

Enabling and constraining family: Young women building their educational paths in Tanzania

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This is a pre-print version.

To cite the published article:

Posti-Ahokas, H. & Okkolin, M-A. 2016. Enabling and constraining family: Young women building their educational paths in Tanzania. Journal of Community, Work and Family. 19(3), 332–339.

Abstract

For an increasing number of African girls and women, upgrading the level of education has become a strategy for life improvement. This paper analyses the role that family plays in enabling women's education and contributes to understanding on the interconnectivity of education, work and family in women's lives in collective societies. The analysis focuses on how young Tanzanian women perceive the role of family and education in their 'youth task', of becoming adult. The analysis is based on interviews with seven young Tanzanian women enrolled in non-formal secondary education and nine professional women enrolled in higher education. The results show that the women were determined to pursue higher levels of education and committed to continuous self-improvement. The women identified family both as a motivator of further education and as a constraint for their individual aims and ambitions. Respecting and maintaining good family relations were given priority over individual aims and decisions. Consequently, the reasons for women to educate themselves were drawn from the overall benefits to the future of the family and society at large. Findings suggest a major role of the family in determining the success in improving education and professional advancement of girls and women in Tanzania.

Key words: women; family; Tanzania; educational paths; youth task

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Introduction

Work and family greatly influence the construction of women's educational paths. Sweet and Moen (2007) studied the integration of educational careers with work and family in the lives of American women and argued for further research on role qualities and role expectations across institutions beyond work and family. In the Global South, upgrading the level of education has become a strategy for life improvement for an increasing number of women of different ages. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the increasing role that education plays in the realities of women in developing countries. As suggested by Heymann, Earle and Hanchate (2004), insights from different parts of the world are essential to understand the scale and impact of specific work and family challenges, which in turn can inform policy development both at national and global levels.

In the case of Tanzanian women, pursuing upper secondary and higher education often overlaps with working, becoming a parent and establishing a family. The most recent labour force survey shows an economic activity rateⁱ of 82.4% among Tanzanian women aged 15 to 24ⁱⁱ (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2006). According to UNICEF (2011), 63% of Tanzanian girls are married or in union by the age of 20. In fact, pregnancy has been cited as the reason for 20.4% of all female dropouts from secondary schools in Tanzania (URT, 2010). While enrolment figures have improvedⁱⁱⁱ, over one-third of secondary school students are over aged, struggling to build their educational paths and a better life for themselves and their families. For these students, pursuing higher education is seldom a linear process; it is a rocky path with several detours along the way. Work and family form an integral part of the lives of female students pursuing higher education, especially master's programmes.

The centrality of family in young African people's future plans and their realisation has been highlighted in studies on young people in Tanzania (Okkolin, 2012; Posti-Ahokas, 2012; Helgesson, 2006). Studies of young adults in Africa (see Arnot, Jeffery & Casely-Hayford, 2012; Helgesson, 2006; Tranberg Hansen, 2005) criticise the individualised view of the '*youth task*' (referring to transition to adulthood), that consider individual autonomy as the major goal of the transition (from education to employment and from childhood family to one's own family). Studies by Thomson, Henderson and Holland (2003) have shown the strong impact of social relationships on individual goals and their realisation. They (ibid.) further criticise the rhetoric of individualism that

does not adequately consider the relationships that lock people into responsibilities and obligations.

This paper discusses the linkages between individual and social settings, particularly the contexts of family and education. In this study, family is analysed as a representation of the essential, culturally formed social relationships that have an impact on individual aims and their realisation. The analysis focuses on how young Tanzanian women perceive the role of family and education in their youth task. In contrast to the individually focused definitions of transition and marker events of attaining adulthood (see e.g. Hartmann & Swartz, 2006; Salmela-Aro, 2001), youth task is perceived as a social phenomenon, a process characterised by social norms, relationships and negotiation.

