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Challenges to gender equality and access in education: Perspectives from South Africa and Sudan

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Abstract

The achievement of the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2015 is a global concern. Worldwide many countries have committed themselves to various initiatives and efforts to improve children's access to education, particularly girls, who are often denied access to education owing to entrenched socio-cultural practices and gender stereotypes.

In post-conflict countries like South Africa and Sudan educational changes have taken place over the past decade. As a result, inclusive and non-discriminatory education policies have been adopted in these countries to redress inequalities in education, policies that target not only free and equal access to education but also improving the quality of education, particularly among the poor and marginalised communities in these two countries. Both countries are, however, still struggling to address issues of equal access to education and gender equality owing to cultural and socio-economic factors in the two contexts. This paper explores experiences of female children in primary schools in selected contexts in South Africa and Sudan and the extent to which their experiences reflect unequal opportunities of access to education and gender inequality. Ultimately what becomes clear is that access to education and gender equality should go beyond numbers to include equality in terms of learning opportunities and resources, treatment at school, equal participation and employment opportunities across socio-cultural and racial lines.

Key words: access, Millennium Development Goals, Education for All, gender equality, universal primary education, socio-cultural factors

Introduction

The notion of the right to education along with equal access and gender equality was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations

1948). The UDHR set the principles for a global acknowledgement of the significance of education for all in general and gender equality more specifically (Mundy 2006; Ghandani, Balani & Smith 2007), and was followed by a number of global declarations, documents and conferences all of which endorsed the accepted notion of gender equality in education, e.g. Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In the 1990 EFA World Conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, it was noted that 100 million children had no access to primary education. By 2000, this number had increased to 113 million (UNESCO 2000). As a result of this, 10 years after Jomtien the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, produced the Dakar Framework for Action, which reaffirmed the commitment to achieve Education for All by 2015. The Dakar Framework for Action, along with the adoption of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, also aimed at alleviating poverty, promoting universal primary education (UPE) and gender equality in education by 2015 (Arnot & Fennell 2008; Colclough 2008).

Since the adoption of the MDGs intense scholarly and policy attention has been paid to issues of access to education, including enrolment rates (Baker & Wiseman 2009; Motala et al. 2009; Jansen 2008; Alexander 2008; Pendlebury 2008; Wiseman 2008; Ghandani et al. 2007; Shindler & Fleisch 2007; Prinsloo 2006; Unterhalter 2005; Chisholm & September 2005; Bendera 1999; Heward 1999; Colclough, et al. 1998; Brock & Cammish 1997). Issues of gender have also come under scrutiny in many countries in the Global South and on the African continent in particular (Chabaye, Rembe & Newman 2009; Diko 2007; Dunne 2007; Fox 1999; Rose & Tembon 1999; Bendera 1999; Wynd 1999). In the context of this attention, many countries in the Global South witnessed a remarkable increase and progress in enrolment rates for children of school-going age. For example, by 1997 the gross enrolment rate (GER)[1] increase in South Africa reached a peak of 125% (Perry & Arends 2004 cited in Shindler and Fleisch 2007: 142). As the democratic government took over in South Africa in 1994 efforts were made to facilitate access to education by providing social development services such as feeding schemes and providing transport for children who had to travel long distances to school, all of which were focused on keeping children in school (Gamede 2005).[2] By 2007 South Africa was close to reaching universal primary education (UPE). Ninety-five percent of school-going age were

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1. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) is the total enrolment at a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school year. The limitation of the GER is that it can exceed 100% owing to the inclusion of over-aged and under-aged pupils because of early or late entrants and grade repetition. A rigorous interpretation of the GER needs additional information to assess the extent of repetition, late entrants, etc. It is, however, important to note that in South Africa during the early years after apartheid there were a significant number of late entrants and repetition in the school system. This is also the case in Sudan. Given the constraints, this article is unable to explore these issues further at this point.

enrolled in school. Girls' enrolment numbers were slightly higher (96%) than those of boys, who formed 95,6% of the total population enrolled in schools (Shozi, 2010; Shindler & Fleisch 2007: 145). Likewise, Sudan experienced a GER increase in 2007/2008, but with a gap of 12% between the number of boys and girls who had access to school; here boys had more access (77,7%) than girls, who were at 65,7% (Sudanese Federal Ministry of General Education 2008).

