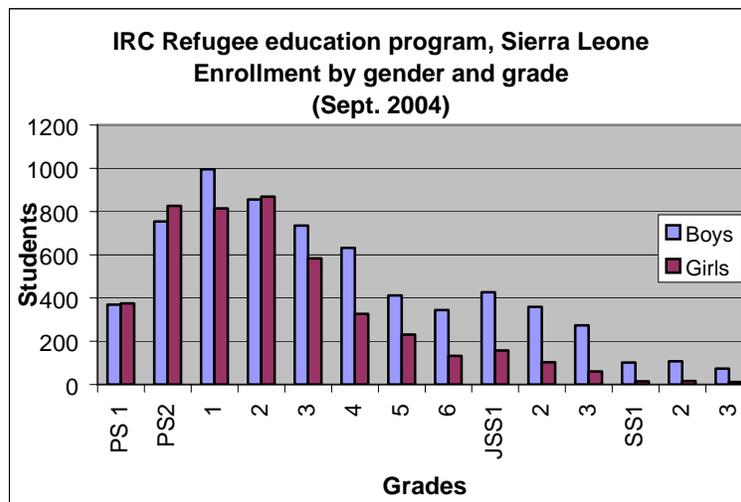
IRC is one of the largest implementing partners of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) for education programs across the world, and particularly in Guinea and Sierra Leone. The focus of the article is the refugee education program, operating in the east of Sierra Leone, and serving an estimated population of 55,000 Liberian refugees in eight refugee camps and the education program in the

N'Zérékoré region of Guinea in which an estimated 7 refugees live in official refugee camps, and in and around the town itself. In both countries, the support provided includes the provision of teaching and learning supplies, in addition to teacher training and training and support for classroom assistants. Almost all the teachers and CAs in both country programs are refugees themselves, and with funding from UNHCR, IRC pays both a small monthly incentive.

The IRC CA program was initiated in 2002 in Guinea, primarily as an immediate response to the shocking report from UNHCR/ Save the Children UK (2002) on the extent of the exploitation of girls and young women by humanitarian workers in refugee camps. Teachers were one of the key groups of perpetrators, and the report highlighted how teachers had been taking advantage of their positions and their authority over girls, offering good grades and other school privileges in return for sex. IRC teachers were implicated in this report, and the organization moved quickly to start to address the issue in a number of different ways, including recruiting and training female classroom assistants, as well as developing and introducing to all employees the IRC Mandatory Reporting Policy on Abuse and Exploitation. Soon after its introduction in Guinea, the IRC Sierra Leone also adopted the classroom assistant program.

One of the fundamental issues to be addressed is the fact that the classes in which adolescent girls are attending are taught almost exclusively by men. In Sierra Leone, for example, IRC supports 459 male teachers compared to 20 women. In Guinea, IRC supports 334 men compared to 103 women teachers, over half of whom are teaching in the kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classes. In these settings, academic success rests in the hands of all-powerful male teachers who teach the lessons, set and grade the exams

and tests and then enter the grades into formal school records. This has made girls especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse – such as trading good grades for sex. Male students who dominate the classrooms can also be a source of sexual harassment for girls, putting pressure on them for relationships and for sex. In addition to overt sexual harassment, male students can further discourage girls through pejorative comments about their schoolwork, teasing when they get answers right or wrong in class and generally making them feel uncomfortable in class. In crowded classrooms the few girls are often squashed into small benches and desks besides the boys, with no space or territory of their own.



Ideally, more women teachers would be recruited to the schools, in order to start to create learning environments which are more friendly and welcoming to girls, and ones in which their perspectives are understood and their needs met. However, the reality is that in the refugee communities in both Guinea and Sierra Leone, because of long standing gender disparities in access to education, there are few women with the level of schooling required to become a teacher. Those that do are usually recruited for more lucrative positions in the UN, NGOs, or other agencies in the camps, or they are unable to

leave family duties or other better paying income generating activities. This is especially true for the many refugee women who are single mothers, or who have lost their husbands to the conflict in Liberia.

