

Community-Led Monitoring and Evaluation and Its Impact on Girls' Education in Northern Ghana

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Abstract

Girls' education in Northern Ghana lags behind national progress, constrained by poverty, cultural norms, early marriage, and inadequate school infrastructure. Top-down monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems often overlook local realities, limiting the sustainability of interventions. Community-Led Monitoring and Evaluation (CLME) has emerged as a participatory approach to strengthen local accountability and improve educational outcomes. This study assessed the impact of community-led monitoring and evaluation on girls' education in Northern Ghana, focusing on practices, data use, and perceived effectiveness. A qualitative desk review design was employed to systematically analyse academic literature, policy documents, and reports published between 2010 and 2024. Thematic analysis, guided by Social Accountability Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, was used to examine community monitoring practices, data utilisation, and barriers to impact. Communities employ a hybrid of formal structures (School Management Committees, Parent-Teacher Associations) and vibrant informal social networks to monitor girls' attendance and well-being. These practices function as early-warning systems, enabling timely responses to absenteeism. However, the impact of CLME is constrained by limited technical capacity, weak documentation, gendered power relations, and inconsistent responsiveness from district authorities. Community-generated data is used for immediate, local problem-solving but rarely translates into sustained institutional action or addresses structural barriers such as chronic poverty. Community-led M&E is a necessary but insufficient strategy for improving girls' education in Northern Ghana. Its effectiveness depends on complementary institutional support, gender-responsive governance, and integration with broader social and economic interventions. The study recommends institutionalising simple monitoring tools, strengthening feedback loops to district authorities, and empowering women within community governance structures.

Keywords: Community-led monitoring and evaluation, girls' education, Northern Ghana, social accountability, participatory governance, gender equality

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Problem

Despite national policies promoting gender equality in education, significant disparities persist between boys' and girls' educational outcomes in Northern Ghana. While community participation in school governance is encouraged, the actual influence of community-led monitoring and evaluation (CLME) on girls' enrolment, retention, attendance, and learning remains insufficiently understood and often ineffective due to capacity gaps and weak institutional linkages.

1.2 Background

Education is a fundamental human right and a catalyst for development. Girls' education, in particular, yields extensive benefits for health, economic growth, and gender equality. In

Northern Ghana, girls face compounded barriers including poverty, early marriage, heavy domestic duties, and socio-cultural norms favouring boys' schooling. Traditional, top-down M&E systems frequently fail to capture these context-specific challenges. Community-Led M&E offers a participatory alternative, engaging parents, teachers, leaders, and learners in tracking progress and demanding accountability, thereby potentially creating more relevant and sustainable solutions.

1.3 Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to assess the impact of community-led monitoring and evaluation on girls' education in Northern Ghana. Specific objectives were to:

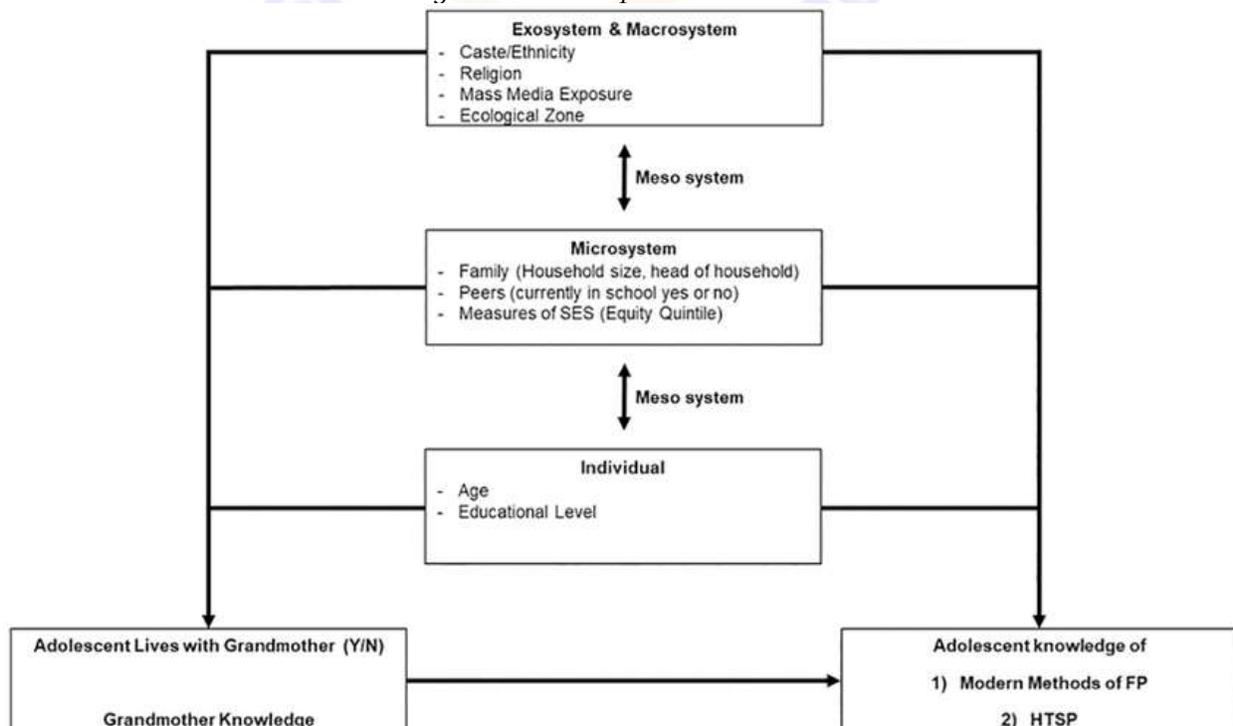
- Explore existing community-level practices for monitoring girls' school attendance, performance, and well-being.
- Examine how community-generated data on girls' education is used in decision-making at the school and local levels.
- Assess the perceived effectiveness and limitations of community-led M&E in addressing challenges to girls' education.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by an integrated conceptual framework combining Social Accountability Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Social Accountability Theory posits that service delivery improves when citizens can monitor providers and demand accountability. Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises that a child's development (including educational outcomes) is shaped by interacting environmental systems (micro, meso, exo, macro).