Whilst there is evidence of greater access to education in both South Africa and Sudan since 2000 (Sudanese Federal Ministry of General Education 2008; Gamede 2005; Shindler and Fleisch 2007), it appears that females have not benefited equally (Diko 2007; Nomlomo, in press). For example, in both countries there are reports of sexual harassment, gender-based violence, rape, assault and negative traditional/cultural practices directed towards girls such as early marriage, particularly in Sudan, which have affected their access to education (Prinsloo 2006, Unterhalter 2005; Wilson 2003; Farag, in press). These factors have often led to girls dropping out of school (Wilson 2003), resulting in 'invisible forms of exclusion' (Prinsloo 2006), all of which have impacted negatively not only on girls' participation and performance at school, but also on the gender equality gap between themselves and boys.

This article focuses on the challenges to access to education and gender equality in South Africa and Sudan. It looks into how gender inequality manifests itself in schools in order to understand the factors that prevent girls' access to education in selected schools in South Africa and Sudan. Through the use of a qualitative research approach, the researchers explored the lived experiences of female children in primary schools in selected contexts in the two countries and the extent to which such experiences reflected unequal opportunities of access to education and gender inequality. It is argued that analysis of access to education should not be based merely on the number of boys and girls who enrol in school, but should also consider other factors such as social class and cultural practices that may prevent learners' equal access to education.

Access to education and gender equality in South Africa and Sudan

The concept of 'access to education' can be traced back to the circumstances of 19th century Europe and North America when compulsory mass education was introduced (Ghandani et al. 2007: 10). 'Access' has been a matter of concern since the end of colonialism in many African countries, and also since the end of apartheid in South Africa (Jansen 2008). With the EFA movement in the early 1990s, the concept of 'access' or 'universal access to education' became dominant, but its meaning was not clearly specified (Alexander 2008). Various interpretations of the concept of 'access to

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2. However, owing to the change in the admission policy for Grade 1 or stricter age admission requirements in South African schools that came into effect in 2000, the GER increase subsequently dropped to 104% in 2003 (Gamede 2005).

education' were developed. It is sometimes defined in terms of enrolment rates or physical access to schooling (Shindler & Fleisch 2007; Motala et al. 2009; Ghandani et al. 2007), but it is also linked with concepts such as 'means of entry' and 'outcomes' of schooling (Gamede 2005). In terms of these interpretations, access to education has come to refer to both physical access and access to knowledge. The latter links with the term 'epistemological access', which was coined by the late Wally Morrow in his article *Entitlement and Achievement in Education* in 1994 (Morrow 1994).

Morrow (1994) distinguished between physical (or formal) and epistemological access. Physical access refers to the physical admission of the learner to school, while epistemological access refers to access to the knowledge and meaningful learning required to achieve competency levels (Motala et al. 2009; Jansen 2008). An important concern in this discussion, given the plethora of factors influencing the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in disadvantaged or poor communities, is whether physical access can be translated into meaningful learning or epistemological access (Motala et al. 2009: 252). Behind this concern is the fact that children in the same school or classroom may not have equal access to education owing to factors like gender, race, poverty, disability, etc., which may impede their opportunities for systematic or meaningful learning (Pendlebury 2008: 25).