The CA program, then, was designed to address the problem of male-dominated classrooms, with the specific objective of reducing girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation in schools and a more general aim of improving girls' educational opportunities. In order to promote girls' education, the CAs need to provide protection and encouragement to girls in schools so that they might enjoy a safe, conducive and motivating learning environment. In both countries, CAs have been recruited from the refugee population, with a flexible entry requirement of Grade 9 education. CAs participate in a short 2 – 5 day training workshop, which includes lesson planning, team teaching, tracking girls' grades and attendance and report writing, in addition to prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation, child rights and child protection topics. CAs are also trained on communication and counseling skills. The CAs are expected to be in attendance at school every day during school hours and to sit in the classes with the students. Home visits and other club activities are conducted outside of class time. The CAs are visited on a regular basis by IRC supervisors, to whom they submit monthly reports detailing girls' attendance, activities and home visits.

Impacts of the CA Programs

Because of fluctuating student numbers in Sierra Leone and Guinea refugee schools, and particularly because of returns to Liberia, it is impossible to obtain clear and comparable data on girls' enrollment, attendance and drop out before and after the introduction of the CAs. However, in both countries, there is a common conviction that

not only has girls' drop-out decreased and attendance improved, but pregnancy rates have also decreased and girls' achievement (grades, test scores and exam results) has improved considerably. One CA in Guinea sums it up as follows: "Before they had many problems in the school like fighting, loving with teachers, getting pregnant, but now it is improving. Before the girls were going down, but now they are improving".

The focus for this article however, is the impact at the classroom level and how the gender dynamics of the classroom spaces have changed with the presence of female classroom assistants working alongside the mostly male teachers. Students in both Guinea and Sierra Leone enthusiastically articulate the impacts of the CAs' presence in their classrooms; in fact every student interviewed from classes with CAs identified positive impacts of the program. In every focus group discussion too, the students spoke of improvements in the classroom experience for them. There is a clear message from the girls that with the CAs, the classrooms are more comfortable and friendly spaces in which to learn and that they feel encouraged not only by the physical presence of a woman in their classroom, but also by the fact that she will follow up with them on home visits.

Elimination of sexual exploitation and abuse

The initial impetus for the program was to eliminate sexual abuse and exploitation of girls in schools, and according to all those interviewed (CA, teachers and students) there has been a dramatic change in teachers' behaviour in schools. Although it is impossible to say that there is no longer any exploitation of girls by teachers in school, nor that the risk of it does not exist, it would nonetheless appear that there has been a significant and positive change to which the CAs have contributed. In Guinea, for

example, the students talk about there now being ‘more respectful’ relationships between students and teachers; as one girl says, “Teachers are no more collecting money from students in school for grades. Students and teachers are now respecting one another”. Most CAs and teachers felt uneasy talking about this issue but when prompted, the majority said that CAs have helped reduce this problem, although it would appear that the teachers see the CAs’ interventions as bringing about the necessary changes in the girls’ problematic behaviour.

When prompted to address the issue of sexual exploitation, the CAs are quick to assert that “since we came in we put a stop to those things”, that “the teachers can’t do anything bad with the students, no, nothing bad like that is happening – I haven’t seen anything like that”. When asked whether they think the teachers have changed the ways they interact with girls, since they came into the schools, CAs in Guinea stress that yes; “The teachers are careful”, says one CA, “We observe them”. In a number of schools, the CAs stress the importance of them being there to observe and see what is happening in the schools, “Things have changed, the teachers don’t do it [sexual exploitation of girls]- this is why the girls are so serious now. We are there to observe, so the teachers can’t say, like, ‘This girl is beautiful.’” One CA explicitly mentions the impact from the girls’ perspectives as she says, “The girls are happy that in our presence they know that the teachers cannot do these things. We are there and we can observe them.”

The teachers too rarely mention exploitation issues without a specific prompt; in the Guinean questionnaire responses about the impact of the CAs in schools, only one teacher makes a reference to sexual exploitation issues. When asked about the most important tasks for the CAs, four out of the twenty-six responses refer to how

relationships between the girls and the teachers have been curbed, although only one of these is explicit about sexual exploitation on the part of teachers. When asked the same question, only one of the twenty-one teachers interviewed in Sierra Leone mentions girls' protection. Furthermore, the data suggest that the protection the CAs provide is in the form of warnings to the girls of what to avoid; one teacher says, for example, "To safeguard girls so as to protect them in school. Because they will know how to protect [themselves] or avoid some activities".

