Young people's transport and mobility in sub-Saharan Africa: The gendered journey to school

Gina Porter
Kate Hampshire
University of Durham. Department of Anthropology
Durham DH1 3LE. (Regne Unit)
r.e.porter@durham.ac.uk

Albert Abane
Augustine Tanle
University of Cape Coast (Ghana)

Alister Munthali
Elsbeth Robson
University of Malawi (Malawi)

Mac Mashiri
Goodhope Maponya
CSIR (South Africa)

Abstract

This paper draws on rich ethnographic data and complementary survey research from a three-country study (Ghana, Malawi, South Africa) of young people's mobility to explore the gendered nature of children's journeys to school in sub-Saharan Africa. In most African countries, girls' participation in formal education is substantially lower than boys', especially at secondary school level. Transport and mobility issues often form an important component of this story, though the precise patterning of the transportation and mobility constraints experienced by schoolchildren, and the ways in which transport factors interact with other constraints, varies from region to region. We draw attention to the nature of gendered travel experiences in rural and urban areas, the implications of these findings for access to education, and finally suggest areas where policy intervention could be beneficial.

Key words: transport; mobility; Africa; education; gender.

Resum. *Mobilitat i transport del jovent a l'Àfrica subsahariana: viatge a l'escola i gènere*

Aquest article es basa en dades etnogràfiques i recerca complementària sobre la mobilitat dels joves, a partir d'un estudi en tres països (Ghana, Malawi, Sudàfrica), per tal d'investigar els viatges a l'escola dels nois i les noies a l'Àfrica subsahariana des de la perspectiva de

gènere. En la majoria dels països africans la participació de les noies en l'educació formal és substancialment més baixa que la dels nois, especialment en l'educació secundària. El patró de les restriccions de transport i mobilitat de l'alumnat i les formes com el transport interacciona amb altres restriccions, canvien d'una regió a una altra. L'article crida l'atenció sobre la naturalesa de gènere de les experiències del viatge en àrees rurals i urbanes i les implicacions d'aquests resultats per l'accés a l'educació. Finalment se suggereixen àrees en les que la intervenció política pot ser beneficiosa.

Paraules clau: transport; mobilitat; Àfrica; educació; gènere.

Resumen. *Movilidad y transporte de la juventud en África subsahariana: viaje a la escuela y género*

Este artículo se basa en datos etnográficos y investigación complementaria sobre la movilidad de los jóvenes, a partir de un estudio en tres países africanos (Ghana, Malawi y Sudàfrica), a fin de investigar los viajes a la escuela de chicos y chicas en África subsahariana desde la perspectiva de género. En la mayoría de los países africanos la participación de las chicas en la educación formal es substancialmente inferior a la de los chicos, especialmente en la educación secundaria. El patrón de las restricciones de transporte y movilidad del alumnado y las formas como el transporte interacciona con otras restricciones, cambian de una region a otra. El artículo llama la atención sobre la naturaleza de género de las experiencias del viaje en áreas rurales y urbanas y las implicaciones de estos resultados para el acceso a la educación. Finalmente se sugieren áreas en las que la intervención política puede ser beneficiosa.

Palabras clave: transporte; movilidad; África; educación; género.

Résumé. *Mobilité et transport des jeunes en Afrique subsaharienne: le voyage à l'école et le genre*

Cet article s'appuie sur des données ethnographiques et recherche complémentaire sur la mobilité des jeunes à partir d'une étude dans trois pays (Ghana, Malawi, Afrique du Sud), afin d'explorer la nature de genre des voyages des jeunes à l'école en Afrique sub-saharienne. Dans la plupart des pays africains, la participation des filles dans l'éducation formelle est nettement plus faible que celle des garçons, en particulier au niveau de l'école secondaire. La structuration précise des contraintes de transport et de mobilité rencontrés par les écoliers, et la façon dont les facteurs de transport interagissent avec d'autres contraintes, varie de région en région. Nous attirons l'attention sur la nature de genre des expériences de voyage dans les zones rurales et urbaines et les implications de ces résultats pour l'accès à l'éducation. Finalement on suggère des domaines où une intervention politique pourrait être bénéfique.

Mots clé: transport; mobilité; Afrique; éducation; genre.

Summary

1. Introduction

2. Background

3. Methodology

4. The journey to school:
exploring interactions between place,
space and gendered mobility

5. Mobility and vulnerability on the
school journey: adult perspectives

6. Mobility and mobility compliance
across the three countries and 24 sites

7. Conclusion: Possible interventions
for positive change

Acknowledgments

References

1. Introduction

This paper concerns the gendered journey to school in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender differences in school enrolment and attendance in Africa are well established: education statistics indicate that girls' participation in formal education is, in most countries, substantially lower than boys', especially at secondary school level. Transport and mobility issues commonly form an important component of this story, though the precise patterning of the transportation and mobility constraints experienced by girl schoolchildren, and the ways in which transport factors interact with other constraints, varies from region to region. On the basis of a large set of empirical data we have gathered in a research project on child mobility in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, our aim in the paper is to explore the nature of gendered travel experiences across geographical locations, paying attention to associated patterns of transport provision.