To see how education, work and family are interconnected in women's realities, we interviewed 16 young women from the city of Dar es Salaam pursuing secondary and higher education. The first group (N = 7) comprised young women, aged between 23 and 28^{iv}, trying to make the critical transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education. These women had already faced a prolonged transition with serious obstacles along their educational paths and had various obligations related to work and family. The second group consisted of women (N = 9), aged from 26 to 40, enrolled in higher education to upgrade their professional qualifications. Unlike the women in the first group, these women had constructed more linear and conventional educational paths within formal education despite school-, family- and work-related challenges. The analysis of the first group focuses on the current role of the family in the lives of over-aged secondary school students and the role of family in their future orientation. In the case of the second group, the analytical interest is directed firstly towards the role of the childhood family in their educational paths, and secondly to the influence of their current family and other conjugal relationships on choices and decision-making in their private lives, work and education. Our emphasis is on finding the social, rather than individual, in women's considerations of their lives now and in the future.

This paper begins by reviewing relevant studies on social formation of future orientation, African families, and the future perspectives of youth. This is followed by a description of the empirical interview process employed in the study. The results are presented and discussed in the fourth section. Conclusions are drawn on the interlinkages between education, work and family, and particularly viewing family as both an enabling and a constraining factor in women's education in Tanzania.

Family and education in the ‘youth task’

The major impact of social and cultural factors impact on the formation of individual future orientation is well recognised and verified (see e.g. Pollard & Filer, 2007; Thomson et al., 2003; Malmberg, 1998). For instance, Pollard and Filer (2007) emphasise the interconnectivity of identity, learning and social setting. Wider political and cultural discourses are mediated and interpreted through the dynamic social relationships with family, peers and the community that shape individual experience and meaning making. Thomson et al. (2003) have studied the relationships between individual resources and the wider social context and their impact on young women’s transitions to post-compulsory education in the UK. They criticise the dominant theoretical and policy agenda that centres on individualisation and tends to underplay the importance of relationships (see also Brannen & Nilsen, 2005, for discussion). Thomson et al. (2003) further argue that understanding the identities and practices in which individuals engage requires acknowledgment of the importance of relationships as well as the forms of reciprocity and obligation that are embedded within them.

Cultural knowledge – the collective ways through which people in a given socio-cultural context give meaning to their lives – is an essential part of the future orientation of an individual (Malmberg, 1998). Cultural knowledge relevant to this study includes ideas of appropriate actions and cultural representations of ‘an educated woman’, particularly within the family. On the basis of her anthropological analysis of the ‘myth of African family’, O’Laughlin (1995) argues for looking beyond the dichotomy of autonomy/dependence in the study of African women and families. Instead, she suggests that the analytical focus should be on the bonds of interdependence, conflict and difference uniting (conjugal) families (O’Laughlin, 1995). Previous analyses of social landscapes of Tanzanian secondary school girls (Posti-Ahokas, 2012) portray extended families as wide networks of supporting relationships, which should be respected, appreciated and well utilised by a woman in pursuit of her goals. Latvala’s (2006) study based in Kenya on educated women’s obligations, loyalties and conflicts related to family and kin depicts African families as circles of help and reciprocity, which sometimes compromise privacy and individual achievements. Previous studies on family ties, social organisation and gender roles in rural Tanzania (Caplan, 1995; Vuorela, 1995) highlight the complexities associated with loyalty to family and the multiple considerations that women make when planning their lives.

The local definitions of the youth task, of becoming an adult and the realities of completion of the task have been studied under different social settings in Africa. For the Tanzanian and Mozambican youth, being able to support oneself and the family, moving away from the parents' house into one's own house, getting married and having children were the essential components of the youth task (Helgesson, 2006). However, the realities of young adults in African cities are often far removed from these normative ideas of family life and attaining adulthood (Helgesson, 2006; Tranberg Hansen, 2005). Tranberg Hansen (2005) studied the youth in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. Their unconventional household arrangements – domestic groups of youth, siblings staying together, grandparents acting as caretakers – are suggestive of individual visions of adulthood, which are in stark contrast to the normative ideas that centre on marriage and family. Tranberg Hansen (2005) argues that the contradiction between livelihoods and desires may prevent young people from entering into adulthood. Helgesson (2006) identifies a clear mismatch between the demands on the youth and their possibilities for achievement. While some aspects of life are 'adult' aspects, others are not. Her results illustrate the dependency between family members and the difficulties of being dependent. In other words, family is seen simultaneously as a source of security and threat (Helgesson 2006). An ethnographic study of the youth living on the streets and in poor settlements in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, by Moyer (2003) discusses the importance of family and other social networks among marginalised youth. Despite being geographically distanced from their families, the economically challenged youth still consider family support more important than that received from other sources. Living in a city enables some of them to support their families back home in the rural areas. A sense of locality and belonging is created among friends, lovers and fellow exiles from home (Moyer 2003).^v