Creating girl-friendly spaces

As part of focus group discussions, students in Guinea were asked whether they would like to be CAs themselves. The responses to this question are interesting, less in relation to students' future aspirations, but more in relation to their perceptions of the CAs and the work they do in the schools. In these groups, mixed feelings are expressed about becoming a CA, but there are some responses which are indicative of the girls' appreciation of their involvement in the classroom. A Grade 6 girl says yes, "Because CAs play the role of mother in the school. They can counsel and direct the children". A Grade 4 girl in the same school also talks about CAs as mother figures: "Yes [I would like to be a CA] because as a CA I will take the place of a mother to direct and correct children". Another Grade 4 girl says "Yes, because CA can solve problems and I want to be solving problems for people too". For one girl it is the possibility to work with groups of girls which appeals. Her reason for wanting to be a CA is "To bring girls together for association." In discussion groups, girls in Sierra Leone say that do feel safer with the CAs and one says explicitly that she is happy to have a 'friend' in class.

The CAs describe some of the activities they do with the girls in groups, and when asked if they interact individually with them at all, they indicate that yes, if they see a girl who is obviously not well or not happy then they will talk to them. For example, one CA explains, “Sometimes, if you see 1 or 2 [girls] sitting and you ask them their problem and then they will tell you, like one girl, she saying she is working and she comes to school late and they [the other students] are all working and she feel shame.... I tell her to not feel shame, to come to school and even if she does come late, she should surely stay”. Another CA explains how she responds to the needs of another girl: “Because some of them are living with people [foster families] – their parents they left in Liberia ...and this little girl in my class she is living with friends and I see in class that she is so sad and just sitting and so I ask her what is the matter. ‘Come and talk to me, you can tell me’, and she tells me her problem, her secret. She says she is so worried about what will happen when we go from here, how she will get money, how she will eat. I tell her, ‘I don’t have money to give you but I will talk to you, you can tell me your secret and you just come to school because education is the answer. As long as you know book, you’ll be all right’”. Such interventions can clearly make a very positive difference to girls in schools who would otherwise have no female confidante or mentor.

Creating a conducive and effective learning environment

There is also a consensus amongst female and male students that the CAs help to make the classroom space a friendlier one, that is more conducive to their learning. In Guinea, girls in a focus group discussion explain how they feel encouraged by the CAs, and, for example, more comfortable to ask questions in class: “Now some of us girls feel more and more safe to ask our teachers any question that bother us without fear of being

provoked by anyone”. This improved comfort level is also expressed by one of the boys: “I personally feel that the classroom is more friendly now than before due to CAs. Most of us feel safer to ask our teachers questions that normally would be called ‘Out of lesson questions’, but because of the CA presence, the teachers are now answering our questions”.

It would also appear that just the presence of another adult in the classroom encourages the teacher to present his lesson well and at least try to ensure that all the students have understood. In contexts where many of the teachers are inexperienced and under-qualified, the students are concerned that they often do not understand the lessons being delivered to them; teachers may not have the necessary skills to link the concepts being taught to the children’s own experiences and existing knowledge. As indicated in the response above, teachers may also refuse to answer questions which may challenge their authority and may also show up their own limited grasp of the subject. In Guinea, teacher motivation is particularly low, primarily because the incentives paid do not keep up with inflation and the rocketing prices of basic commodities. These low levels of motivation understandably impact on the quality of the lesson planning and preparation done by the teacher and on the delivery of the lesson. However, it would seem that the CAs’ presence does motivate the teachers to work at ensuring their students understand and to answer their questions if they do not. Responses also indicate that the CAs “provide maximum support in classroom management and discipline” and clearly this has a positive impact, with enhanced teaching and learning in a calmer and more organized classroom. Teachers in Guinea also recognize explicitly how the quality of their

instruction has improved since the CAs started in the school; they write: “[the CA program] makes me work promptly and caring” and “It makes the teacher teach better”.

The student group discussion responses on becoming a CA also highlight how the CAs impact on learning. One girl says that if she were to become a CA, “Yes, I believe that I am able to help to make learning a better thing for boys and girls.” A Grade 6 girl says, “ Yes, I would like to be a CA in order to help other girls like myself make the learning environment a more friendly place”.