Our research covers detailed studies in 24 urban and rural sites across three African countries. Security is an issue which forms a key theme in some of the locations where we collected data, especially where girls are concerned: they may face a very real threat of rape. In other cases girls' journeys to school and school attendance are hampered by Africa's transport gap and cultural conventions which require females to take on this burden (by pedestrian head loading) and other work before leaving for (or instead of attending) school (Porter, 2010; Porter et al., in press). There is insufficient room in this paper to examine in depth the role that girls' household duties associated with Africa's transport gap plays in shaping gendered patterns of travel to school, but it is important to note its presence and contextual significance for the daily travel patterns described below. Following a short review of background literature and methods we present and comment on the comparative survey data for the locations in which we worked. We examine the implications of our findings for gendered patterns of access to education, and suggest areas where policy intervention could be beneficial.

2. Background

Multiple interacting mobilities are central to social change (Sheller and Urry, 2006). This paper focuses on issues of mobility along a specific routeway, the journey between home and school. This routeway, we contend, is in itself a landscape of process in which gendered power hierarchies help shape the narratives of mobility meanings (Cresswell and Uteng, 2008). The potential for girls and boys to travel along the routeway reflects the complex relationality of places and people. The resulting mobility meanings have profound significance for the life chances of those who are allowed - or prevented - from traveling. Formal education, even if poorly resourced, is widely perceived to offer potential for escape from poverty and insecurity: achieving universal primary education is one of the key Millennium Development Goals [MDG2].

In recent years, the emphasis on 'free' universal primary education in the Millennium Development Goals has boosted primary education enrolment figures substantially across sub-Saharan Africa. Primary completion rate in Ghana, for instance increased from 61% in 1991 to 71% in 2006, in Malawi they increased from 29% in 1991 to 55% in 2006, 55% and in South Africa from 76% in 1991 to 100% in 2006 (World Bank, 2009). Attendance figures, however, often remain substantially below enrolment. This is because children's time spent at school limits their potential to contribute to household production and reproduction. Moreover, although fees have been abolished, parents are still expected to fund other items such as uniform, books, furniture, Parent Teacher Associations and suchlike. Ersado (2005) points to other potential constraints including poor school quality and lack of access to credit, though these will vary in importance between urban and rural areas. Little detailed information is available in the literature regarding the significance of the time, effort and/or costs of transport incurred in getting to school.

Once children have completed primary school or junior secondary school (where this latter middle stage occurs), a move to (senior) secondary education may be contemplated but is often not achieved. The barriers to enrollment are more substantial at this level since fees are imposed. Additionally, secondary schools are fewer in number than primaries and tend to be located in major service centres (Porter, 2007): consequently, in addition to fees and related school-based costs (uniform, books, PTA etc), there are likely to be substantial travel costs, a very long daily walk or costs of accommodation at or close to the school. In remoter rural areas even primary school enrolment and attendance may be affected by travel distance, since schools cannot usually be provided in every settlement, but at secondary level the barriers imposed by distance are usually much increased.

There have been surprisingly few studies directly concerned with travel to school in Africa (Porter, 2010). Gould's (1973) early work in Uganda showed how poor transport services forced most children to walk to primary school while secondary school children usually had to live away from home due to the distances involved. This situation is still common across Africa. Avotri

et al. (1999) note how, in Ghana, the closer the secondary school, the more likely that children are to be sent to primary school, as continuity of the child's education is feasible. They also describe (pp. 94-5, 165) how long walks to school due to lack of or high cost of transport and attendant problems of lateness encourage late 'over-age' enrolment (especially of girls), truancy and early drop out. In South Africa, a survey of rural KwaZulu Natal schools in 1998 shows that 75% of pupils who walked to secondary school walked a distance of over 3 kms and that 43% of primary school children who walked traveled over 3kms: at least 280,000 children in this region walked for over one hour, one way to school. An associated survey of school principals indicated that 60% of their pupils were often late, 58% sometimes absent and 70% of pupils were often tired at school, due to long walking distances (Mahapa, 2003). The 2003 South Africa National Household Travel Survey adds further corroboration to this picture. Seventy-six percent of 'learners' were reported to walk to their educational destination and almost 3 million out of the 16 million total (especially those located in more rural provinces) spent more than an hour a day walking to and from educational institutions (RSA Department of Transport, 2003). When long journeys to school are coupled with required contributions to household labour demands, the impact on attendance is likely to be particularly strong.

The widespread household transport gap, notably lack of piped water and electricity for cooking, adds substantially to the impediments to children's school attendance and performance, especially when coupled with the other household duties expected of children. Girls, in particular, are commonly expected to perform numerous duties both before and after school (Andvig, 2001). This delays the time when they leave home in the morning and may result not only in late arrival at school (with consequent punishment from their teachers), but also leave them exhausted during lessons. Poor roads, unreliable, costly or non-existent transport services etc. may add further to their problems on the journey to school.

Given that girls' school enrolment rates are often considerably lower than boys' across most of sub-Saharan Africa, transport impacts on girls' education are of particular interest. Low enrolment and attendance among girls are in part related to their particularly heavy household duties, but also associated with cultural perceptions regarding the (limited) value of girls' education, and perceived dangers for girls who have to travel a long distance to school or board away from home. Avotri et al (1999) provide a particularly rich, detailed examination of the numerous constraints on girls' primary education in Ghana. A review of children out of school (DFID, 2001, p.7) using DHS surveys suggests that in Niger, where there are only 41 girls per 100 boys at school in rural areas (compared to 80:100 in town), distance of home from school is a key factor. In some contexts, improvements to road access and transport availability can probably make a significant impact on girls' attendance as studies in Morocco have indicated (Khandker et al. 1994, Levy and Voyadzis 1996, cited by African Union et al., 2005).