Acquiring post-primary education has emerged as an essential strategy towards completing the youth task for an increasing proportion of African women. Helgesson's (2006) research in Mozambique and Tanzania shows a clear link between educational advancement and the social capital available to young people. In the context of poverty, good social relations can help people to continue education. Support from extended family and their networks becomes viable. The educational paths of the hundred young people studied by Helgesson (2006) were often unlinear, with interruptions caused by changing economic situations and social relations. Despite these challenges and poor employment situations, education was still seen as a strategy to compete for employment. Studies by Arnot et al. (Arnot et al. 2012a, Arnot, Chege and

Wawire, 2012) in Ghana and Kenya and by Stambach (2000) among the rural communities of Tanzania analyse the prevalent gender structures and the impact of increasing educational levels of girls on the traditional family systems and cultural practices. Educated girls are simultaneously impacted by the traditional structures and the new influences introduced by secondary education (Stambach, 2000). While families support women's education, they are also confounded by the changes posed by education within their communities. Hence, education creates new spaces and opportunities for individual and family choices (Arnot et al. 2012a). The highly educated women in Kenya confirmed the importance of education as a provider of further opportunities and economic independence (Latvala 2006). It also enabled them to be conscious of women's weak positions in the society (Latvala 2006; see also Okkolin 2012).

Methodology

Seven young women (Group A), enrolled in a non-formal secondary school that catered to over-aged students, were interviewed in March 2010. Nine older, highly educated women (Group B) were also interviewed on different occasions during 2006–2008. The age, living arrangements, and current school- and work-related activities of interviewees are listed in the Table 1.

Table 1. Age, living arrangements and current activities of the interviewees

Group A: Women enrolled in non-formal secondary school			
Name	Age	Lives with	Current status
1 Suzy	28	Aunt	Repeating Form 4 (lower secondary)
.			
2 Elisabeth	23	Older sister	Looking for a job and a chance to attend evening classes to repeat Form 4
.			
3 Nuria	28	Husband	Repeating Form 4
.			
4 Happy	24	Cousin	Undecided about future course of acting and re-taking the Form 4 examination
.			
5 Angelina	23	Parents	Works full time (secretarial work); self-studying for Form 4 examination
.			
6 Kemi	23	Sister	Attends Form 5 preparatory class (upper secondary), works at sister's street food stall
.			
7 Eve	25	Grandmother	Attends Form 5 preparatory class
.			
Group B: Women enrolled in higher education			
Name	Age	Lives with	Current educational status
1 Amana	36	Divorced; children live with the father	Finalising master's degree in Education; teacher
.			
2 Amisa	26	Cohabits with boyfriend	Finalising master's degree in Developmental Studies
.			
3 Genefa	40	Married with children	Finalising master's degree in Education; teacher
.			
4 Hanifa	33	Married with children	Finalising master's degree in Education; teacher
.			
5 Naomi	32	Married with children	Finalising master's degree in Education; teacher
.			
6 Rabia	30	Boyfriend	BA in Mass Communication; university lecturer
.			
7 Rehema	28	Lives with parents	B.Sc in Home Economics and Human Nutrition; teacher
.			
8 Tumaini	33	Boyfriend; owns a house, lives alone	Finalising master's degree in Public Health; Programme Manager (HIV/Aids)
.			
9 Wema	32	Married	Finalising master's degree in Social Sciences; lawyer
.			

Thematic interviews and the voice-centred relational method of data analysis

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), interviews are particularly well suited for (1) studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, (2) describing people's experiences and self-understanding and (3) clarifying and elaborating people's perspective on their lived world. In this study, interviews were chosen as the mode of investigation on the basis of the findings of a previously conducted survey and written empathy-based stories ([Name removed for anonymity]). Through the interviews, we aimed to gain a better understanding of young women's actual experiences and their reflections on the family in relation to the meaning of education and their future expectations.