Focusing on gender, the discrimination and oppression experienced by women and children through various social policies and cultural practices in different parts of the world is a matter of concern (Arnot & Fennell 2008). This concern has led several international and national organisations making important contributions towards gender equality, women's liberation and empowerment (Arnot & Fenell 2008; Unterhalter 2008; Colclough 2008; Hains 2009; Joseph 2009; Mehran 2009). These contributions notwithstanding, there remains disagreement around the meaning of gender equality. In some contexts it is understood in terms of physical access to education, i.e. the equal enrolment rates of boys and girls in schools (Arnot & Fennell 2008; Unterhalter 2008). In this approach, having equal numbers of boys and girls in a school is regarded as gender equality. It is this, against the narrow gap in GER between boys and girls (96% for girls and 95,6% for boys) of school-going age, that has led to the misconception that there is no gender inequality in education in South Africa (Diko 2007; Unterhalter 2005). There are other factors at work, however, including the intersection between poverty, social class, power and race, which create disadvantages for girls (Holmarsdottir 2011; Holmarsdottir, Ekne, & Augestad, 2011; Subrah-maniam, 2005; Colclough 2008; Unterhalter 2005). These manifest themselves in terms of learning opportunities, treatment in school, equal participation and employment opportunities (UNESCO 2003/2004; Pendlebury 2008; Diko, 2007; Prinsloo, 2006; Unterhalter, 2005). Given the political history of both South Africa and Sudan, especially that of conflict marked by discrimination, human oppression and civil war, this article seeks to understand the impact of these factors on gender equality in South Africa and Sudan.

Contexts of the study

Sudan has recently, for political and ideological reasons (Breidlid 2012), been divided into North and South Sudan.[3] Despite its rich natural resources and fertile land, it remains one of the least economically developed countries in the world. The long-lasting war, the ongoing conflicts and the resulting separation of the north and the south in 2011 had a deeply negative impact on the economy of the country. During the war torture, murder, rape and enslavement were common. The quality of social services provided to people deteriorated and broke down. These factors, coupled with inequalities in traditional power structures, left women, particularly in southern Sudan and other regions, in a precarious position, suffering from some of the poorest material conditions in the world (UNDP 2007). While about 46,5% of the total population live in poverty, the majority of the poor comprise women and internally displaced people (IDPs) living in rural areas, making up about 12% of the total population (UNDP 2011). There is also a high rate of unemployment in the country. Youth unemployment has reached around 18% (Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics 2010).

Likewise, South Africa experiences high rates of poverty and unemployment, particularly in rural areas, but also in many of the townships. Unemployment is closely related to education and also linked to migration, both intra-urban migration (Carrim & Soudien 1999; Lemon & Battersby-Lennard 2009) and intra-provincial migration (Kok et al. 2003). Of specific concern is that segment of the population in the 15–24 age cohort that is neither in education nor employed. A recent study by Mayer et al. (2011) shows that youth unemployment in the 15–24 age group stands at 48,2%, and is higher among black females than males in South Africa. The unemployment ratio between females and males is skewed, with that of females standing at 67% and males at 53%. This is attributed to poverty, teenage pregnancy and a lack of appropriate skills owing to incomplete secondary education or high drop-out rates between Grades 10 and 12 (Mayer et al. 2011). The statistics show that despite higher rates of access to education in South Africa, the unemployment rate is increasing. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation found that 41,6% of the youth in the 18–24 age group in 2007 were not in education/training or employment and not disabled (Cloete 2009).

It should be pointed out further that both Sudan and South Africa are post-conflict countries. South Africa went through the struggle against apartheid, while Sudan has been involved in two civil wars for roughly 50 years. In South Africa, women, of all the social groups in the country, were the most seriously affected by the apartheid system. They were subjected to triple oppression: as women and on the grounds of both 'race'

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3. It should be noted that the Gender Equality, Education and Poverty (GEEP) Project, which the data reported on here is part of, began in 2008, when Sudan was one country. Thus, the data presented in this article was collected in the Sudan before separation and as such the country is discussed as one for the purposes of this article.

and social class. The subjection of women in Sudan was even more profound. The ascent to power of the Islamist military government in 1989 resulted in

> [the] banning [of] most women's organisations and, in general, political parties; prohibiting much coeducation; forcing religious education; harassing women who were not in 'Islamic dress'; policing women morally in public places; firing or reassigning many professional women while imprisoning women street vendors of local brew; and generally curtailing all civil liberties (Hale 2009: 147).