3. Methodology

This paper draws on research from a broader study of diverse aspects of child mobility conducted in three countries – Ghana, South Africa and Malawi. These countries were selected principally because they represent very diverse contexts and histories, but also because of the lead author's prior research experience and networks in the first two countries. The child mobility study utilised a two-strand approach, in which a more conventional adult academic research study was complemented by a child researcher strand. A full description of the recruitment and methodology in the child researcher component is available elsewhere (Porter et al., 2010a.). Seventy young researchers aged between 11 and 21 years were involved in the study across the three countries. Following one week's preliminary training, they undertook a range of research activities including writing their own mobility diary for a week or more, interviewing their peers (including on accompanied walks), holding focus groups and compiling photographic journals of the journey to school using disposable cameras.

The adult research component was conducted in 8 sites per country, 24 sites in total. We selected two agro-ecological zones in each country in order to pick up within-country contrasts in mobility and access related to physical conditions associated with local economy, culture, topography etc. These were the coastal savanna and the central forest region in Ghana, the southern Shire Highlands and Lilongwe central plains in Malawi and the Eastern Cape and North West Province in South Africa. We worked in one urban (poor high density neighbourhood) site, one peri-urban, one rural with services (usually a primary school, sometimes a clinic) and one site classified as remote rural with no services (in particular, no primary school) in each of these zones. It is not possible to provide a detailed descriptions of the 24 sites, given word constraints on this paper. Moreover, we have chosen not to identify the rural sites in our published work on the larger project [we tend to use pseudonyms] because of issues of confidentiality where populations are small and, in some cases, the topics under discussion are highly sensitive. Work in the adult research strand included intensive qualitative research (in–depth interviews, life histories, focus group discussions, ethnographic diaries, accompanied walks) with children, their parents and key informants.

Mobile ethnographies have been a key method in the qualitative component of the study both for adult and 'child' researchers (Porter et al., 2010b). These have consisted principally of accompanied walks in which the adult or child researcher accompanied a young respondent, from school to home, or from home to a water point, wood fuel supply, grinding mill, market or other place to which they traveled regularly. We found these walks an ideal approach to interviewing children and young people, allowing us to experience their mobility with them, while at the same time avoiding some of the uncomfortable silences which can occur in a face-to-face stationery interview, especially in circumstances of unequal power relations (as is particularly

the case with adult-to-child interviews). Conversation during a walk is often more comfortable, since the young respondent can avoid eye contact and any silences which occur are more easily accommodated as the exertion of walking makes silence a normal, natural component of interchange. Conversation and unsolicited observation replace a more formal question and answer routine. We also found it an important means of sensitising our urban-resident Research Assistants to the nature of children's journey problems and experiences in some of the remoter rural areas where we were working. One of our Eastern Cape research assistants, a young woman Masters' student from the local university expressed how strongly this impacted on her view of rural conditions: *'my experience of walking such long distances makes me angry. This should be experienced by the education (officers)…How about these kids? They are too small to walk such distances'.*

Some of our child researchers enjoyed making accompanied walks with their peers because they said it allowed them time for play, an opportunity to take photos for their project work and to see new places.

The qualitative research was followed by (and helped shape) a questionnaire survey of approximately 1,000 children aged 7-18 in each of our research countries (n=2,967). The survey consisted of a random sample of approximately 125 children per settlement (see www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility for details). The parent/carer was asked to give some basic information about the selected child but the subsequent interview with the child was conducted wherever possible out of hearing (but within sight) of the parent and other family members.

4. The journey to school: exploring interactions between place, space and gendered mobility

The vast majority of children in our study, both boys and girls, in all sites, from urban to remote rural, in all three countries, walk to school. Data from our survey indicates the dominance of walking as a mode of travel, particularly in Ghana and Malawi where it is almost the exclusive mode of transport on journeys to school, in all settlement types. In Ghana 98.6 % of girls and 97.4% of boys in our survey reported that they had walked to school the previous school day, and in Malawi 99.3% of girls and 99.1% of boys. In South Africa comparable figures were a little lower at 86.3% for girls and 86.4% for boys: here 10.3% of girls and 10.4% of boys had travelled to school by bus (either dedicated school bus or public bus). According to the 2003 South Africa National Household Travel Survey (cited above), 76% of 'learners' were reported to walk to their educational destination. Our data indicates this figure is well-exceeded in the (overwhelmingly poor) study areas where our project is focused.

Bicycle use to school (either as cyclist or riding pillion) was reported by only one boy and not one girl in the Malawi sample, by 7 boys and just one girl in Ghana, and by just one girl in South Africa. There have been sporadic

efforts to expand the use of bicycles among school pupils in poorer areas of South Africa under the *shova kalula* programme (Mahapa, 2003), but this appears to have had no influence in our study settlements on either boys or girls, a fact also supported by qualitative evidence.

Even in urban areas where there is relatively good transport availability in the vicinity, most children (except those resident in wealthy neighbourhoods) are expected to walk to school, especially at primary level. Parents and carers do not have the funds to pay transport fares for children in the context of more pressing demands on their meagre resources. This might be perceived as a beneficial situation: Western literature tends to focus on the positive impacts of walking on physical health, cognitive development, environmental awareness and knowledge, mental well-being (Hart 1997, Wells 2000, Korpela et al. 2002, Bjorklid 2004, Milligan and Bingley 2007). However, our accompanied walks with children as they travelled home from school brought to the fore some very different perspectives.