Interviews with Group A were conducted in Kiswahili, the first or second language of the interviewees, with the assistance of a colleague who acted as an interpreter. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated by a professional Tanzanian translator. The use of a native language is important, particularly in surveys attempting to bring out the voices of girls who are seldom heard in their societies (Benson, 2005). Furthermore, as Bujra (2006) suggests, English speakers in developing countries are likely to represent the affluent sections of the society. In other words, the selection of only English-speaking participants for this study may have introduced a bias; the perspectives of girls from poorer and rural backgrounds may have been neglected. On the other hand, interviews with the participants of Group B who had substantial exposure to English were conducted in English.

Voice-centred relational (VCR) method of data analysis (Byrne, Canavan & Millar, 2009; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; 2003) was used to evaluate the interview data from different perspectives and to construct a structured analysis of the data. Essentially, this is a reflexive method concerned with voice and researcher-researched relationships, which emphasises interdependence and relationality (Byrne et al., 2009). The VCR method allows researchers to adopt different positions during data analysis. Our adaptation of the method was informed by the one used by Mauthner and Doucet (2003; 1998) and included four separate readings of the interview transcripts, each with different aims and focus.

The first reading was done to identify the overall story of each interview and to reflect the researcher's intellectual and emotional response to it. The second reading focused on the narrator's sense of agency and social location. Listening to people's perceptions of their social relationships and their consequences was the purpose of the third reading. The picture of the Tanzanian family became more vivid and the

focus of the analysis started to evolve more clearly during this stage. The fourth and last reading focusing on cultural contexts and social structures captured issues that needed to be clarified to an international audience. The analysis centred on the family context: what are the features within Tanzanian families that have an impact on the women's thinking and education-related experience? How do they see their own position within the family? The following section highlights the family-related issues identified through the VCR analysis.

The relationships between the interviewees and their families were analysed via VCR readings, particularly those focusing on social relationships and their consequences as well as on cultural context and social structures. Themes representing the nature of individual-family relationships were developed. Below, three themes are presented and illustrated by individual experiences. The women participating in the study are quoted; their names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Enabling and constraining family

Current situation of the interviewees

Determined to succeed in pursuing education, the seven young women in Group A, well over-aged for lower secondary education, had repeated classes and had gathered funds for further studies from various sources. Some of them had moved to the city to gain better access to opportunities. Of the seven, only two had managed to pass the critical Form 4 examinations and were enrolled in a preparatory class for Form 6 examinations. The other five were yet to come to terms with their low examination results, which did not guarantee them the opportunity to proceed directly. One was pursuing self-study, two were repeating their preparatory class and two others were yet to determine their course of action, source of future funds or time for re-taking their examination. One had already taken up full time employment to fund her evening classes and another woman was looking for a casual day job to ensure a similar arrangement. By comparison, in Group B, women's transitions from one level to another in their educational paths had been more linear, however not without interruptions or problems. Six of the women were qualified teachers. Two held a bachelor's degree from a university. At the time of the interviews seven were pursuing master's degree studies.

Family contexts of the women

At the time of interviews, five of the seven women in Group A were staying with members of their extended family – an aunt, elder siblings or grandparents. Four of them listed their biological parents (either father or mother or both) as their primary care takers. One woman was staying with her biological parents, but was looking to stay independently. One of the women was married and expecting her first child. The women had grown up in families with 1 to 6 children. All the parents of the interviewed women had completed at least seven years of primary education. The ones with primary education worked as farmers or engaged in small businesses. The father of one of the women held a university degree while two mothers had received vocational training. Two others had finished lower secondary education. The more educated parents were working in offices or in a bank; one was employed as a nursery school director. All the seven interviewees received moral support from their parents to further education beyond the lower secondary level. Barring one, all the women were struggling to finance their education, even though two belonged to families with relatively high socio-economic status.