The CAs also describe what they do to promote learning in the classrooms and their focus is mostly on what they do for and with the girls. One Sierra Leonean CA says, “I am helping the girls with their English. Yes, they like us because we like to sing, do drama, and when there is no teacher then I write on the board for them and get them to copy down. I remind them that they are here for education and for writing. If they are sleeping, I get them to stand and tell them to wake up and concentrate”. CAs in Guinea are doing similar things; one says, “..... when the teacher is writing on board we can go round and correct and tell them how to write, tell them to put the date and to leave the right spaces ...”. Another CA echoes what has been mentioned by the students relating to the impact on the effectiveness of the teachers’ instruction, “We tell the students to concentrate so they will get the lesson and get everything clear - so that helps the teachers”. The results of their interventions are also observed by the CAs: “Since the project started, the girls used to sit and they were not seriously working and now we are there to encourage them and to counsel them and to make them concentrate on the lesson, and so they are more active”. Other positive impacts include improved class participation of girls, especially in English and more interest in going to the library to study. One of

the CAs states that the girls in her class are now doing as well as the boys, and in fact there are 5 very clever girls and it is the boys who want to sit next to them in the tests. She tells the girls to sit together, though, to avoid any interference from boys.

Changing the gender dynamics of the classroom: A complex task

As highlighted above, the classroom assistants do make a significant difference to classroom atmosphere which is highly appreciated by the girls and also by boys. This can then contribute to enhanced learning, especially for the girls who are often perceived as being behind and in need of extra encouragement. However, the data also indicate that whilst on one level the CAs' presence may enhance the school experience for girls, at another, the introduction of para-professional, unqualified women into contexts of hegemonic male spaces cannot alone address the complex challenges to long term change for the protection of girls and for gender equality. The data presented and discussed in the following section indicate that the classroom dynamics and relationships between teachers and CAs and between students and CAs are more complex than might at first be thought. Especially when considered in relation to Goetz' theories of gender and institutions in development contexts, we see that for the CAs, the focus is on changing the girls to better suit the classroom, rather than challenging the underlying gender/power dynamics within the classroom. Feminist perspectives on the tricky positions of women teachers help to articulate the contradictory position in which the CAs are placed, as women themselves, subject to gendered subordination within a hegemonic male classroom space, but attempting to bring about change in girls daily experience of school.

Teachers and CAs

When the CAs were first introduced to the classrooms, there was a certain amount of discomfort on the part of the teachers; teachers considered them as ‘sex police’ and as classroom spies who would be reporting on their every move. The general consensus now, however, is that the teachers no longer feel so uncomfortable, and that they have started to see that there are some benefits to them of having assistants in the class. As one teacher describes, “Yes, at first the teachers were somehow afraid of them [the CAs] and thought they were just reporting on them, but then the EO [Education Officer] showed us the job description and we felt more comfortable. Even when they came though, we thought they were police”. The CAs are all too aware of the teachers hostility, and although they also insist that the relationships are now quite different, they also talk about the past. As one CA in Sierra Leone says, “At first the teachers used to be afraid of us but we told them we were there for the girls”. In Guinea, there was a similar situation. As one CA explains, at the beginning, “Some [teachers] were happy and some were not happy. From the beginning they didn’t know and they thought we’d be against them, but now they are seeing that we are helping them too.”

It is also clear that although the teachers are now more accepting of the CAs and have responded to their presence with more respectful behaviour, improved lesson planning and delivery and more interaction with students, their expectations of the CAs are limited to relatively menial tasks and ones which do not challenge their authority as teachers. The training of the CAs includes the concept of ‘team teaching’. This could be a good way to promote female participation in high status teaching activities and to build the skills and the confidence levels of the CAs as further incentives towards a teaching career themselves. However, the reality is that none of the teachers talked about any real

