Gender Disparity and Its Impact on Higher Education

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Abstract

*Educational research on gender has expanded beyond biological differences to the study of social interactions, during which individuals construct gender-related achievement differences. The issue of gender disparity is one which has been publicly reverberating through society for decades. This paper "**Gender Disparity and Its Impact on Higher Education"** reviews a diverse literature on gender and higher education. Gender inequality is more*

pronounced in some aspects of the educational systems than in others. Explanations of gender inequality in higher education should distinguish between these different aspects of education and should explain those contexts in which women have attained parity as well as those in which they continue to lag behind. The methodology followed will be qualitative interpretative where the focus will be on the correlation between gender disparity and its impact on higher education i.e. What aspects of education exhibit the most pronounced gender disparities?, Has the educational system merely reflected developments in the rest of society? This paper will also deal with what is being done to solve this problem and what kind of remedial measures would be employed.

Key words: Gender, inequality, education, challenges, opportunities, remedial measures

Introduction

We live in a world in which education is characterized by extensive gender inequalities. At a time of enormously expanded access to all levels of education, of high aspirations for political participation and huge growth of knowledge economies, 77 million children are still out of school, 57 per cent of whom are girls (UNESCO 2006: 30). Seven-hundred and eighty-one million adults are illiterate and 64 per cent of these are women (UNESCO 2006: 59). Nearly one billion people, one-sixth of the world's population, have little or no education, either because they have never been to school or have had less than five years of schooling and left before acquiring key areas of knowledge and many useful skills. Two-thirds of these people are women and girls (Unterhalter 2007: 155).

Through a nationally driven strategy of ensuring that gender is integrated into education planning, there is optimism that gender equality will be achieved. While this approach requires longer-term commitment, it should ensure greater sustainability than more gradual approaches to gender reforms. The need to promote Gender equality lies embedded in the inequalities meted out to the majority of female population in the country and around the globe. This makes us realize that the capacity of a country to deliver itself on its commitments to the maintenance of gender parity and equality in education is determined by individuals and the organizations in which they work, especially in the field of education.

The relationship between gender and educational inputs, such as curricula, textbooks, pedagogy, and teacher training, are rarely made explicit. Similarly, the links among gender inequities, inputs, and outcomes are not sufficiently acknowledged. More importantly, the education sector has enormous potential to challenge and transform existing social relations, as well as to influence the acceptance of gender equality as a fundamental value and human right in society. Most research assumes that individuals' progress through the educational system in a sequential mode and that early school experiences set the stage for those that follow (Pallas 2003).

Gender equality is an often-used but infrequently defined term. Incorporating the concept of gender equality in the practical framework of education will assist the education programmers in designing, managing and evaluating different education projects. For this practicality to be achieved, the framework should reflect clear distinctions and demonstrate interrelationships among the concepts of gender parity, gender equity, and gender equality.

Gender Equality: A Conceptual Framework for Reaching All Learners

Parity and equity are the building blocks of equality in education. Gender equality means that there should be no discrimination on grounds of a person's sex in the allocation of resources or benefits, education and access to services in all sectors. Further, gender equality also means that males and females have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights and contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural, educational and political development. This makes us understand the nuances between equity and equality in the conceptual framework that reinforces other key issues in education such as access, quality, continuity, and relevance.

According to Wilson (2003), three-fold characterizations of rights in education are: Rights to education, Rights within education, and Rights through education. The first one can be equated to gender parity that gives equal participation for boys and girls in different aspects of education. The second one is similar to gender equality with regard to learning content, teaching methods, subject of choice, learning outcomes, etc. This is possible when there is non-discrimination in educational opportunities. The third one is equal career opportunities, political participation, wages, and employment. These rights are indivisible as they produce gender parity and equality. Focusing on these rights can capture the dynamics of gender equality as they

operate within the education system. In contrast to the above discussion, UNESCO (2002) argues, the links between rights to education, rights within education and rights through education are not linear. Rights to education do not guarantee rights within education, and neither do rights within education secure rights through education