4.1. Rural narratives

In rural areas, in particular, children may have a walk of 5 kilometres or more to school along a route with substantial physical and other hazards. We draw first on an example of one four kilometre walk some of us undertook with school children during our pilot study in the Shire Highlands area of Malawi to illustrate this point. One afternoon, at the start of the rainy season, armed with umbrellas and raincoats, two of the research collaborators, together with three research assistants (two young men, one young woman), walked with three upper primary schoolgirls, aged between about 13 and 16 years along their normal route between school and home. Only one of the girls had shoes for the journey: white nurses' shoes that, we learned later, she had borrowed from an older sister in honour of the occasion. The route was a narrow footpath which wound its way through farmland and bush from their school (which is located in a fairly remote off-road village, about 12 kms from the paved road), to their homes in a small isolated settlement situated about four kilometres further from the main road. The route includes a number of potential hazards. There are five streams to cross, but only three are spanned by roughly-constructed wooden bridges: the remaining streams must be crossed with great care when the rivers are high. There are also two graveyards: here, in particular, the girls run for fear of meeting witches, lions, hyenas or other such apparitions. There is also a real fear of attack from humans: from farmers if they walk on the fields in the cultivation period, and also from boys and men who may offer only verbal abuse but are not infrequently suspected of being intent on rape: one of the girls on our walk had recently been chased by five boys. Given these hazards it is hardly surprising that the three girls always walk together to and from school. Since they are the only three children in their village attending the same school on a daily basis (because of the distance), if only one of the three is able to attend on a particular day she is likely to play truant.

During this walk with rural school girls in Malawi, but also with girls in other rural locations in Ghana and South Africa, some very similar themes emerged: in particular, the quantity of tasks that were generally required of them at home before they could set out for school (and tasks also sometimes required en route), the common requirement to accompany younger siblings, the consequent delayed journey to school, the delayed start and hazards (physical, human and supernatural) met *en route,* resulting in late arrival, and the punishment that would be meted out to them in the classroom.

The physical hazards en route to school obviously vary, but in rural areas often include dangerous streams and rivers in the wet season. In northern Ghana a father told us, *"During the rainy season when the river is full, only those who can swim come to school… female children usually absent themselves… because most of them cannot swim."* A girl in one of the Eastern Cape rural sites in South Africa made a similar observation: *When during the heavy rainfalls we can't cross the river because it is full and I cannot swim like boys do so we don't go to school until the river has subsided.* Girls' lack of experience in swimming appears to be a fairly common issue in rural areas and one which can expose them to considerable danger during the wet season when rivers can rise with remarkable speed.

On late arrival at school, the punishments meted out can be severe, as this 19-year old girl (who walks 5 kms along a narrow and hazardous route across streams and over a hilltop to her junior secondary school in Eastern Cape, South Africa) recounts: "*the mud on the way makes us dirty and we wash our feet at the last river… we have to put off our shoes if it is raining. Our teachers understand our route, they do not punish us much.. two lashes, but sometimes we miss morning classes*".

Punishments for late arrival at school are widespread in all sites across our three countries and tend to include beatings and lashings, whether corporal punishment is officially allowed or not. In Ghana we met children who were required to carry sand for school building work as their punishment for arriving late at school; in most sites they expect to have to clean the lavatories or sweep the compound. In some cases children who had had to traverse long and difficult routes including swollen rivers in the wet season said they had arrived at school so late that they were simply sent straight home. Not infrequently the long journey to school has started on an empty stomach in the first place. In this context of long journeys to school in rural areas, often particularly heavy work loads for girls before school, and the fear of punishment following late arrival at school, it is hardly surprising that many girls perform poorly at school because they are already exhausted from the work and the walk (and may have had little if anything to eat before leaving home), and that some girls will choose to play truant if they are likely to arrive late.

The experiences recounted by Sipiwe, an 18 year-old Pondo girl, to one of our women research assistants at an early stage on an accompanied walk home from the village where her school is located (though in this case interviewed just before school reopened after the vacation), encapsulate many of the issues

discussed above – the domestic work demands, the problems of the long journey from school, hunger, fear, poor performance and the consequent shame of being 'old for year' (poor performance preventing normal annual progression to the next class at the end of the year).