Research methods

The data reported in this article are derived from studies conducted for the Gender Equality, Education and Poverty (GEEP) Project between 2009 and 2011, and from the findings of a collaborative research project between South Africa, Sudan and Norway. GEEP focused on key issues related to the EFA movement. It paid particular attention to the MDGs and the ways the gender goals in education in post-conflict Sudan and South Africa were addressed.

The total sample for the purpose of this article comprised 39 participants: 11 teachers, six parents and 22 learners. Of the 39 participants, 24 were drawn from the Sudanese sample and 15 from South Africa. In Sudan data collection occurred before the separation of Sudan into two independent states (as noted earlier). Data were collected from two co-educational government schools in the Khartoum state Omdurman, which now forms part of North Sudan. Given the instability produced by the war, we chose two schools that accommodated learners of more or less the same socio-economic status and experiences as a source of the data. One of these schools served the children of semi-nomadic people[4] and the second accommodated children from internally displaced and poor communities.

In South Africa two schools were used for data collection: one in a black township in the Western Cape and the second in a remote and poor rural area of the Libode district in the Eastern Cape Province. For the purposes of this article use was made of data collected in the latter school, as it matched the situation of the two schools selected in Sudan in terms of socio-economic status and the kind of life that learners were exposed to at home and within the community. The rural school in South Africa was classified as a Quintile 1 school with very limited resources and facilities compared with township or urban schools. The quintile system in South Africa categorises schools according to parents' income, unemployment rate and level of education (Kanjee & Chudgar 2009). Quintiles (Qs) range between 1 and 5; Q1 schools are the poorest schools and Q5 are the least poor schools. The poorer schools receive higher state support than the less poor schools (Kanjee & Chudgar 2009).

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4. The semi-nomadic group referred to here are in fact settled nomads who for one reason or another have settled in villages, but the thinking and cultural practices related to nomadic mode of life are maintained. Thus, it is more the cultural traditions that are important here than the actual way of life. This is particularly important in this article, as the cultural traditions can and often do affect the education of girls.

The purposive sample (see the table below) was drawn from Sudan and South Africa in order to gain insight into how gender inequality affected learners' access to education in the two contexts. In both contexts the principals and senior teachers were involved in the study in order to get their perspective as school managers on how they understood gender equality and the impact of gender on learners' access to school. Other teachers were interviewed in order to understand how they dealt with gender issues in their teaching and the extent to which their understanding of gender equality influenced their interaction with children. Children from Grades 6, 7 and 8 were selected, as they were the most senior learners in the schools. The assumption was that they could speak with more experience and confidence about gender-related experiences in their lives.

When data collection started in 2009, the learners were in Grade 8 in South Africa, while their counterparts in Sudan were attending Grades 6 and 7. The reason for the difference in grade levels had to do with the age range in which girls begin to drop out of school in the two countries. In Sudan girls tend to start dropping out of school around Grade 5-6 (Sudanese Federal Ministry of General Education 2008), while in South Africa girls begin dropping out in Grade 8 (Grant & Hallman 2006). The reason for the difference in drop-out in the two contexts is unclear at this juncture.

Sample of participants in Sudan and South Africa

	Sudan		South Africa		
Sample	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Teachers	4	2 (headmasters) and 2 (assistant teachers)	2 (deputy principal and head of department)	1 (headmaster)	11
Parents	3	1	2	0	6
Learners	6	6	5	5	22
Total	**13**	**11**	**9**	**6**	**39**

The main focus of all the data collected was to understand challenges to gender equality and access to education in both contexts. In both countries data collection involved interviews with teachers and parents, focus group discussions and individual interviews with learners. The main focus of the interviews with teachers and parents was on how they understood gender equality and its influence on children's access to meaningful learning. Two focus group discussions were conducted with boys and girls 14 to 16 years of age in each context, one with boys and the other with girls. In these discussions the children talked about their experiences at home and at school in order to highlight issues of gender inequality. The learners who participated in the focus group discussions were individually interviewed to investigate their views on gender equality in more detail. Ethical considerations with regard to voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality were adhered to during data collection in both contexts.