Despite financial constraints and problems, most of the highly educated women in Group B described their childhood families as ‘middle-class’, having ‘normal’ and ‘moderate’ standard of living. The educational attainment of the interviewees’ mothers ranged from no schooling at all (poor writing and reading skills) to master’s degree, while that of the fathers ranged from six years in primary education to doctorate. The women in Group B belonged to families with three to six children, and in most cases, all their siblings had completed at least secondary education. Three of the interviewed women belonged to families in which the parents were divorced: two of them had been raised by their mothers whereas the third one had been supported by her father, and she continued to live with him and his new wife at the time of the interview. With regard to living arrangements at the time of the interview, three women were living with their boyfriends; one was dating but living independently; four women were married and had children (1–4) and one was divorced.

Forms of support

All women identified family as an essential source of support to their individual educational aims. Regardless of socio-economic background, the women received moral support from their families, particularly from parents and spouses, to continue their education. Their families

encouraged their pursuits so that the women could improve their own lives as well as those of their families. Eve (25, group A) explained the support she received from her parents while attending upper secondary school in the following words:

'My parents they are much encouraging me because they know what's going on for this country. When I can't get education means I'll be as street children but when I get a change to educate means I prepare my future. My parents like to encourage me every day, 'my children, study, study, study' every day that's a song.' (Eve, 25, A)

Amisa (26), one of the highly educated women, described how her mother was not only very supportive, but also insistent that she 'should go to school'. Amisa and her siblings were raised by their mother without any support from their father. Their mother told them: 'I don't have anything to give you. I'm giving you education. [...] If you want to get something from me, then you have to go to school'. Amisa concluded how she came to understand 'that you don't have any alternative except going to school'.

Interviewees who had failed their secondary education examinations said that their parents had been instrumental in sensitising and encouraging them to try again. Where financial assistance from parents was not available, women still considered the moral support derived from parents as vital. Suzy's (28, A) parents were disappointed by her failure in the examinations but continued to be morally supportive of her. Suzy viewed this support as her fundamental motivation to continue. Lacking economic means and living in a remote rural area, she relied on her parents' support even though they were unable to assist her financially. Her parental support and connections also enabled Suzy to find accommodation with a woman of the same tribe who also paid her school fees. The tribal connection ensured complementary support.

Despite their weak economic conditions, some families of the interviewees were making a significant effort to generate the funds need for further education. Kemi's (23, A) older sister was supporting her education by selling food on the street. Similarly, Genefa (40, B) explained how she and her other three siblings were dependant on their sister, because their father could not support their education. In Genefa's case, despite the lack of financial or moral support from the parent, all the children were educated, and some had attained the highest level of education. Amana (36, B), for her part, presented a very supportive image of her family: 'I had a baby. I stayed in the village for four years. Then I

separated from my husband and that's when I asked myself, 'what to do next'. I also kept asking my family and they told me they will help me to get back to school; they told me that my chance had already gone, but they will offer me another chance'. In contrast, when Happy (24, A) and Angelina (23, A) did not pass in their examinations, their parents in higher positions were no longer willing to finance their education. Other challenging aspects of living in a family are discussed in the following section.

Family as a constraining factor

Responses from interviewees also revealed how family relations sometimes constrained their individual plans or ambitions. Instead of an equal member in the family, some women felt that there merely the subjects of goodwill and charity. The following quotations also reflect the various negotiations that the women were constantly engaged in with their family members. Reflecting on their description of their negotiations, the young women felt they had relatively low negotiation power within their hierarchical family structures. Angelina (23, A) explained her recent negotiations and their outcome in the following words:

Researcher: 'How did your parents take your Qualifying Test results?'

