THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
INTERSECTIONS
The women working to improve girls' education
Thursday, March 8, 2018

PARTICIPANTS:

ADRIANNA PITA
Office of Communications, Brookings
Host

DASMINE KENNEDY
Echidna Global Scholar

CHRISTINA KWAUK
Fellow, Global Economy and Development
Center for Universal Education

ARMENE MODI
Echidna Global Scholar

MARÍA CHRISTINA OSORIO VÁZQUEZ
Echidna Global Scholar

DAMARIS SELEINA PARSITAU
Echidna Global Scholar

(MUSIC)

PITA: Welcome to a very special episode of Intersections. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

For International Women's Day we're showcasing the work of the Echidna Global Scholars, leaders from NGOs and academia with experience in and ties to developing countries who come to Brookings to pursue research on global education and improving outcomes for girls in their region and throughout the developing world. At the end of the fellowship the Echidna Scholars turn their research into an action plan to take back with them to the countries in which they work, building networks to help spread solutions for expanding girls' education and reaching the most marginalized girls.

KWAUK: We need to be highlighting not only tangible problems, but also tangible solutions to get policy makers -- and more than just policy makers I think, more gatekeepers, community leaders, men into the room and onto the table to discuss the important issues around girl's education.

PITA: That's Christina Kwauk, a Fellow with the Center for Universal Education at Brookings who manages the Echidna Global Scholars program and researches gender equity in education, 21st century skills, and youth empowerment, talking about the importance of working within communities in practical ways to make a difference in girls' lives.

SPEAKER: Here at Brookings within our larger work on skills for our changing world, we have been working with research partners and with the girls' charge life skills working group to think through life skills development for girls.

What are life skills, how do they develop, how can they be taught effectively, and how do they actually transform girls' lives? While the field has made great strides in promoting life skill programming for adolescent girls over the last decade, we risk leaving girls hanging when they, empowered by their new skills, are met with sometimes violent backlash by family, community members, and others when they attempt to apply these skills outside of the safe spaces created by NGOs and other programs.

The burden of change often falls on the shoulders of girls, young adolescent girls, who have learned life skills. And now I think we should look at how the onus is now on us to figure out how to simultaneously create more receptive and enabling environments.

SPEAKER: It's about knowing and understanding Maasai culture, and the though patterns, and the fears. Like one professor described it as Maasai having an education complex, that they are so afraid that when their children are exposed to an education they will lose their children, they will adopt strange manners, and speak English, and not know what to do respecting elders, because Maasai value system is founded on deep values of respect of the hierarchy. And so just understanding that and being an insider, knowing how to speak to them, and even how to dress to go to them to speak. Every time I go to the village I don my Maasai attire to tell them that it's compatible for me to be educated -- I mean modernity and education are compatible with Maasai culture. I can be a Maasai when I want to be a Maasai, and I can run away from Maasailand when I want to.

PITA: Damaris Parsitau is a Professor of Sociology and Director of the Institute of Women, Gender, and Developing Studies at Egerton University in Kenya. She is also the first Maasai woman from her village to earn a Ph.D. and has spent her career advocating for girls' rights, health, and education within the Maasai culture that practices female genital mutilation and early marriage.

PARSITAU: I am that Maasai girl that I am going to speak about today. The Maasai have a unique culture and they have refused to give up that culture, despite all the pressure from modernity and globalization. They just want to stay with their culture.

More importantly, the Maasai have a unique system of social and political governance which is very different from the Kenyan leadership, political system that we have. And it goes back to generations of Maasai systems of knowing. It is a system that is heavily patriarchal and where men are the rulers. They make all the decisions that affect everybody, including women who basically have no voice.

Sixty percent of Maasai children in rural areas are not enrolled in school at all. And the rates of girls transitioning to and completing secondary school is very low. In fact, 8 percent of Maasai girls in rural areas do not complete secondary schooling. And we need to ask ourselves, and it should worry all of us, why are Maasai girls not going to school. And, you know, there is all manner of lofty and beautiful policy on paper. We have a free primary school education since 2002-2003. We have free secondary school education since 2004. We have an Anti-FGM

board, we have an act that protects girls from early marriage and female genital mutilation, yet Maasai girls are still not going to school. Maasai girls are subject to female genital mutilation and early marriage, which both are linked to girls drop out in school. Eighty-nine percent of Maasai girls undergo female genital mutilation, which is very sad.