Permission to conduct research in the schools was granted by the Khartoum Province in Sudan and the Eastern Cape Department of Education in South Africa. Permission was sought from teachers and parents who were interviewed, and from parents whose children participated in the study.

Data were analysed qualitatively in terms of the broad themes and categories specified for the study, namely gender equality and access to education. Although the findings of the study cannot be generalised owing to the small samples that were used, they provide rich information on girls' experiences in schools and the extent to which they reflect gender inequality and barriers to children's meaningful learning/access.

Research findings

Common in the findings for both countries were the factors of poverty, school environment, safety and security and socio-cultural practices. These appeared not only to impact on children's access to schooling, but also to determine the nature of the gender inequalities experienced in both countries.

Poverty, gender and access to education
The analysis of teachers' responses suggested that poverty on its own was not material in preventing children from attending school in either country, especially at primary school level. In South Africa, this was in large part due to the commitment of the government, which had made provision for food (feeding scheme) and non-payment of fees in poor communities, factors that could be seen as contributing to keeping young children in school. However, drop-out was experienced at secondary or high school level owing to high teenage pregnancy rates and parents' financial difficulties where they had to pay school fees. A deputy-principal explained:

> Another thing is that children get food here at school … that motivates them to attend school because at other homes food is scarce … parents are struggling … they are unemployed (deputy principal, August 2011)

This finding corresponds with that of Shindler and Fleisch (2007: 136), who pointed out that despite the historical disadvantages and poverty of the former homelands in South Africa, more children have physical access to education in the poorest provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo than in the better-resourced and more prosperous provinces of Gauteng and the Western Cape. It appears that poverty is itself a positive factor in the decision of parents to send their children to school. The belief is that access to education will result in socio-economic gains and the alleviation of poverty:

> Well, I cannot afford not to send my children to school ... How will I get out of this poverty ... in this struggle I'm confronting? I'm only hoping that when they finish (schooling), the situation will be better … I don't care even if I don't have money … children must wake up and go to school (parent, August 2011)

In Sudan, parents' reaction to poverty and schooling seems to be different. When

families experience financial difficulties, some decide to keep their children at home and it is often girls who are affected by such decisions. As a result, some of the girls drop out of school to do casual jobs with their mothers and others get married at an early age to reduce the economic burden of their schooling.

> There are remarkable numbers of pupils who drop out because of the school fees; this is more observed among girls. They are the first ones to be taken out when the family cannot pay the fees, then they are either encouraged to get married or take the burden of the domestic chores (female teacher, November 2010).

The response above indicates that while early marriage for girls is condemned and even seen as a form of child abuse, some families force their girls to get married in order to reduce poverty. Likewise, cases of forced marriage and abduction of young girls in South Africa are not uncommon, especially in certain remote rural areas where *lobola* (bride price) in the form of cows, sheep and goats is regarded as economic wealth that upgrades the social status of the girl's father.

As a result of poverty some young boys also drop out of school to work to contribute to their family income in Sudan.

> I stopped going to school because I am from a poor family with limited financial resources. My family failed to pay my school fees and buy me uniform and books in addition to the daily money I need for food and transport. Instead I found selling in the street more attractive and with economic benefits. Through selling I am able to have money to support my family and at the same time I become economically independent, buying everything that I need (Ahmed, 10 years old, June 2010)

