

**Title:** Embracing universal access to secondary education in St. Vincent : what are the costs and consequences for parents in beneficiary households?

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**Abstract:**

Governments, multilateral donor agencies, civil society, development scholars all agree that education contributes to poverty reduction. In St Vincent and the Grenadines, this conviction underpinned the implementation of the Universal Access to Secondary Education (UASE) initiative of 2005 that provided all successful Vincentian primary school students with access to five years of secondary school education. The same sort of confidence in the ability of education to reduce poverty has also motivated Vincentian parents to embrace the UASE initiative, and to make a variety of decisions that have allowed their children to take advantages of the new educational opportunities for secondary education. This dissertation investigates these decisions; highlight the cultural and economic contexts in which these decisions have been made; and illuminate the contributions that fathers and mothers have each made to the success of the initiative. A core theme of this study is that while Vincentian households are decreasingly male dominated, major gender differences remain. In particular, while adult males in some poor households have borne additional burdens because of the UASE initiative, adult females have done so in virtually all households. Previous poverty studies using statistical methods to link education to poverty reduction have been insufficiently sensitive to social changes that have proven often necessary for parents to embrace expanded opportunities for the education of their children. Therefore, this thesis adopts a qualitative case study approach that is based on 49 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group meetings. This research strategy is well suited to capture people's lived experiences; their own understandings of these experiences; the reason why parents make important sacrifices for the sake of their children's education; and the related transformation of gender traditional gender roles and gendered division of labour, on the part of some, though importantly not all, mothers and fathers. Empirically, the study reflects on tensions and contradictions within households about these transformations, and the increasingly important role of women in household decision-making. These household circumstances have been an important part of the context from which poverty statistics have often emerged, and the study contributes a fuller account of the traditional expectations, practices and work orientation of Vincentian parents. A sound grasp of these socio-cultural and historical characteristics is vital in accounting for observed changes in parents' household relations. In documenting and accounting for household processes and orientations that have accompanied parental embrace of the UASE initiative: this study shows how fathers have exhibited a range of dispositions to their households. These have reflected their gendered orientation to the division of labour and their varying degrees of willingness to transform their orientation. In contrast to the variability of these fathers, women - in their roles as mothers - have almost invariably borne heavy burdens in terms of added domestic labour and sometimes paid labour outside the house. Attaching tremendous importance to their roles as mothers, women have taken this responsibility upon themselves in households where adult males simply refused or at least were very reluctant to do what was necessary. These sacrifices were necessary if their children were to attend secondary school. In this sense, the success of the UASE has come at an important cost to these mothers. Mothers' pro-school actions catalysed many unintended changes to household relations and cultural practices - changes not well documented in previous poverty studies. These findings have important implications for the focus of future poverty reductions studies and poverty reduction initiatives. Poverty related studies should expand their purview to embrace more nuanced analysis on the ways in which culture and poverty have interacted to shape the lived experience of people in diverse geographical locations and have in turn shaped responses to education-poverty reduction initiatives.