> I woke up early today at 04:00 am. I prepared for my journey to Mtambalala so that I can arrive there early and come back early. I and my little sister (that is, the one) I am walking with, we left home at 05:30 am. We were visiting my mother's family. We were sent by our mother to borrow money for school fees so that when school opens my mother can pay the outstanding fees. We arrived there around 07:30 am. Fortunately for us we arrived there and both my uncle and aunt were there because if we hadn't found them we would have to come back with nothing. That is why we had to wake up so early in the morning. We were sent to borrow the R150 so that mother would be able to pay the school fees and buy food while she waits for the social grant.
>
> We use the same route whenever we go to school, to town and to visit the clinic in Mtambalala. This route is very scary and tiring because whenever I have to take it I feel unhappy and frightened. It's a very long journey which can take me 2 hours to get home from Mtambalala. I am used to the route though, because it the only route which we can use… My feet are killing me as I am walking back home. We travel over the top of that mountain and then through the forest. Most of the time we are in the forest, it will take us long to get out of the forest. I feel very tired now, I don't know what I will be when I get home with my sister. We talk to each other so that we won't have to feel the long distance.
>
> In the afternoon when I come back from school I feel sleepy when I am walking because I am tired. We walk hungry and we haven't eaten anything since breakfast and I feel very weak. There is a stage we are going to pass it is the scariest part of the way into the forest. It is very quiet - you only hear the sound of the birds singing and scary noises. Once you get to those households you never know what will happen to you, there are dogs. I make sure I stay as far away as I can from them. After walking here, it is very slippery when it has rained. There is a steep slope just after we have crossed the river. In order to walk safely we have to use the other route which will have to mean that I will end up walking more than two – maybe up to three hours. My feet sometimes get swollen and stiff after I have walked a long distance so I would have to stop on the way for a rest.
>
> When I think about going to school every morning I feel very sad. I feel very sad because most children of my age are supposed to be in High school. I feel embarrassed when I have to stand in the assembly with little children and they laugh at me saying that I am an "ancestor" of the school. I feel that if there was a school close to home I would have been in Senior Secondary now.
>
> When I get home I have to fetch water from the river. I remember one Friday afternoon when I came back home. I had failed at school. I was scared to show the report to my mother. I had to lie that I didn't receive the school report. When my mother found out I was coming from the river. She asked me to explain everything that happened. She beat me up and I ran away from home to my grandmother. I later came back. The reason I failed was because I didn't have enough time to do my homework since by the time I got home

> I was tired and on top of that I have to do household chores. (04 April 2007, Accompanied walk from 12:45 pm to 14:00 pm, Eastern Cape, South Africa)

On most walks there were also boys among the pupils we accompanied. They raised some of the same issues as girls: the miserable nature of a walk undertaken when hungry, the particularly unpleasant nature of travel in the rainy season without an umbrella or protective clothing, the need to accompany siblings, and the physical hazards. Boys expressed less concern than girls about human and supernatural hazards (verbal abuse, rape, ghosts), and less often referred to worries around late arrival at school. This may be because late arrival is less common among boys, which is likely to be the case since in most contexts boys have fewer domestic tasks to accomplish before they leave home. In some cases boys seemed to have less fear than girls of the punishments they would face at school. Moreover, when boys referred to lateness it was often associated with play *en route* rather than work loads which delayed the start of the journey from home. As is the case with girls like Sipiwe, however, a delayed school start and many interruptions associated with lateness and non-attendance brings to the fore the 'old for year' issue (which was more often raised by boys than by girls):

> 'I dropped out of school because I was constantly being sent to the maize mill and whenever I came back my legs were sore… every time I went back to school I could find my (mates) well ahead of me. They had covered lots of topics and it was not easy for me to catch up'. (John, 17 years, rural Malawi)

Boys in rural areas also tended to put more emphasis than girls on their fear of encountering snakes and dogs. This is probably because boys are more inclined to route deviation in the course of games on the way to and (especially) from school, whereas girls who have had to complete domestic tasks (and thus start their journey with less time to spare) will have no time to deviate from the most direct route available and are likely to be tired on the way home:

> 'the owner of the house doesn't want us to pass through his yard… one day he allowed his dogs to chase after us. We all ran but the dogs caught one of my friends and bit him… I am now scared to walk through that homestead'. (Simeon, 16 years, rural Eastern Cape, South Africa)

Boys were also more likely to refer to interactions with the opposite sex and 'courtship' as a pleasure of the journey, especially in the dry season:

> 'I only enjoy the journey when I am with my friends as we get to chat to girls'. (Stephen, 17 years, rural Eastern Cape, South Africa)

For girls, such encounters were more commonly referred to negatively as (unwanted) 'love proposals'.

4.2. Urban narratives

In our urban research sites, physical hazards are also regularly encountered, but tend mostly to be of somewhat lower magnitude than in remote rural areas where many streams are largely unbridged. Human hazards, by contrast, are particularly frequently cited as a danger in interviews with school girls in urban and peri-urban sites, especially in Malawi and South Africa. Some of the more harrowing stories related to travel between a peri-urban school and a rural settlement in North-West Province South Africa where a number of girls and boys have been raped[1]. When we accompanied some young secondary school students on this route, one 17-year old girl pupil expressed her worries:

> 'I fear people who hide in the bush (waiting) for us. They wait for us in the bush and as we walk, especially when you are alone, they grab your school bag and all the belongings that you have with you… The bush is bad, you cannot see people hiding or seeking you… It is even worse to cross the bush at night. There are so many rapists there at night and a lot of drunk people'.

In urban areas across the three countries, girls' travel narratives emphasise, as in rural areas, the problem of tasks which must be accomplished at home (and en route) before school, associated delays to the school journey, consequent late arrival at school and subsequent punishment. They also expect to accompany young siblings, like their rural counterparts and talk about hunger when they have to walk to school without food.

> 'The distance to school is not a major problem to me but what to eat in order to walk this distance is the problem'. (Rebecca, 14 years, Ghana peri-urban site)

In urban sites in Ghana, a number of girls expressed a strong preference to walk alone if the school was located near to their home, so they would arrive at school on time and avoid punishment. In South African and Malawian urban sites girls spoke of their fear of verbal abuse from passers by, the difficulties of being propositioned by men or boys, stealing, and rape.