Angelina: 'They did not like (it). They did not like (it) to the extent that they blamed me as I had failed. Hence, they did not support me at that time, and instead, they told me they would seek a job for me that would support me to study on my own. So (this) is the work they have sought out for me so that I support myself educationally – it is a casual one.' (Angelina, 23, A)

Her expressions 'they blamed me' and 'they told me they' are suggestive of her low negotiation power and the hierarchical relationships within the family. Eventually, Angelina's parents decided to resolve the issue in their own way. Similarly, invoking the power earned from her financial stability, Elisabeth's (23, A) sister stopped financing Elisabeth's education after her second failure in the examinations. Frustrated and trying to secure funds to re-take the examinations, Elisabeth explained the dynamics of negotiation:

'I was relying on my sister and brother-in-law to do so (to pay the fees), but they have said "it is impossible for now, as we have many other things to handle". It is like they are discouraging someone.' (Elisabeth, 23, A)

Elisabeth's expression 'to be educated by someone' in relation to the financing of her education alludes to the power relation implicit between the one 'being educated' and the one 'educating'. Her experience highlights what 'being educated by someone' implies. Until last year, Elisabeth's older sister and her husband had funded her studies; however, when she failed the examinations for the second time, they asked to seek employment. During the interview, she clearly recognised her past dependency on the sister and acknowledged the support. She viewed the withdrawal of financial support and their refusal to reconsider the decision as discouraging. In Elisabeth's case, the power dynamics combined with the complex family relations and the difficult financial situation served as an essential factor determining her next steps. Owing to the absence of financing, she was forced to consider taking up employment and combining work and studies.

Unlike the young women of Group A, the highly educated women in Group B did report any feelings or experiences of blame, barring one woman who blamed herself for the failure of her sister. In practise, they were all 'educated by someone': parents (all except Genefa), grandparents (Amisa), other relatives (Amana, Amisa, Rabia and Wema), and/or older siblings (Amana and Genefa). Yet, none of them referred to having had a weak bargaining position within the family, while pursuing secondary education. They felt that gender-based roles and hierarchies, which undoubtedly existed in their families, did not determine their familial position or diminish or deteriorate their educational options. For instance Amana explained, 'my parents never differentiated between girls' and boys' schooling', when deciding whom to send to school.

Nuria (28, A), who had recently married, perceived the responsibility of her education as having been shifted from her parents to her husband: 'They (parents) only helped me in the period before my marriage. But now after marriage, they said, 'Now we are washing our hands off you; it is up to you and your husband to take care of everything'. While the parents continued to provide moral support, her husband was expected to assist her financially. Nuria was grateful for her husband's support but would have preferred to be financially independent. Amisa (26, B), who was finishing her master's degree and had a boyfriend, was very vocal with regard to independence and managing her life:

'If you were raised to believe men are everything, like men are the ones who are supposed to provide, and you are waiting for men to provide for you, why should you work hard? After all, there is someone working hard for you [...] I am proud of my grades. I was working hard. We really worked hard. I don't know if we slept. [...] My boyfriend knows very well, I have put everything open, like: if you want to be with me, things are like this; you have to choose. I told him like, if you think you are going to marry me and then you are going to change, you are very wrong!' (Amisa, 26, B)

In contrast to Amisa, Hanifa (33, B) explained how her marriage and familial relationships were not evidently grounded in independence or equal decision-making. In fact, she had to negotiate with her in-laws (compare Latvala 2006) not only for funds but also for choice of an educational path.

In situations where continuing education required re-negotiation, financial issues acquired more prominence. For instance, Happy (24, A) had not yet been able to make definite plans because she was still negotiating finances: 'Up to now I have not enrolled. Yes, I have got advisors who have advised me, except a person who can now offer to pay again (for me); the fee is lacking'. Six of the seven women enrolled in secondary school cited serious financial constraints as a prevalent problem. The monthly school fee of the six girls was 20000 Tanzanian Shillings, roughly equivalent to 9.40 Euros or 13.30 USD^{vi}. The young women enrolled in school had sought financial support from their parents, elder siblings and from people of their tribe. Kemi (23, A), who had already completed Form 4, explained her situation:

'Talking about school, because in the school where I am studying, let us say I have lots of problems especially with respect to fees. Hence, with me, in the case of fees, it becomes a big problem. I have happened to talk with the principal. Sometimes he allows me to attend (class), but the circumstances surrounding my study there are very difficult, because my sister is a petty street food vendor; therefore, my present problem is with fees. Sometimes I stay at home, without even going to school.' (Kemi, 23, A)

Women in Group B, who had enrolled in universities, also discussed their financial constraints in the context of pursuing secondary education.