CLME is positioned as an intervention that strengthens the mesosystem (linkages between home and school) and empowers the microsystem (family, community) to enact accountability within the exosystem (school, local government) and macrosystem (policy, culture). The framework predicts that CLME improves girls' educational outcomes by enhancing local oversight, fostering responsive institutions, and addressing context-specific barriers across these interconnected systems.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework



1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to academic discourse on participatory governance and gender in education within sub-Saharan Africa. It provides evidence for policymakers, notably the Ghana Education Service, to strengthen decentralised education accountability. In practice, it offers insights for NGOs and community-based organisations to design more effective, context-sensitive interventions to advance girls' education and gender equity.

1.6 Research Gap

While there is literature on community participation in education and on girls' schooling challenges in Ghana, few studies specifically examine the nexus between community-led M&E and girls' educational outcomes, particularly within the unique sociocultural context of Northern Ghana. This study addresses this gap by providing a focused analysis of CLME mechanisms and their gendered impact.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Girls' Education in Northern Ghana: A Context of Persistent Disparity

The existing literature consistently highlights Northern Ghana as a region characterised by acute educational inequality. Girls' enrolment, retention, and completion rates, especially at the secondary level, trail national averages and boys' performance within the region. Scholars attribute this to a complex web of socio-cultural norms (early marriage, gendered labour expectations), economic poverty, geographical barriers (long distances to school), and inadequate school infrastructure, including lack of menstrual hygiene facilities (Alhassan & Odame, 2015; UNICEF Ghana, 2020).

2.2 Community Participation in Educational Accountability

Global and African evidence underscores that community involvement in school governance can improve accountability, reduce teacher absenteeism, and enhance student outcomes (Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011). In Ghana, structures such as School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) serve as established vehicles for this participation. However, their effectiveness is often hampered by inadequate training, resource constraints, and unclear mandates, particularly in rural northern communities (Akyeampong et al., 2013).

2.3 The Evolution towards Community-Led Monitoring and Evaluation

Moving beyond general participation, Community-Led M&E is a defined approach where community members actively collect, analyse, and use data to assess services and advocate for improvement. It emphasises local ownership, contextual relevance, and empowerment. Studies in other LMIC settings show CLME can improve service delivery and citizen engagement (World Bank, 2019). Its application to girls' education, however, requires careful consideration of gender dynamics within communities.

2.4 Theoretical Anchors: Social Accountability and Ecological Systems

Social Accountability Theory provides a lens for analysing how CLME empowers citizens to hold power-holders accountable, a process that depends on access to information and institutional responsiveness (Malena, Forster, & Singh, 2004). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) justifies the focus on community-level action, illustrating how girls' education is affected by multiple interacting systems; CLME directly intervenes in the mesosystem (school-community linkages), potentially influencing outcomes across other systems.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This study employed a qualitative desk-review design. This involved the systematic search, selection, and thematic analysis of existing secondary data to synthesise knowledge and answer the research objectives. This approach is suitable for constructing an evidence-based overview of a topic where significant prior work exists (Bowen, 2009).

3.2 Setting

The review focused on documents published between 2010 and 2024. Academic databases (Google Scholar, JSTOR) and institutional websites (Ghana Education Service, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank) were searched using keywords: "community-led monitoring," "girls' education Northern Ghana," "School Management Committees," "participatory evaluation," and "gender and education." The search yielded peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, NGO reports, and academic theses.