power sharing in the classroom and made it clear that when the CA was in the classroom alone with the students, she was merely a replacement for him. The CAs may share some of the responsibility for classroom management with the teacher, however, there is little sense from the teachers that they see the CA as an equal partner in teaching and learning processes. In fact when asked specifically about team teaching with his CA, one teacher responding by saying, “Yes, if the teacher goes to urinate then the CA teaches. When the teacher gives question papers, then the CAs correct.” One teacher admits that sometimes when he is tired the CA will take over the teaching in the classroom, or when he goes out “for 5 or 10 minutes”. One of the few female teachers interviewed also seems to see the classroom assistant as more of a teacher’s aide: “Yes, they are helping us – they keep the students mute when they are noisy, they are there talking to the children, encouraging them. [As a teacher] you may decide not to come to school because of your health and then the CAs are keeping the students busy ...” Another Class 6 teacher describes his CA as follows: “Sometimes when I am not in the class she takes care of the students, she monitors the tests when I give. She erases the board and also gives some corrections. The teacher cannot be in the classroom all the time.”

Generally teachers felt that CAs needed more training, but in contrast to the teacher attitudes described above, there are two teachers who are quite frank about their own negative experiences. One is an experienced woman teacher and she says quite openly, “According to what they told us they [the CAs] are there to look after the girls, but I see no use, they can’t teach. For example, me I am handling 13 subjects and if she [the CA] was capable, she should be helping me. The teaching work is tedious, like preparing grade sheets etc. In theory, the CAs are useful, but.... I don’t know.....”.

Another teacher is equally questioning of the value of the CAs, and even suggests that they add to the teachers' work, "The CAs are a problem – it is very difficult - they should be educated to know what to do in the classroom. Now we [the teachers] have to do classroom management of students and CAs."

Much has been written on the tricky position of women teachers in western classrooms and on the 'impossible fiction' (Walkerdine, 1990) of being a woman teacher. Walkerdine points to the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in an identity which asserts power, status and commands respect (teacher) at the same time that it speaks of subordination, marginalization and repression (woman). Munro explains that "to be a woman is to lack authority, knowledge and power. To be a teacher is to have authority, knowledge and power" (1998, p. 1). Gannerud's study (2001) highlights the contradictory situation women teachers are in with regard to authority within a school context in which their work is given a low status. Although less well explored in development contexts, such conceptualizations of the woman teacher appear to be equally relevant outside of the west (Kirk, 2003). If they are true of women teachers in West Africa, then the position of unqualified classroom female assistants is even trickier and even more problematic. Walkerdine (1990) eloquently describes the tension that exists for the woman teacher who is expected to facilitate the individual, rational development of each child, and yet has to do so from within the confines of a classroom, where her role is considered similar to that of a nurturing mother. For the classroom assistants, this impossible task has additional layers of gendered complexity; the expectation that they can facilitate the empowerment of girls from a position which has far less status than that of a teacher and

is embedded within a hegemonic male classroom space, is seen to be even more problematic.

Relationships with girls

As described above, in general the girls interviewed and who took part in discussion groups were appreciative of the CAs in their classes, seeing them as a friend, big sister, mother-figure. However, there are also data to suggest that the girls – and boys – lack respect for these women and that as unqualified, relatively poorly educated local women, girls do not see them as strong role models.

Some way into the interviews, some of the CAs in both Guinea and Sierra Leone started to articulate some of the challenges that they face in gaining the trust, confidence and respect of the girls in schools, especially the older girls. This is not at altogether surprising when one considers what sort of role the CAs may be perceived as playing, as they advise girls to dress modestly, and to ignore boys, exhorting them beyond all else to study hard. Furthermore, in a small refugee community where people tend to know each other well, the girls are also very aware that the CAs have not completed their own education, and can be skeptical of what they can do. As one CA described, “They will test us – just to check we know it, but it is getting better now. At first they were saying things like, ‘Oh look at her, she pretends she knows all this’, and when the teacher leaves the class, they would raise their hands to ask difficult questions to see if the CAs really do know”. Another says, “Some of the girls, they don’t obey us – they don’t listen to us. We call them and we give them tests”. But some of the CAs have developed strategies to deal with this sort resistance and to squash any perceptions that they are not up to scratch; they say that it is important that “you show them that you know by writing on the blackboard”.

Another strategy is to copy the teachers' notes into their own books and study so that they can answer.