However, according to UNESCO (2003) the leap to equality in education and gender parity mean different things. Parity is achieved when the same proportion of boys and girls, relative to their respective age groups, enter the education system, achieve educational goals, and advance through the different cycles. There is no doubt that to achieve equality in education parity in enrolment is necessary, but this alone will not suffice (Subramanian n.d.). The process of treating girls and boys fairly is Equity, but at the same time it does not imply treating all learners the same because many factors could hinder students in getting a chance to achieve equitable outcomes. A basic principle of equity is equality of opportunity among people who according to the World Bank, (2005) says that "a person's life achievements should be determined primarily by his or her gender, social or family background." For example, in Egypt and in Tanzania, girls were provided scholarships to help reduce the disparity in boys' and girls' school enrolment and science camps were organized for girls to conduct experiments respectively.

These were provided by the USAID programs. Such equity strategies should be reflected in policies and practices directed toward learners, teachers, and the community, which in turn would eventually help attain gender equality over the long term. Measuring changes that take place and adequate monitoring should be given utmost priority. The data that is collected should be categorized to illuminate the differential impact of activities on males and females. The enrolment and completion gap between girls and boys has been considerably closed over the last two decades as a result of international efforts in education. But, inadequate attention has been given to the retention and achievement, or the quality and relevance of education. Since 1990 the international focus has been on gender parity in education and this has helped improve the enrolment of girls in all regions. By 2000 the enrolment rates had almost reached near parity. The only exceptions were South Asia and sub Saharan Africa where significant challenges remain despite increases of ten per cent (10%) or more in the gross enrolment rates for girls.

The terms gender parity and gender equality are reflected in one of the six EFA goals elucidated in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) as follows:

1. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
2. Gender parity and equality in international development goals.

The Dakar Framework for Action represents to date the most important international political commitment towards promoting Education for All. The framework contains two gender-based goals. In Article 7 [ii] participants commit to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by2005. The second commitment is to achieve gender equality in education by 2015. These goals are fully supported by the Millennium Development Goals, which reiterate the importance of ensuring completion of a full course of good quality primary schooling by2015 [Goal 2], the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary schooling by 2005, and the achievement of gender equality in all levels of education no later than 2015.

Therefore, in addition to gender parity and gender equality, we need to have a clear perspective on the concept of gender equity. This will help measure the effectiveness of measures adopted to achieve gender parity and gender equality while they are in operation. Thus, gender equity can mean the proper distribution of resources between women and men in a way to address the inequalities in the investment and capacities of women and men. That is, gender equity measures are those that recognize that in order to promote equality between women and men to, within and through education, (the three "rights" discussed above) special measures are required to overcome the prior inequalities that constrained women's access to equal access of opportunities not only in the field of education but also in employment, politics and other personal choices.

Pattern of Gender Inequalities

Gender inequalities between women and men are constructed by gender inequality in education and are related to other spheres that intersect with education. Given that gender inequality is constructed both through formal social norms and rules [for instance, laws and statutes] as well as through

'unwritten norms and shared understandings', (Kabeer, 2003), it is also important to ensure that progress towards equality encompasses both changes in formal laws and institutional practices, as well as the informal, shared understandings within societies regarding the opportunities and life chances to be enjoyed by men and women in education and society.

Gender inequalities exist among the rich and the poor, but they tend to be greater among the poor, especially for inequalities in capabilities and opportunities. Primary, secondary, and tertiary educations are not separate components but are an integral part of an education system. Widening the scope of measuring progress towards gender equality will necessitate some amount of conceptual openness to explore the range of pathways that may exist in different contexts and explain growth towards gender equality in education. Assessing development towards gender equality, therefore, requires measuring meaningful progress towards the right to education. Both quantitative and qualitative information on a wide range of phenomena that support the rights of men and women, to, within and through education needs to be assessed. Achieving gender parity is just one step towards gender equality in and through education. International consensus on education priorities accords an important place to achieving gender justice in the educational sphere.

