

It's a Girl Thing: Menstruation, School Attendance, Spatial Mobility and Wider Gender Inequalities in Kenya

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Abstract

Recent attention has been drawn to possible linkages between poor sanitation in sub-Saharan African schools and low attendance rates amongst post-pubescent girls. In particular, questions have been raised about the influence of menstruation and access to sanitary products on schoolgirl absenteeism but research on this topic is scarce. Moreover, the few detailed empirical studies that have been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa on this topic have produced contradictory results. These uncertainties coupled with theories of how concepts of pollution and taboo are used to construct or police spatial boundaries (and maintain power relations within society) provide an interesting context for examining everyday geographies of menstruation. Kisumu, Kenya provides the context for the study which utilises a feminist political ecology framework to investigate cultural and spatial limitations associated with menstruation and puberty. Drawing on schoolgirls' lived experiences, we illustrate how emotional geographies of puberty and menstruation are productive of and help to reproduce gender inequalities in mobility and access to social capital resources (especially education). At the same time we show how poverty coupled with low levels of sexual and reproductive health and rights education can exacerbate gendered bodily inequalities as girls face an increased risk of sexual exploitation when they reach puberty.

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