All their families had generated additional income for education by growing and selling agricultural products and baking bread, for example. At the time of the interviews, these women were able to sustain themselves through their professions and did not report facing critical financial constraints. To summarise, economic conditions of the families, complex family dynamics and the existence of strict examination-based advancement in secondary education served as constraints in the paths of young Tanzanian women pursuing education at the secondary level. The women studying in universities were financially more stable, either because of a scholarship, their spouses' and families' support or their own income.

Family as a central future goal and a motivator

The personal future goals that the women had set for themselves were also strongly linked to the family. For example, all the women in Group A hoped to get married and have children. Respect towards the institution of marriage was extremely high. Four women in Group B and one in Group A already had families of their own. In addition to supporting one's own nuclear family, all the women felt responsible for helping the members of the extended family. Staying physically close to (extended) family members was seen as an ideal situation. For Kemi (23, A), staying close to her family in the future was very important:

'I, too, therefore like - later when I will be having a family - to stay like this with my family. ... I want to stay close to my family, we get faced with the same problems, we share on different things.' (Kemi, 23, A)

Family played a central role in Eve's (25, A) vision of her future. She wanted to build a good family, and devote enough time to her children:

'I need to be a mom of a family so I need to prepare myself to cope with my husband to be or my children. ... When I get children and things like that I need to understand to make time for my kids because the kids they have lot of problems. So when I am near my children, I know how can I help them and what's their problem.' (Eve, 25, A)

Although the highly educated women in Group B did not criticise their childhood families for lack of educational support or contest weak and gendered negotiation positions, they seem to draw on their childhood experiences while discussing ideas of (future) parenthood.

That family as an essential source of social relations in the present and in the future was evident in all interview responses. Highly educated women primarily referred to their own nuclear families, whereas for younger women enrolled in secondary school, the term 'family' included siblings, grandparents, other relatives or even people of the same tribe. Physical proximity to the family was identified as a highly desirable factor in the present and for the future. Perhaps, because many of the interviewed women were living with members of their extended families, they considered ensuring staying close to families and helping them as a part of their future responsibilities. Helping others was seen as an essential function of future life. The interviewed believed that education should benefit the whole family and the surrounding community:

'I want to study so as to jump-start myself, i.e. together with all the community surrounding me; to study, to uplift myself as a person as well as the community surrounding me, to reach the place I desire.' (Kemi, 23, A)

In summary, the women considered being highly educated an essential part of adulthood and a good life. Therefore, attaining education was considered an important factor of the youth task. The role of family is critical in completion of the youth task, particularly for the women who were enrolled in education and who were financially dependent to their families. Whereas financial dependency was experienced as a burden, other forms of dependency were considered natural and ideals of independent adulthood were not present. Through their education and enhanced positions in the society, women wanted to help others and to give something back to their families.

Discussion and conclusion

Family relationships and family-related future goals seem relatively stable in the otherwise fragmented realities of young Tanzanian women. The women interviewed for this study represent different socio-economic groups and originate from different geographical locations and ethnic groups. Nevertheless, they were united in their struggle for pursuing

further education either at secondary or higher level. Despite the diversity in their backgrounds, their perceptions of their relationships with their families were surprisingly similar. Similarity in ideas related to family and relationships was also identified in Helgesson's (2006) cross-national and cross-gender study. To some extent, the future goals of the young women interviewed in this study resonate with Stambach's (2000) findings on the views of educated girls in rural areas. The ideals of independence, modern marriage and nuclear families prevalent among the educated young women in Stambach's (ibid.) study (see also Chege & Arnot, 2012) were also identified in our data, albeit combined with references to responsibilities towards the extended family and concern over its well-being. These responsibilities when not explicitly denoted were implied as undisputable and taken for granted.

Financial constraints were emphasised by all the women, even those from relatively privileged backgrounds. The highly educated women had been either selected to governmental secondary schools or had sought financial assistance from their (extended) families to be enrolled in private schools. Conversely, none of the interviewed women in secondary school were benefiting from public support or services in secondary education. Hence, receiving financial support from family members was an essential factor for them, which further enhanced their dependency on the family network and delayed achievement of economic independence. Financial dependence on others is not a favourable situation. While taking up employment and combining work with studies may seem as an additional burden, it also helped some women gain confidence. Thus, self-reliance, an important criterion for completion of the youth task, was obtained.