 A move towards substantive gender equality thus requires recognizing that discrimination arises from differential valuation of what it is men and women contribute, giving rise therefore to prevailing inequalities in rewards and resources allocated to men and women. These differences are very obvious in societies where girls are not encouraged to pursue their education when compared to boys. This could be a result of their socially constructed roles as careers, as they are in societies where the higher academic achievement of girls goes unnoticed and undervalued in relation to the wider economy of society.

Developing societies however, have different patterns of gender inequalities from those in most industrialized societies (Buchmann & Hannum 2001). A gender dynamic which takes into account the relations and interaction between males and females is a good approach to be taken towards achieving parity of gender in education. There are four dimensions that should be considered such as, equality of access, equality in the learning process,

equality of educational outcomes, and equality of external results in order to achieve equality in educational sector.

Gender is a social construct that defines and differentiates the roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations of women and men. However, it is the inherent biological differences between males and females that have formed the foundation for the social norms which demarcate appropriate behaviours for women and men and that in turn decide their roles in the social, economic and political sectors.

Gender Equality in Education Policy

In many countries, research has demonstrated that a uniform approach to education delivery – where girls and boys receive the same inputs – overlooks the different educational needs of girls and boys and can serve to reinforce existing social biases and inequalities, to the detriment of girls. These biases and inequalities are both internal to the education system (education supply factors) as well as external to education, emerging in the family, community and broader society (education demand factors). Thus, we understand that government policy commitments in education need to go beyond a focus on gender parity to promote gender equality. The Education policy needs to be developed based on the understanding that girls and boys do not start on the same level, and that the challenges they face in education are a reflection of broader inequalities between men and women in society.

Hence, a gender equality approach to education policy should analyze and address factors in the broader social context which affect a family's decision to send their girls and boys to school and, to address any disparities in the treatment of girls and boys, and the opportunities open to them, which affect their willingness to stay in school and to achieve academically. Through an in-depth understanding of the education supply and demand factors which contribute to inequalities in education for girls and boys, the education policy ought to clearly articulate their vision to see the desired change in terms of providing equity in education access, and opportunity.

Much has been talked about 'gender parity', 'gender equality', and 'gender equity' in education. Gender parity in education is a rather narrow aspiration that simply tells us the equal numbers of girls and boys present in the school. Many countries are making progress on gender parity, but the limited nature

of the concept means that more challenging dimensions of gender equality and equity are not being adequately monitored, measured and discussed.

Gender equality and gender equity

There is no precise difference between these two terms, exactly what they mean, or how they should be used since they are often used interchangeably. However, it is generally agreed that to achieve gender equity/equality, there is a need to remove deep-seated barriers to equality of opportunity for both sexes – such as discriminatory laws, customs, practices, and institutional processes. This process of working towards equality is sometimes called practicing equity. It also entails developing the freedoms of all individuals, irrespective of gender, to choose outcomes they value. Gender mainstreaming seeks to ensure that organizations and institutions express gender equality as one of their aims and that they actively promote it in their work. There is a lack of emphasis in the education sector on gender analysis, gender training, to redress gender inequalities. This is what mainstreaming should be about. This takes us to provision of quality education: an education system that ensures education of all girls and boys which is personally and socially valuable. The necessary dimensions of quality education that can achieve gender equality in higher education should include the content of learning materials and the curriculum, the nature of the teaching and learning materials, teacher-pupil relations, and gender sensitive use of resources. Additionally, it should provide the freedom to enter all levels of education, to learn and participate in safety and security, to promote and enjoy economic, political and cultural opportunities. This then brings us to the remedial measures and interventions that are necessary to promote gender equality at school level and also at the higher education level.