PITA: For Damaris, creating that more receptive and enabling environment for Maasai girls involved approaching the custodians of Maasai traditions, culture, and spirituality.

PARSITAU: So at the center of Maasai girls' education and at the center of Maasai culture are the custodians of tradition and culture. These are the gatekeepers of traditions, the doyennes of the knowledge, systems of Maasai culture. They are extremely influential and highly respected authoritative and are rarely question. But they have a big say on whether girls get an education or not.

So, in my study I tried to identify these groups that are very critical to allow Maasai to go to school. And these are the elders, the spiritual leaders, the community leaders. And they are not law makers, they are leaders anointed and appointed within the Maasai political social system. They have the capacity to allow girls to go to school if only we can be able to work with them and understand their culture with respect and sensitivity.

So I identify the role of elders and how we can go about each one of them to be able to allow Maasai girls to go to school. First of all, the elders are very powerful, and Maasai elders are appointed from, you know, when they are young and they grow up into that leadership and become very influential and have voice. And you cannot get anything done if you don't go through them.

So I think if we engage these elders with cultural sensitivity, trying to understand their thought patterns, understanding their fears about girls' education, I think we'll be able to get somewhere.

Spiritual leaders -- and we have both spiritual leaders denominational and nondenominational. Within the Maasai cultural system there are spiritual leaders who are also very powerful. But I think they are very critical in getting girls to school.

KENNEDY: Jamaica is often not seen as very interesting or important when it comes to girls' education. For one, we have already attained gender parity and there is universal

enrollment from primary to the secondary level. But there have been high incidences of teenage pregnancy, which by virtue of that being the case, prevents educational participation for some of our girls. In 2008 Jamaica had one of the fourth highest teenage pregnancy ratings in the Caribbean. The rate has trended down nicely, which is very interesting, but it still remains pretty high when compared to regional and global averages.

So teenage pregnancy has implications for the girl herself, and also for the country at large. For the girl, well we know that there can be education disruption and there can be attendant health issues for both herself and also for her child. If she doesn't benefit from a second chance education, there is scope for a limited human capacity development, and there can be high dependence on welfare services. And if this continues, then there's a scope of intergenerational poverty.

PITA: Dasmine Kennedy is the Assistant Chief Education Officer with the Educational Planning Unit of Jamaica's Ministry of Education.

Much how Damaris focuses on the particular marginalizations that Maasai girls in Kenya face, Dasmine's research pinpoints the particular challenges of teenage mothers in Jamaica. And just as the expectations of national level policies on education and gender equity are not always met in Kenya, Jamaica's national policy for the reintegration of school age mothers into the formal school system is not universally implemented, particularly for girls from lower social economic situations.

KENNEDY: So in 2013 the education ministry implemented a policy which now provides scope for the girls to return to school, to continue their education. So there is continuing education that takes place at our women's centers. To date we have 18 such centers distributed throughout the parishes and the provinces of Jamaica. And the girls are allowed to continue their education during pregnancy and are provided with services, such as counseling, mentorship, parental education, and childcare. And after they would have given birth, then there is also introduction to contraceptive before the return to the formal school system. These services tend to follow the girl right through the school system until they finish secondary level education.

The policy has not undergone any formal rigorous evaluation to date, but my tenure at

Brookings has allowed me the opportunity to interrogate the policy somewhat to get a greater understanding of how well we are doing and what are the potential gaps that we need to close at this moment. One of the things that is arresting my attention very much is the level of mixed stakeholder buy in, which has resulted in inconsistent implementation and compliance across schools. And this has become very important because many of our critical actors all should be assisting as individuals to ensure that the girls benefit from a second chance of education, tend to have their own level of discrimination and their own way of preventing some of the girls from returning to school.

And when you hear guidance counselors and social workers say to you that in the school system sometimes they are not allowed to interface with the girls, they don't know who they are, some of them don't know the provisions, only the policy, the new one that then always assisting with the change at the implementation level.

PITA: A key component to ensuring that teenage mothers receive their rights to a full education is resisting the social pressures that can make these girls invisible to the very system that's supposed to be protecting their educational rights.

KENNEDY: When a girl gets pregnant while in school, and you'll imagine it will take some time before it starts showing. When that becomes public knowledge, then that girl knows that her place is no longer there, so she leaves the school system. Now, if this girl doesn't have the interest to return to school, then she can get lost. It is not necessary that the girl has to return to the formal system that she was already enrolled in. This too creates another challenge. Even though it makes leverage for a choice, it creates another problem because, yes, everybody understands the fact that education is important for these girls, but you can't have educational administrators who may decide that, oh, I don't want to take any of these girls, and she could confuse the situation by delaying the process of the girl's return to school, or if they don't do that they will prefer to take another girl who was once enrolled in another context. And they say the girl would come to their perspective very fresh, no one would know their status, and the level of discrimination would be reduced.