3.3 Data Collection and Quantitative Metrics

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was conducted. After familiarisation, relevant text segments were coded. Codes were collated into potential themes (e.g., "Hybrid Monitoring Practices," "Data Use Pathways," "Barriers to Impact") and then reviewed, refined, and defined. Analysis was supported by NVivo 14 software. Theoretical frameworks guided the interpretation of themes, connecting findings to concepts of accountability and ecological influence.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

As a desk review of publicly available documents, no primary data involving human subjects was collected. All sources are cited appropriately to maintain academic integrity and acknowledge intellectual property.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

4.1 Hybrid Monitoring Practices: Formal Structures and Informal Networks

The analysis revealed that monitoring is not monolithic. Formal practices occur through SMCs and PTAs, which hold meetings and occasionally use simple tools like registers. Their functionality is highly variable, often constrained by infrequent meetings and limited technical capacity. Informal practices are pervasive and agile, conducted through kin and neighbourhood networks, women noting girls' absence during chores, and elders observing household patterns. These informal networks enable rapid, context-aware responses but operate outside formal documentation and decision-making channels. A gendered division of labour exists: women often undertake the day-to-day, informal monitoring of girls, while men dominate formal committee leadership.

4.2 Pathways and Blockages in Using Community-Generated Data

Community-generated information is used primarily for immediate, local interventions, such as home visits, parent dialogues, and peer pressure, to address absenteeism. This use is potent at the hyper-local level but has limited scope. Upward translation of data to influence district-level planning or resource allocation is rare. Key blockages include: limited community capacity to analyse and present data; the absence of trusted, formal channels for communicating with district authorities; and the perceived lack of credibility of reports from women and informal sources within male-dominated governance structures.

4.3 Perceived Effectiveness: Proximate Gains versus Systemic Limitations

Community actors perceive CLME as effective in building social capital, strengthening school-community relations, and addressing proximate, observable problems like sporadic absenteeism through direct negotiation. However, there is widespread perception of limited impact on systemic drivers of educational exclusion: entrenched poverty, deep-seated cultural norms around early marriage, teacher shortages, and poor infrastructure. Effectiveness is perceived as highest when external NGOs provide tools and training and create linkages with district officials.

4.4 Interlocking Barriers Constraining Impact

The study identified a reinforcing set of barriers:

- Socio-cultural & Economic: Patriarchal norms prioritising boys' education and girls' domestic roles, compounded by poverty forcing households to prioritise immediate labour over schooling.
- Technical & Institutional: Limited literacy and data skills among community monitors, coupled with weak capacity and responsiveness from district education offices.
- Gendered Power Dynamics: Women's central role in monitoring girls contrasts with their marginalisation in formal decision-making spaces, stifling advocacy.
- Logistical: Geographical isolation and safety concerns for girls travelling long distances, which monitoring can identify but not solve.

4.5 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that CLME in Northern Ghana is a vital but constrained mechanism. Its strength lies in leveraging social embeddedness—using existing relationships to enable timely intervention—consistent with Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the mesosystem. This organic, informal monitoring is a crucial social asset.

However, the accountability chain is frequently broken, affirming Social Accountability Theory's requirement for institutional responsiveness. Data often remains "stuck" at the community level due to technical gaps and political barriers. The gendered nature of monitoring presents a paradox: those most invested in and knowledgeable about girls' challenges (women) are least empowered to drive systemic change.

The hybrid model reveals a "two-tier" system: agile, informal networks handle case-by-case issues, whereas under-resourced formal structures struggle to exert strategic influence. For CLME to transform from a coping mechanism to a change strategy, it must be institutionally integrated. This requires investing in community capacity (simple tools, literacy-numeracy training), creating mandated feedback loops to district authorities, and deliberately reforming SMC/PTA governance to include and empower women.

CLME alone cannot resolve poverty or transform culture. Its highest potential is realised when coupled with complementary interventions: social protection (e.g., scholarships, school feeding) to address economic barriers, and community sensitisation programmes to shift norms. It is most effective as part of a multi-pronged strategy.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Community-led monitoring and evaluation play a meaningful but circumscribed role in promoting girls' education in Northern Ghana. It excels as an early-warning system and a builder of local trust and collaboration, effectively addressing proximate threats to girls' schooling. However, its impact is significantly limited by structural barriers, poverty, patriarchy, and institutional weakness, which local monitoring alone cannot dismantle. Therefore, CLME is a necessary component, but not a standalone solution, for achieving educational equity for girls.

5.1 Recommendations

For Ghana Education Service & District Assemblies: Institutionalise simple, pictorial monitoring tools for low-literacy settings. Establish clear, formal protocols for SMCs/PTAs to submit consolidated reports to District Education Offices, with stipulated response timelines. Mandate and fund gender-balanced representation and leadership training for women in all school governance committees.

For NGOs and Development Partners: Design interventions that explicitly link community monitoring with resource provision (e.g., conditional cash transfers triggered by attendance data). Focus capacity-building on data interpretation and advocacy skills for community monitors, especially women. Facilitate structured dialogues between communities and district officials.

For Schools and Community Leaders: Schools should proactively share data with SMCs/PTAs and integrate their feedback into improvement plans. Traditional and religious leaders should champion community-wide dialogues to re-evaluate norms that hinder girls' education, leveraging the moral authority highlighted by informal monitoring.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies should employ primary mixed-methods research to quantify the impact of specific CLME tools on girls' learning outcomes. Longitudinal research is needed to track the evolution of community monitoring systems and their sustained effect on transition rates to secondary school. Research should also examine the cost-effectiveness of integrating CLME with social protection programmes in northern Ghana.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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