> 'We have to walk in groups because there are boys who are not schooling who take our money and mobile phones'. (Susan, 18 years, urban South Africa)

> 'I don't like to travel to school because there are boys who mock us on the way... They wait for us on the road where they smoke dagga and then they follow'. (Zodwa, 13 years, urban South Africa)

Traffic dust and dirt, traffic and traffic dangers were also raised as substantive issues on the journey to school in urban areas by girls, especially in

---

1. Male sexual abuse of schoolboys is reportedly a significant phenomenon in rural RSA (Andersson and Ho-Foster 2008).

South Africa and Malawi. Only very occasionally did we hear from girls about pleasures enjoyed on the school journey:

> 'I enjoy the conversation between my friends and I when coming to school… even if I am offered transport to school I will turn down the offer because I like the conversation'. (Victoria, 18 years, peri-urban Ghana)

Boys' urban travel narratives were, in many respects, very similar to those of girls in urban areas. There were similar comments as those from girls about dust and mud from passing traffic (a problem in terms of arrival at school in an acceptably clean uniform), and the dangers of traversing open drains and road traffic dangers, especially in Malawi and South Africa:

> 'accidents are common when a school year has just started because … standard 1 has a new crop of children some of whom are too young to cross carefully on the roads'. (Focus group with school boys, urban Malawi)

Hunger was another not uncommon theme:

> 'I was so hungry that I collapsed during assembly. It was madam Pat who bought some (local maize snack) for me. That actually revived me. My brother and I do not usually eat before coming to school'. (David, 12 years, peri-urban Ghana)

Boys reported having to accompany siblings but in Ghana (as was the case with girls) some observed that they prefer to walk alone if school is close so that they arrive on time. Additionally, however, in all three countries there were references to play – and fights – on the journey home. In Malawi and South Africa, fear of attack from boys and men was a problem not only for girls but also for boys and encourages travel in groups:

> 'We wait for each other so that we can walk in groups. This prevents attacks from bad people… sometimes they beat us and tell us not to let anybody know about it… (or) they will skin us to death'. (David, 16 years, urban Malawi)

This pattern of group travel appears similar to the 'collective independence through peers' identified by Brown et al. (2008) as a strategy among girls in United Kingdom. Among younger boys, in particular, such groups are likely to be single-sex:

> 'I walk alone to school even though I have female friends who attend this school and reside in my vicinity. I don't come to school with them because if I do people…. may say I like playing with females. My colleague males here will tease me'. (Peter, 14 years, urban Ghana)

5. Mobility and vulnerability on the school journey: adult perspectives

Parents and carers rarely accompany their children to school in sub-Saharan Africa: when questioned in interviews, they often implied that they were too busy making a livelihood. The perspectives of parents and carers about the journey to and from school display a strong gender perspective across urban and rural contexts in all three countries.

There is a widespread expressed concern about girls' journeys and girls tend to be encouraged to travel to school in groups whenever possible:

> 'We fear girls will be cheated on or get raped on way to school'. (Fathers' group, rural Malawi)

> 'We encourage that they walk in groups… the journey is fearful…. I insist that my daughter walks with other children to school everyday. I think that is what other parents do.' (mother of 1 girl 14 years, rural Ghana)

> '(girls) that are older are not allowed to play around with boys and we don't allow them to go very far from home (prompt: why?) When they have reached puberty stage (12+) they may be impregnated with boys. Yes we fear they may get pregnancies when moving with boys'. (mothers' focus group, peri-urban Malawi)

> 'These days children, especially girls, are being abducted. There are people who abduct children and then cut their body parts to use it as muti… letting girl children travel alone on public transport is not safe again these days (because of this)'. (grandmother carer of 2, rural South Africa)

In southern Africa rape presents a particularly great danger, given the high incidence of HIV/AIDs in the region. In South Africa, however, the publicity given to this danger appears to have sensitised not only girls but also boys to the possibility. Also, boys are possibly more exposed to rape in South Africa than elsewhere in Africa associated with long-standing cultural patterns of male co-residence in male mine-labour communities.

However, the extent of parental warnings to girls in areas where actual incidents of rape appear to be rare and its use as a reason for curtailing girls' education in remoter rural areas where girls' labour is need for household production and reproduction may also raise questions regarding the motives behind expressed parental concerns, as we consider further below.

By contrast with the concerns about girls' independent travel to school, few parents and carers expressed any concern about boys' journeys to school though, as with girls, group travel was perceived to offer safety in conditions which might otherwise be hazardous:

> 'I feel he is safe enough because he walks with other students to school… on days when his colleagues do not come I usually look for a bicycle to take him to school myself. I insist that he does not go alone to school'. (Father of 9 years old boy, peri-urban Ghana)

Traffic dangers were raised as an occasional concern, especially in our urban North West province site in South Africa, but elsewhere traffic was mostly perceived by parents as much less significant as a potential threat to children on the school journey than human assault. The issue of traffic danger was raised more frequently by teachers than by parents in most locations.

6. Mobility and mobility compliance across the three countries and 24 sites

As we have seen, pre-school transport and housework burdens for girls (substantially more than boys') lead to delayed travel, delayed arrival at school, and associated severe punishment in urban and rural schools and the potential consequence of early dropout. In urban and rural sites across all three countries, we find particular efforts to socialize girls into mobility compliance from an early age: parental encouragement of travel in groups – especially among girls- is the common response to perceived dangers for girls en route to school. Boys may experience fear of attack on the journey to school and consequently choose to travel in groups, especially in urban areas of Malawi and South Africa, but parents rarely express fears for their boy children, not least because boys can not become pregnant (Porter et al., 2010c).