And for those who don't take but their own student, if the school operates a shift system -- so let's say the girl was enrolled in the morning shift, then the girl (inaudible) on the

evening shift. So nobody knows that girl. And what becomes disheartening too, the fact -- this whole protection around the girl also hides that girl from accessing services because in order to support the system and ensure that the girl benefits from all the social services that are in place for her, we have guidance counselors and social workers employed to our school system. And this is their role, to support the girls, to help them to succeed.

So I was very amazed and distressed when I entered a number of schools and I spoke with the guidance counselors and they'll say they don't know who the girls are, they have never been introduced to them. And some of them said they don't even know the provision under the policy and I said, really. So these are persons who we are paying to take care of these girls and they are not equipped and armed enough to provide the services. And where you don't have the support following the girl in the way that she needs to get it, then a girl can drop out of school, or she can decide to just go anywhere she likes because there is no one looking out for her interests.

And when you speak to other persons, when you ask about special services that are in place for the girls, they will say every girl in their institution receives the same treatment, so there is no special services for them in some institutions. And already you know that they are already from a disadvantaged situation. They have their own challenges and would need additional and special support.

So these are some of the things that are contributing to the invisibility of the girl.

PITA: For the Maya girls of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, their invisibility is a matter of rural isolation, language barriers, and discrimination against the indigenous people.

María Christina Osorio is a professor at the Universidad Anáhuac Mayab, and also at Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, in Merida City in Southern Mexico. Her research has focused on the advancement of women and indigenous peoples in Mexico in creating equal opportunity for all.

VÁZQUEZ: In the history of Mexico educational policies have tended to be more of assimilation. Because of that, right now we have an educational gap among indigenous people and non indigenous people.

In order to identify what works in girls' education, in this specific region, it is necessary first to identify the main challenges these girls have. The challenges they have is the poverty, high rates of poverty, and the isolation of the villages, culture barriers, and gender norms. The supports they already have are international agreements, the majority of them in the framework or United Nations, also governmental programs, scholarships, and also indigenous approaches.

The main recommendations that I have that are related to my research activities is that it is really necessary to include in the curricula the indigenous knowledge, so the children, especially the girls, can't related with it. Also it is necessary to have teachers who really engage with those communities.

Another important aspect of this research is to expand on line education. The majority of these girls don't have any money or resources to go to the cities to achieve higher levels of schooling. Because of that we need to bring the school to them.

Also it is necessary to establish better mechanisms to try to report any kind of abuse. It was really hard for me to hear the injuries of children, especially girls, who face a lot of mistreatment from (inaudible) teachers, people who are not engaged with these communities. And when the moms try to talk about it, the school people don't listen to them because they do not speak Spanish, they speak Maya.

PITA: Outside of the education system Maya girls also face gender roles in the home, where they're expected to be the primary supports for their mothers with chores and childcare, while any resources the family has are provided to the boys.

VÁZQUEZ: In the household, it is expected that the girls they need to do everything for the boys. So this is changing in the cities, but if you travel a little bit far away from Merida City, from Cancun City, then you are going to find these stereotypes where girls are doing almost everything. So, yes, we're trying to implement some actions to try to change things inside the household as well.

PITA: Just as Damaris Parsitau found, speaking to Maasai communities as a Maasai woman who pursued her education, helped create avenues for other Maasai girls. One of

Mexico's more successful programs brings Maya girls who have gone on to college back to their communities as ambassadors and teachers.

VÁZQUEZ: But it's really working in indigenous approaches. And the reason is because they talk and they understand because they face the same challenges. The Mexican government is really supporting indigenous people, giving a lot of scholarships.

The situation we have with that is that some of the population expressed that they don't know how to apply for these supports. So we have the support, but maybe we need to improve the channels of communication.

We know we have this problem, that we have all these funds available. So we need to try to implement campaigns so people can apply for these supports, because they could represent the difference between a girl who can be educated or not educated.

One of the programs in Mexico, the name is called CONAFE. So it's very successful for this reason, these Maya girls who want to attend university or want to go to university, they engage with this program for like one year or two years, and they go to various isolated communities and they teach the girls in Maya, like primary level. At the end of this program, because of their participation in the CONAFE program, they are available to have all the university is already paid because of this program.