Interview responses revealed that family as a social network is central to people's current considerations and their future visions. For young women in secondary school, the most crucial (family) relationship is with the person who educates her. For most of the interviewees in both groups, this person was rarely their biological parent. Women in Group B viewed themselves as relatively independent and did not emphasise the challenges related to negotiations along their educational paths. In contrast, the younger women in Group A viewed family relations as hierarchical, marked by unequal power relations, constant negotiations and dependency. These features of the family relationships were seen as constraints to individual ambitions and as hindering the completion of the youth task by the women themselves. However, despite these constraints, in the absence of other sources of support, the extended family can be largely seen as an enabling factor for young women willing to educate themselves.

The concept of family (with fluctuating meanings) is firmly at the core of the individual goals of all interviewed women, and family relationships seem fundamental to existing and future well-being. The women believed that a good life can be built around good relationships and by focusing one's life around them. They also felt that individual educational and professional achievements should benefit the family and the community. Consequently, they anticipated additional obligations and responsibilities towards their families in the future (e.g. Latvala, 2006).

The interviewed women have assumed enormous responsibilities towards themselves, their family members and their future. They have to simultaneously juggle the roles of being a student, a daughter, a bread winner, a wife and a mother. The adult and non-adult aspects of life (Helgesson, 2006) are intertwined, resulting in sometimes controversial roles and reactions, particularly for the over-aged secondary school students. Referring to these women in secondary school as 'youth' does not give credit to the various roles that they have assumed. Contradictions in definition of youth are also present in the Tanzanian youth policy (URT, 2007). The legal age of marriage, for example, is 15. However, for the policy to meet the needs of the young people who have not completed their youth task in terms of moving from education to employment, an upward revision of this age to 35 years used in the current youth policy seems reasonable.

In this study of young Tanzanian women, the strong impact of social relationships on individual goals and their realisation has become evident. Hence, our findings support the criticism of individually focused definitions of the youth task (Arnot et al. 2012a; Helgesson, 2006; Tranberg Hansen, 2005) and encourage further research on the diverse meanings of attaining adulthood. As shown by Thomson et al. (2003) and in this study, individual differences in response and experience can emerge from influences at family and community levels. Analysing these complex interactions helps us to better understand the interconnections between education, work and family in women's lives. Evidence from Tanzania also shows the unquestionable centrality of family in the lives of educated African women. The family as both a constraining and enabling factor has proved to be a central determinant for individual advancement in education, especially in the context of inadequate public support to education. Therefore, when developing policies and strategies to improve educational levels and professional advancement of girls and women, issues related to family relationships should not be overlooked.

Acknowledgements:

This research has been conducted as part of a joint research project of University of Jyväskylä, Finland and University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania titled “Educated girls in and women in Tanzania – Sociocultural interpretations on the meaning of formal education”, funded by the Academy of Finland. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the IV international *Community, Work and Family Conference* on May 2011 held in Tampere, Finland. The authors wish to thank Dr. Elina Lehtomäki for providing valuable comments on the earlier drafts of the article.

Notes

ⁱ The economic activity rate or the labour force participation rate refers to engagement in economic activity by working or looking for work.

ⁱⁱ In fact, in the age group of 25–34 years, the proportion of economically active is 96.8%. (United Republic of Tanzania, Integrated Labour Force Survey 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Gross enrolment (GER) in lower secondary education increased from 20.2% in 2006 to 47.3% in 2010. Net enrolment rates increased from 13% in 2006 to 31% in 2010. GER in higher education in 2010 was 5.3%, of which 35.3% comprised female students. The decreasing trend in the proportion of female students is evident at different educational levels. (URT, Basic Education Statistics 2010).

^{iv} The official age of transition to upper-secondary school is 16 or 17.

^v See also the 2012 Unicef report “Cities and Children” in Tanzania.

^{vi} For comparison purposes, a taxi ride within the city area would cost 20 000 TSH, and a loaf of bread 800–2000 TSH.

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