A very detailed examination of young people's gendered travel patterns, based on statistical comparison of our quantitative survey data (using SPSS) across all 24 sites, is available elsewhere (Porter et al., 2010d). This draws attention, for instance, to the overwhelming dependence on pedestrian travel to school for both genders in all 24 sites (noted in the introduction to this paper). It also highlights differences between sites. In Ghana the children who feel safest as they travel to and from school are those living in urban and peri-urban locations. Girls feel safer than boys in Ghana's urban locations, but a greater proportion of boys than girls feel safe in rural locations. In Malawi, the greatest hazards are felt by children traveling to school in remote rural locations, and a greater proportion of boys than girls feel safe in all locations. In South Africa (with the exception of rural settlements with services, where schools tend to be relatively close to most homes), fears of travel to school are greater than in either Ghana or Malawi. In remote rural locations, only a small proportion of boys (24%) and an even smaller proportion of girls (21%) in our South African survey feel safe on their journeys between home and school (compared to 31% of girls and 44% of boys in Ghana and 42% of girls and 45% of boys in Malawi). Rough terrain and fast flowing rivers are a particular hazard of travel in remote rural locations across all three countries, but especially South Africa where terrain in the Eastern Cape sites presents particular challenges. In urban and peri-urban areas, not surprisingly, traffic hazards are perceived as a more serious danger than physical terrain. Interestingly, boys appear to have more awareness of traffic danger than girls in urban areas (particularly in Ghana and Malawi), possibly because they are more likely to make journeys alone. The highest proportion of children reporting danger of

attack from people – bandits, older children, murderers, kidnappers etc. – was in rural areas in all three countries. In urban areas the perceived risk of attack in lowest in Ghana and highest in South Africa. When asked about specific dangers of rape on the school journey, the figures were substantially higher for South Africans [12.9%] than for Ghanaians [0.4%] or Malawians [0.2%].

In the context of high surveillance and mobility restrictions on girls (especially once they reach puberty), coupled with time poverty, girls' school attendance is consequently likely to be more impeded than that of boys. Abduction and rape may be used by parents as a threat to try to constrain girls whom they perceive to be vulnerable – and perhaps potentially promiscuous – to 'safe' spaces (Porter, 2011). Deviations from the normal route to school and local sites of insecurity (such as cemeteries, shrines, high grass in wet season) are avoided especially by girls. But to what extent are the fears girls express exacerbated by parental concern for daughters? And to what extent are the fears which parents and carers express in part at least exacerbated by household demands for girls' labour? Certainly, the negative impacts of longer journeys on mental well-being (bandits etc.), physical health and schooling were emphasised by both girls and boys and raised as a reason for early dropout. From this perspective, distance to school can be perceived as a potential tipping point in that decision.

7. Conclusion: Possible interventions for positive change

The journeys to school that we describe in this paper resonate strongly with the statement by Ingold and Vergunst (2008) that social relations are not enacted *in situ* but are paced out along the ground. Across our research sites girls, in particular, are strongly constrained in their journeys to school, not only by parental concerns for their safety, and in particular their vulnerability to sexual attack, but also by cultural mores which commonly ascribe domestic work (including water and fuel wood transport) principally to females, from an early age. Boys, by contrast, have rather more freedom from parental control from an early age and their journeys to and from school appear to be more often characterised by play and a spirit of adventure which allows deviation from the narrow corridor of the most direct school route (while keeping in groups where it is necessary to maintain guard against potential male attack).

In terms of policy there are a number of potential routes to improving safe school access, especially for girls. These include an expansion of girls' boarding house provision and general boarding provision; experiments with adaptation of the walking bus concept to help children to walk safely to school in regions where dangers of rape and harassment are high; cycle hire centres based at schools, to help overcome the shortage of cycles available (especially) to girl children for travelling between home and school; girls' training in cycle riding, maintenance and repairs and swimming lessons for girls, especially in rural areas where river crossings are sparse. Various non-transport intervention are also needed, including those aimed at reducing girls' time poverty (improved

availability of water supplies, community woodlots, grinding mills etc.) so that they have less work to do before the journey to school (and so that over-stretched parents will be less inclined to withdraw daughters from school), and sensitization of teachers and education authorities to transport/distance-related lateness and an end to the harsh punishments imposed by many on children who arrive late for school

Above all, however, a stronger focus on gendered transport, mobility and access issues in the development policy and practitioner community is essential. The failure to recognise the specific importance of mobility and transport and the ramifications of immobility in the Millennium Development Goals is clear testament to this omission (Grieco et al. eds. 2009). In the context of the goal for education, and specifically girls' education, a firmer and more specific recognition of the role which distance, perceived and real travel hazards, transport availability and other mobility factors plays in allowing or barring access to school is urgently required.

Acknowledgments

References

AFRICAN UNION et al. (2005). *Transport and the Millennium Development Goals in Africa*. Africa Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa, with the collaboration of the African Development Bank, World Bank and EU, February 2005.

ANDERSSON, N. and HO-FOSTER, A. (2008). «13,915 reasons for equity in sexual offences legislation: A national school-based survey in South Africa». *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 7, 1-20.