In the focus group discussions the girls themselves express quite mixed and contradictory feelings about CAs. As described above, the question, 'Would you like to be a CA?' elicited some very touching responses from students in Guinea that indicate their appreciation for the CAs. However there are many girls who disagree and say they would not like to be CAs. The reasons for this fall into two broad categories – because of the hard work and low pay and because of the lack of respect that is accorded to them. This latter category of response is of particular interest: One girl says, for example, "No, because CAs get their fair share of headaches from impolite, rude students". Another says, "Some students are challenging the CA in class and mock the CA outside school". The reality is also that the students are more than aware of the financial difficulties of the CAs and this may also contribute to a lack of respect for these women who are there to support and encourage them in school. It should also be noted that many of these same students say that they don't want to be teachers either, again because of the low pay. One girl says quite frankly, no, she would not want to be a CA, "because CAs live in poverty" and another, "No, because CA job will not improve my family and myself". In one of the schools in Sierra Leone a specific school rule was made for the students to call the CAs 'teacher'; the fact this was done specifically to encourage the students to respect the CAs just like they do the teachers is also an indication of a more problematic relationship between the students and the CAs than might have initially been imagined.

Teachers generally are placed in a paradoxical situation in which they themselves are subject to comprehensive control within a hierarchical structure, whilst at the same

time they are authority figures with rules and regulations (such as uniform, pregnancy policies) to impose on student bodies (Sattler, 1997). This paradox can be especially true when female teachers – and in this case female CAs - are assigned pastoral responsibilities for girls and thus become responsible for the patrolling and disciplining of girls’ bodies, imposing uniform and behaviour rules. The girls in Mirembe and Davies’ (2001) study of school culture in Uganda, were very resentful of the interventions of female teachers who they felt ignored the important issues for them. The authors point to the need to recognize that these girl-woman relationships take place within a school context of hegemonic masculinity.

Perceptions of Girls and Strategies for Girls’ education

Although the CAs may be (or at least become) strong advocates for girls’ education, they also appear to believe that it is the girls who are not serious enough about their education, that it is the girls who need to study extra hard and avoid the attention of men (including teachers) and male students. “They shouldn’t wear false hair or makeup as it attracts men, and short skirt”, says one CA in Sierra Leone. In the same school, another CA explains how important it is for the CAs to take care of the girls in school and to make sure they are clean and well dressed and their hair is plaited. A colleague adds: “...And their manner of dressing has improved too. Before they were wearing big earrings and polish their lips with colour, but now they are more moderate....”

Other CAs also tend to talk about the girls as if the problem lies with them, and as if they are there to make up for the girls’ lacunae in comparison with the boys. One CA explains, “Of course, sometimes the boys get angry because we are only helping the girls, but we tell them that the girls are backward and they boys are cleverer and so they [the

girls] need more help”. Another CA says that they focus their attention on the girls, “because they are left behind”. This tendency to problematize the girls and the girls’ behaviour and to assign the responsibility to the girls to change their negative behaviors and attitudes towards school is also reflected in responses from teachers. For example, one teacher writes that the most important aspect of the CAs’ work is the CAs’ encouragement to the girls in class, “because girls had not being taken education so serious”. Another teacher writes, “I think supervision of female students is the most important task. This has encouraged the female students to learn on their own and not to depend on male students for help”. For others, it is important to encourage the girls on their lessons and to make sure they are on the right lesson in class, that is that they have the right books out. One of the CAs explains how they keep the girls focused on the lessons, “We tell the teachers to send the questions to the girls, to make sure they are awake and being serious”.

Anne Marie Goetz (1997) highlights the problematic nature of gender equality initiatives which focus on women as the problem. She proposes a shift in perspective from ‘getting women right for the institution’ to one of ‘getting the institutions right for women’. Such a shift is one which is very relevant in this context in which, as we have seen, the emphasis has been on the CAs helping the girls to fit better into schools. Rather than focus on the girls’ rights and the expectations they should be able to have of the male students and teachers, the CAs stress how important it is for the girls to keep themselves to themselves and to avoid the males in school. They see an important role for themselves in instructing the girls to keep away from the boys. They describe this thus: “We talk to them about not going around with boys,” and “We always encourage them

[the girls] and tell them of the importance of education – that they shouldn't follow men and not to jump with them. We tell them 'you shouldn't wrestle with boys because in doing that it is dangerous'". Teachers seem to appreciate this apparent change in the girls' behaviour with one saying, "The girls used to be confused and now it is improving, their manner of approaching the teachers has improved. Now they are not late and they are coming up....the CAs are encouraging them". CAs in Guinea explain that the most important aspect of their work, is the advice they give to girls not to go round the teachers and other men, so they get pregnant.