PITA: Of course, getting girls into school, finishing school, and even on to university, isn't the only aspect of improving life outcomes for girls.

Here is Christina Kwauk again, talking about the next step after education, beyond language skills, beyond learning to use computers, beyond enrolling in STEM programs is teaching girls how to tackle the broader societal barriers around them.

KWAUK: First we think about the opportunity structures that enable or limit the degree to which the girl can translate competencies into choices and into action. Opportunity structures can include the social and political context, as well as the historical experiences and opportunities the girls may or may not have encountered or have had access to across their life course.

Opportunity structures can also include the enabling or limiting structures within the labor market, within the marriage market, and even the quality of her social relationships, as well as behaviors and attitudes towards girls help by teachers or community leaders.

Second, we have to think about agency, or the girl's ability to see and to make choices. The thing is that her individual agency is achieved in multiple ways. One is sort of an internal development determined by the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that she possesses and develops over time. These can become stronger, they can make her a stronger agent of her own lie by really being strengthened, diversified, and by becoming more complex over time. But then another way is relational, determined by whether others recognize her agency.

So together these mediating factors of agency and opportunity structures have a significant role in the process of translation, and we don't pretend that this isn't abstract stuff, and we really think that if we don't attend to these factors, then we really risk developing girls' life skills to navigate life skills programs and not necessarily their real world context.

Not paying attention to the girls' ability to translate competencies into empowered action and not viewing mediated factors, like opportunity structures and agency, as equally important as developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes, really risks life skills programming, leaving girls behind, leaving them hanging, and keeping the onus of change on their shoulders.

So this means that our programming misses a critical step in achieving the goal of transforming and empowering girls' lives.

MODI: We were just working from what do the girls need, you know. The girls need to know the laws, the girls need to know that all these stereotypical images, roles that they are, you know, told to play as wives and mothers. They can sort of transform that. So we needed to change gender norms, we needed to give girls information on not just the daily things that were relevant to their lives, but also skills in decision making, skills in negotiation. And how did we do that?

PITA: Armene Modi is a teacher and founder of Ashta No Kai, a nonprofit organization based around Pune, India, that works to educate and empower rural adolescent girls and women.

MODI: When we started working on girls' education in the initial years, the barriers were similar to barriers in many, many areas, particularly rural areas in the developing world, which were child marriage and distant schools that kept adolescent girls from accessing their right to an education.

A recent UN study had indicated that 47 percent of girls in India marry before the age of 18. I hope you are shocked. In Marasha State the statistics are close to around 35 percent for child brides.

PITA: Armene and Ashta No Kai found that one very simple intervention, providing girls a bicycle to get to school, took on a snowball effect, boosting their confidence and expectations of being able to pursue their own agency.

MODI: In the early years, we noticed that many of our girls, as young as 12 and 13, were married. And of course, one of the reasons was that schools were distant. But that did not prevent parents from buying bicycles for their sons, because they considered their sons, as you all well know, assets. Unfortunately for girls, they felt buying a bicycle was an unnecessary expense because, you know, the girl would eventually get married and they also would have to pay a dowry.

This led us to launch a bicycle bank which has enabled 1,000 girls in our areas to access school. And when we discontinued the intervention, parents realizing the value of educating their daughters, began to buy bicycles to send their daughters to school.

Merely enabling a girl to access school we felt was not enough. So we added a life skills education program that would promote girls' future wellbeing, in tandem with the bicycle bank.

After three years of cycling to school and completing high school, some of our girls came to us and said, can we keep the bicycles? We would like to go onto junior college. We were delighted and launched a scholarship program. And I'm very proud to tell you that more than 1,100 girls have received scholarships and our village girls have become dentists, engineers, pharmacists, agricultural researchers -- they have blown us away.

The base where we started from was what do girls need? If they need to two wheels of change, let's give it to them. Adolescence is a very vulnerable, a very critical stage in a girl's life. I think if we don't catch girls at this very pivotal stage, you know, to help them transition,

particularly from primary to secondary school. You've read all these numbers, these huge enrollments. In India I think it's like 98-99 percent of girls are enrolled in primary school, but what happens after seventh grade when primary school ends? They tend to drop out. And that's where we need to lift them up and make sure they transition on.

Our interventions were basically very simple, no brainer type of interventions.