Remedial Measures or Interventions

Buchmann & DiPrete (2006) find that the relationship between family background and college completion has changed for men and women over the second half of the twentieth century. A number of interventions that have proven effective for increasing girls' participation in primary school may also apply to post primary education. These include making schooling more affordable by reducing costs and offering targeted scholarships, building secondary schools close to girls' homes, and making schools girl-friendly. Additionally, the content, quality, and relevance of education must be improved through curriculum reform, teacher training, and other actions (Millennium Development Goals).

Social norms that have perpetuated discrimination and inequality must be eradicated through education. All interventions taken to promote gender equality in education must, therefore, be transformational in nature. In other words, education has to serve as the means for transforming attitudes and beliefs that have previously hindered the achieving of gender parity. More importantly, the education sector has enormous potential to challenge and transform existing social relations, as well as to influence the acceptance of gender equality as a fundamental value and human right in society.

This brings us to the importance of individual capacity which comprises the quality, skills and commitment of each policy maker, administrator, and teacher. Teachers must be able to teach both girls and boys effectively to ensure that gender inequalities are not strengthened in the classroom. Senior administrators should be able to carry out gender analysis; to identify approaches as a result of this analysis, to help put these approaches into practice, and to monitor progress. Hence gender training can play a significant role in building the capacity of administrators and teachers. Effective training needs both to raise awareness of the inclusion of gender equality and women's empowerment and the third Millennium Development Goal is a reminder that many of those promises have not been kept, while simultaneously offering yet another international policy opportunity to implement them. Thus gender equity measures need to be both gender-aware and transformative of gender relations in the ways in which they operate, within the possibilities offered by the environment in question.

Conclusion

Much of what has been discussed in this paper has been known for decades, but it has been difficult to translate that knowledge into development policies and practice in the required scale so as to bring about a radical transformation in the equal distribution of opportunity and outcomes for both boys and girls in the field of higher education.

Gender inequalities exist among the rich and the poor, but they tend to be greater among the poor, especially for inequalities in capabilities and opportunities. Primary, secondary, and tertiary educations are not separate components but are an integral part of an education system.

Disparity in case of women's participation in higher education is an important dimension which demands continued scholarly and political

recognition. Women's participation in the paid labor force has for instance risen significantly over the past decades, but it has been accompanied by a concomitant rise in the feminization of poverty, making the sharp conceptual polarity between gender and poverty untenable (Beneria, 2003). Informed by the implications of this rethinking, the analysis above has sought to outline one approach to the policy conundrum in developing countries over targeting of educationally vulnerable groups, and to broader academic debates on the changing scenario of providing equal opportunities for both boys and girls (men and women) in the development and educational transitions that would help reduce to a considerable range the existing disparity at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

For many girls, gender inequality is a feature both of their lives and of their experience of education. Gender equality in teaching is a central component of a good-quality education. To increase equality of access to education, and to sustain progress towards Education For All, it is necessary to develop teaching methods, new ways of learning, and curricula that enable girls and boys to participate in learning as equals. The culture of a school and its practices outside of formal lessons, for example, in the playground or during meal times, also affect how girls and boys learn. So gender equality needs to be a central part of the development of the school curriculum and ways of teaching.

The process of determining what works and what does not work begins by providing meaningful opportunities for girls, boys, women and men to express their education needs and interests. The need of the hour is an education that promotes social change and contributes to building a just and democratic society; a society where education is a right and where girls and boys, men and women can exercise this right alongside their right to freedom from violence and discrimination and their right to life and livelihoods. This calls for an expanded understanding of gender equality in education that seeks not only equal numbers of girls and boys attending and completing school but one that is ready to transform its policies and practices in different contexts and different types of organizations and institutions. It requires understanding, capacity, political support, and adequate finances and management. It requires connections between different types of initiatives, because piecemeal, small interventions cannot adequately meet the challenges outlined. As the paper has shown, there is already a lot known

about what good quality gender equitable education looks like and what happens when people put it into practice.

However, there is much more that needs to be done and as gender gaps close worldwide, there are increasing questions about the relative importance of gender as a focal point for addressing schooling and inequality in developing countries.

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