Feminist educators and theorists of education have critiqued initiatives in which it is the problematic, messy and unpredictable bodies of girls and women which have to be 'fixed' in order for them to fit into the androcentric institutions to which they desire access. The responses described above highlight the CAs' roles in 'fixing' the 'deficit' girls to firstly get them into school and then to perform well once in the classroom. One teacher says, "CAs are mainly to check on the girls and to know why the girls don't come to school, to tell them how to dress as girls and how to behave and tell them what not to do", and neither the teachers nor the CAs articulate any need to change any of the structures or processes of schooling in order to better suit the girls. As Mgalla et al (1998) find in their study of a somewhat similar guardian program for girls in Tanzania, the opinions of the CAs on girls, gender equality and empowerment are grounded in their every day realities of camp or town refugee life, and are indicative of the prevailing social context. CAs, like any women in the refugee context are implicated in the intersecting and overlapping gendered ideologies of different institutions and organizations (Kabeer, 1994), including the family, school, community and the service

providers such as UNHCR and IRC. This means that their understandings of the barriers to successful education for girls, and the strategies that they develop for addressing these, tend to reflect rather than challenge the prevailing discourses of the community in which they live. We have to remember that at least when the CA program started, the prevailing attitude amongst teachers and others in the community was that the girls were seducing teachers because of their provocative clothing.

Such prevailing teacher attitudes also shape the understandings which the CAs develop of the problem, and explain their attention to the clothing, appearance and demeanor of the girls. The work of the CAs is circumscribed within the traditional gender/power dynamics of the community, further entrenched in the patriarchal institution of the school. Whilst they clearly have agency and have bravely broken new ground in their communities with their different initiatives to promote the girls, it is perhaps not surprising that they ultimately do not challenge the power and authority of the teachers. For women whose financial and social security – and that of her children - may depend on working within the status quo of the community and not rocking the boat too far, this could be very risky.

Conclusions

Feminists educators and education researchers have described the classroom space as one that androcentric, and one which requires us to see the world from a normalized male point of view, to value that which is associated with the men and male characteristics and values, and invisibly conflates male experience with universal experience (Robertson (1993). Creating a shift from such a classroom to one in which girls and boys, men and women are equally active, are equally valued, respected and

served is a complex task, which requires attention to all aspects of the schooling experience, including curriculum, teaching methodologies and materials as well as staff dynamics, management processes and so on. Shifting the gender and power dynamics within classrooms and the ways in which male and female students are perceived and supported by teachers will take time, and a number of different program inputs. In the long term it is important to ensure that there are more women teachers, head teachers and other administrators, supervisors and other program staff; the classroom assistant program is one which should – if effective – eventually become unnecessary as more girls complete their studies and become teachers themselves. Yet it is clear that it will take some time before this is going to happen on a large scale. In the meantime, the CA program is a necessary and important one. It is also a complex one, with a number of inherent tensions and contradictions that require careful attention.

It is clear from the data presentation and discussion above that the classroom assistant program is successful in creating more comfortable learning environments for girls and has had beneficial impacts for boys too. One of the most important impacts is its contribution to a reduction in sexual exploitation of girls yet beyond this, the physical presence of the CAs in class, their moral encouragement for the girls and the concern that they show for their well-being and their academic success helps to change the classroom space from one in which girls are marginalized and even disrespected, to one in which they are given special attention, support and encouragement. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the CAs are in somewhat tricky positions in the classroom, and that alone they may not achieve the needed long term impact for girls empowerment of shifting the underlying hegemonic male culture of the school.

The challenge is for us recognize, as stated at the outset, that in such contexts, the work that the CAs are doing is ground breaking, and that the strategies they use are very appropriate – and practical responses to their perceptions of the problems. These perceptions and the solutions used also have to be understood as shaped by the androcentric context in which they have been formed. The imperative becomes to carefully and respectfully move these practical responses of the CAs towards more strategic approaches that ensure the immediate protection of girls in the current classroom spaces, but also envisage their long-term empowerment within ones which are more gender-aware.

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