PITA: Her participation in the Echidna Fellowship gave Armene an opportunity to comprehensively examine the results of Ashta No Kai's efforts.

MODI: The most important finding was that the longer the girl experienced the bicycle bank intervention and the life skills, the greater was the impact. The earlier she experienced these two interventions, again, the greater was the impact.

Also, Ashta No Kai girls were four times more likely to complete high school when expose to both interventions. They also completed -- a much higher number of our girls in our villages completed grade 12 as compared to those in the control group.

It was very clear that these simple low cost interventions that we had initiated to promote adolescent girls' education had made a difference in many girls' lives, had given them opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers could never have dreamed of.

PITA: In their efforts to each skills, negotiate with cultural gatekeepers, provide financial resources, and increase access to education, the Echidna Scholars all found that engaging the grown women in these communities, the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, the girls in question, as allies made a powerful difference in achieving their goals.

Here's Damaris Parsitau again.

PARSITAUI grew up in a large family where we had so many men. And my brothers went to school and they supported me a great deal. But my mom was my greatest ally. And until recently is when I discovered that she was, you know, playing cat and mouse with culture, because my mom never allowed me to stay in the village during school holiday. I was already in Nairobi with relatives. And I came to realize later that she was making sure that I don't go through the cultural rituals.

PITA: For the Maya girls in Mexico, being able to see someone from their own indigenous community succeed made the biggest difference.

Here's María Christina.

VÁZQUEZ: It is necessary to enhance positive female role models. These girls imitate what is close to them.

I would like to share with you a story about a former student that I have that right now she is indigenous, she's a student in Mexico City on her master's degree. And I was talking with her about how come that she has been right now a student in very harsh conditions, and she explained to me, you know something, it is very important to me to achieve my master's degree because I know my little sisters are looking after me, so I hve to do this not only for me but also for my little sisters.

Because of that I understand now how important it is to have these positive female role models. It is very important to enhance and to recognize that these girls need extra emotional support from their moms. If their moms are not available to do that, an aunt, a godmother, a grandmother should be involved with those girls. They face major challenges for being indigenous.

PITA: And in India, Armene Modi and Ashta No Kai found that engaging the community around the girls holistically created the supportive environment that enabled the girls to succeed.

MODI: In all the case studies that we did, mothers played a very key role. So however much we could develop the girls' voice and agency, self esteem, et cetera, without the mother's support I don't think the girl could have gone very far.

What we tried to do was create a supportive enabling environment for the girls. As I mentioned earlier, in all the various interventions we tried to capture the girls at tipping points when the might, you know, fall through the cracks. And in terms of giving voice and agency, for example, many of the girls had so many misconceptions and misinformation about adolescence, you know, about menstruation, all these social taboos. So helping to demystify some of this helped girls a lot. It helped girls to feel that they're like all other girls, you know, they're no different.

Once we made mothers our allies, the ripple effect extended to the fathers. One strategy we used was to make mothers financially no quite independent but to give them, you

know, livelihood interventions. And once their income increased, they were our allies because, you know, they believed in us, that we were trying to improve the quality of their lives. So they were very instrumental in helping us to transform the lives of girls.

We also brought in microcredit and so on. So ours is kind of holistic. We're targeting not just the girl, but the mother, primarily, because she holds the key to supporting and promoting the girls' aspirations, the girls' education, et cetera. And we did this through financial upliftment for the mothers, we also supported the girl.

PITA: Across all the areas of research on development, alleviating poverty, increasing economic activity, and even mitigating the effects of climate change, the evidence shows that nothing makes as much of an impact as empowering and educating girls.

The work of the Echidna Scholars is notable for its on the ground investigations, how to best make a different in girls' lives, finding the evidence for what solutions work, sharing those practices with others, and showing that progress is possible for women and the world.

I hope you've enjoyed listing to Damaris Parsitau, Dasmine Kennedy, María Christina Osorio, and Armene Modi today about the work that they've done in their communities. For more on their projects, the work of previous Echidna Scholars, and that of Christina Kwauk, Rebecca Winthrop, and their colleagues at the Center for Universal Education, please see the show notes where we'll have extensive links, or just go to Brookings.edu/universal-education.

With my thanks, as always, to Gaston Reboredo, our audio engineer and producer, and the rest of the Brookings Podcast Network staff, Brennan Hoban, Chris McKenna, and Fred Dews.

I've been your host, Adrianna Pita. Thanks for listening, and don't forget to follow us on Twitter @PolicyPodcasts for more great episodes.