ANDVIG, J.C. (2001). *Family-controlled child labour in sub-Saharan Africa. A survey of research*. Washington: World Bank, Social Protection Unit, October 2001.

AVOTRI, R.; OWUSU-DARKO, L.; EGHAN, H. and OCANSEY, S. (1999). *Gender and primary schooling in Ghana*. Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.

BJORKLID, P.(2004). «Children's independent mobility and relationship with open space- studies of 12-year olds' outdoor environment in different residential areas». *Revisita Psihologie Aplicata Anul*, 5 (3-4), 52-61.

BROWN, B.; MACKETT, R.; YI, G.; KITAZAWA, K. and PASKINS, J. (2008). «Gender differences in children's pathways to independent mobility». *Children's geographies*, 6 (4), 385-401.

CRESSWELL, T. and UTENG, T.P. (2008). «Gendered mobilities: towards an holistic understanding». In: UTENG, T.P. and CRESSWELL, T. *Gendered mobilities*, 1-12. Ashgate.

DFID (Department for International Development) (2001). *Children out of school*. London: United Kingdom. Department for International Development, October 2001.

Ersado, L. (2005). «Child labor and schooling decisions in urban and rural areas». *World Development,* 33(3), 455-480.

Gould, W.T.S. (1973). *Movements of school-children and provision of secondary schools in Uganda*. University of Liverpool. Department of Geography, African Population Mobility Project Working Paper, no. 3.

Grieco, M.; Ndulo, M.; Bryceson, D.; Porter, G. and McCray, T. (eds.) (2009). *Africa, transport and the millennium development goals*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Hart, R.A. (1997). *Children's participation: the theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care.* London: Earthscan.

Ingold, T. and Vergunst, J. L. (eds.) (2008). «Introduction». In: *Ways of walking: ethnography and practice on foot*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Khander, S. R.; Lavy, V. and Filmer, D. (1994). *Schooling and cognitive achievements of children in Morocco.* Discussion paper no. 264. World Bank, Washington D.C.

Korpela, K.; Kytta, M. and Hartig,T. (2002). «Children's favourite places: restorative experience, self-regulation and children's play preferences». *Journal of Environmental Psychology,* 22, 387-98.

Levy, H. and Voyadzis, C. (1996). *Morocco impact evaluation report: socio-economic influence of rural roads.* Operations Evaluation Department, Report no. 15808-MOR, World Bank, Washington, D,C.

Mahapa, S. (2003). *Integrating gender into World Bank financed transport programmes. Case study South Africa. Shova Kalula*. Unpublished report, September 2003.

Milligan, C. and Bingley, A. (2007). «Restorative places or scary spaces? The impact of woodland on the mental well-being of young adults». *Health and Place*, 13 (4), 799-811.

Porter, G. (2007). «Transport planning in sub-Saharan Africa. Progress report 1. Improving access to markets and services». *Progress in Development Studies*, 7(3), 251-257.

— (2010). «Transport planning in sub-Saharan Africa. report 3: The challenges of meeting children and young people's mobility and transport needs». *Progress in Development Studies*, 10(2), 169-80.

— (2011). «'I think a woman who travels a lot is befriending other men and that's why she travels': Mobility constraints and their implications for rural women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa". *Gender, place and culture*, 18 (1), 65-81.

Porter, G.; Blaufuss, K. and Owusu Acheampong, F. (2007). «Youth, mobility and rural livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa: perspectives from Ghana and Nigeria». *Africa Insight,* 37(3), 420-431.

— (2011) (in press). «Filling the family's transport gap in sub-Saharan Africa: young people and load carrying in Ghana». In: Holt, L. (ed.). *Geographies of Children, Youth and Families: An International Perspective.* London: Routledge.

Porter, G.; Hampshire, K.; Bourdillon, M.; Robson, E.; Munthali, A.; Abane, A. and Mashiri, M. (2010a). «Children as research collaborators: issues and reflections from a mobility study in sub-Saharan Africa». *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 46(1), 215-227.

Porter, G.; Hampshire, K.; Abane, A.; Munthali, A.; Robson, E. and Mashiri, M. (2010b). «Where dogs, ghosts and lions roam: learning from mobile ethnographies on the journey from school». *Children's Geographies,* 8(2), 91-105.

Porter, G.; Hampshire, K.; Abane, A.; Robson, E.; Munthali, A.; Mashiri, M. and Tanle, A. (2010c). «Moving young lives: mobility, immobility and urban 'youthscapes' in sub-Saharan Africa». *Geoforum,* 41, 796-804.

Porter, G.; Hampshire, K.; Abane, A.; Munthali, A.; Robson, E.; Mashiri, M. and Tanle, A. (2010d). «Youth transport, mobility and security in sub-Saharan Africa: the gendered journey to school». *World Transport Policy and Practice,* 16(1), 51-71.

RSA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT (Republic of South Africa) (2005). *The first South African National Household Travel Survey 2003*: Technical report.

Sheller, M. and Urry, J. (2006). «The new mobilities paradigm». *Environment and Planning A*, 38, 207-226.

Wells, N.M. (2000). «At home with nature: effects of 'greenness' on children's cognitive functioning». *Environment and Behaviour,* 32 (6), 775-795.

WORLD BANK (2009). *World Development Report*. Washington: World Bank.