The boys' response indicates that from an early age boys are expected to provide for their families, and such responsibility is likely to develop into feelings of authority and dominance as the boys grow older. While similar cases are experienced in South Africa, especially in urban or industrialised areas, data from the Eastern Cape school provide a different perspective. In this school, three of the five young boys who were interviewed believed that education, rather than dropping out of school, would enable them to provide adequate financial support for their families. They aspired towards better education and good job opportunities as doctors, lawyers and engineers so that they could take good care of their future families. The responses from three of the boys also illustrated the value of circumcision as one of the factors that shaped boy's masculinity or manhood and a sense of maturity and responsibility. For example, one of boys in the Eastern Cape school had this to say:

> I would like to go to university and study to be a lawyer ... have a big house and a nice car and earn good money to support my wife and children. I must build a big house for my parents. But I must first go to the bush, so that other men can recognise me as a man who can build a home (Zamile, October 2010)

However, the boys' sense of responsibility appeared to be motivated by traditional values that perpetuated gender stereotypes. For instance, four of the five boys displayed patriarchal attitudes in terms of being future heads of families who had to be providers for their families, while girls had to be 'good wives' who had to bear children and cook for their husbands. The boys' responses also emphasised gendered

roles that portrayed themselves as future men or husbands who had to do better jobs than their wives. The good jobs for the boys seemed to be a source of power and domination over their future wives, as one of the boys said:

> I have to study very hard to succeed. If I have a good job my wife will respect me, but it must be a better job so that my wife cannot undermine me … and ask me to cook and wash nappies … A wife must cook and take care of the children because as a man I'm busy … I'm important … I'm the head of the family … (the wife) must be good and respect me (Thando, October 2010)

The excerpts above illustrate that while poverty is a challenge in both countries, South African children, both boys and girls, seem to have better opportunities of physical access to education than the children in Sudan. However, there are other factors in the schooling system that favour boys over girls, some of which are discussed below.

School environment, safety and retention

According to Jansen (2008), retention is a major problem in terms of access to education. Access to education is inclusive and meaningful if it ensures the enrolment of all children (boys and girls) of school-going age and strengthens their retention, progression, achievement and completion (Oxfam 2005). In both Sudan and South Africa, it was apparent that the school environments where the research was conducted were not conducive to learning. The school in the Eastern Cape, for example, did not have enough teaching space or resources. As a result, some classes were accommodated in a house close to the school. The principal shared an office with his secretary and the deputy principal. There was no library or adequate teaching resources.

Furthermore, three of the five girls who were interviewed in the South African school expressed concerns about violence in the school at both the hands of the teachers, but also their male peers. Boys see girls as their 'property' and feel that it is their right to take what they want from them. During the focus group discussion with the South African boys they were asked if 'boys pressure girls to have sex':

> They pressure them, but the girls will say they don't want to … now boys end up raping them … If you pressure them they can say I don't want this, you must know that we rape them because they don't want this but we do it. … the boy he is getting control, he has the control and takes the girl and do it without permission (focus group discussion with boys, South Africa, 19 October 2010)

Although research suggests that victims of gender-based violence are often reluctant to report the crime (Human Rights Watch 2007), two of the five girls who were interviewed in this study said that they did tell their teachers, parents or guardians about cases of violence. However, such reporting was often met with disbelief by parents or guardians or if it happened outside of school, the school did not see it is an issue for them. There was evidence that girls were harassed or assaulted by boys at school, and they often did not receive protection from teachers (Nomlomo, in press).

> If it happens outside of school we don't report it because the school doesn't think it is their problem … Also you can't get help outside of school, because others pass and they think

you are playing and our parents don't believe us as these are the people we have known our entire life, so they say we are making it up (interview with girl, South Africa, 29 March 2011)

Access to school was influenced by the distance children had to travel to school, especially for the children in Sudan, although the education policy in Sudan suggested that the distance to school should not exceed three kilometres. In certain South African rural areas children also walked long distances to school, especially when they got to secondary or high school level. There were fewer secondary or high schools than primary schools. Travelling long distances to school impacted negatively on children's academic participation at school, as it led to physical and mental exhaustion or arriving late and regular absence from school. Girls were mostly affected by the long walk between their homes and the school and some of the rape incidents occurred on the way to and from schools. Parents therefore feared for the safety of their children, especially girls, as explained by the headmaster of one of the schools in Sudan:

> Some parents feel reluctant to send their daughters a long distance to school. They have the fear that they might be attacked or even raped on their way to school (headmaster, November 2010)

Rape cases were also common in South Africa. For instance, more than 55 000 rape cases were reported in South Africa in 2004/5 and 40% of those rapes were committed against children (UNICEF 2003). Whilst cases of sexual abuse of boys existed in South Africa, they were not as common as sexual abuse of girls, which often took the form of rape.

Socio-cultural practices and gender equality

Children's access to and participation in education are influenced by certain socio-cultural practices, especially in developing countries (Fox 1999; Stromquist 1999; Unterhalter 1999). In both countries the impact of socio-cultural beliefs and practices was apparent, and learners displayed internalised beliefs and understandings that perpetuated gender imbalances while keeping girls out of school, especially in Sudan. For instance, the participants interviewed in Sudan indicated that the early arranged marriages and men's hegemony were the major challenge for girls' education. Girls were socialised early in life for their roles as wives and mothers and parents disregarded the value of education in relation to their cultural norms. As a result, many parents stopped girls from attending school when they reached the age of puberty, as they were to be prepared for married life as wives and mothers.

> These attitudes represent the different cultural stereotypes that are mainly derived from ... traditional norms. These norms view the education of girls as irrelevant to their future gendered roles as wives and mothers. Moreover, these people socialise their daughters in these roles at an early age, even before the age of 12-15 years, the time that they should get married (headmaster, November 2010)

Whilst data showed that girls and boys had free access to schooling and that parents recognised the value of education for their children in the Eastern Cape school (South

Africa), it was apparent that marriage was what defined a girl, although this def-inition was not imposed on them, as was the case for the girls in Sudan. In the follow-ing excerpt, for example, the girl acknowledged the value of being a girl. She aspired to be a 'good wife' by displaying good behaviour.

> A girl is a **bright flower**, and that means I must have **self-respect** so that I can **display the beauty** of a girl, so that when I **get a husband** one day, people should not say bad things about me. (And) I must **respect my husband**. According to **the Xhosa culture, a girl's home is with the in-laws**. **I mustn't be rude** ... (Grade 8 learner, July 2010)

From this response, it is apparent that cultural values had a strong influence on how girls defined their gender identities. The girls' responses were influenced by socialisation processes that required them to show self-respect, to be submissive and obedient in order to qualify for marriage (Joseph 2009: 13). Whilst this kind of behaviour may have been perceived as a norm in the Xhosa culture, it encouraged the hegemonic status of men and widened the gender inequality gap between men and women. In this case, girls were portrayed as powerless and voiceless individuals. This kind of behaviour was also reinforced by school activities that prevented girls from participating in certain roles such as leadership positions, and roles were also gendered at school, such as girls sweeping floors while boys worked in the garden. The gendered roles revealed the patriarchal nature of the Sudanese and South African societies, which is filtered through the schooling system, leading to gendered roles and a widening of the inequality gap between boys and girls. Unfortunately, the gendered roles became part of the learners' internalised value system, which may have a negative influence on their adult lives.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with other studies (as already mentioned above), but what was interesting in this study was not only the correlation between the girls' experiences in terms of gender equality in Sudan and in poor rural areas of South Africa, but also the socio-economic value attached to formal education in both countries. In Sudan, it appeared that preparing girls for early marriages in the form of home education was valued, while in South Africa children's access to formal edu-cation was prioritised despite other educational challenges experienced by young girls at school, such as sexual harassment. However, the expected role of being a 'good wife and mother' was certainly ingrained in South Africa as well.

The effects of war in Sudan impeded free access to education, while the apartheid backlogs were a barrier to quality education in South Africa. The schools that belonged to the former homelands of the apartheid regime were still in poor condition, under-resourced, with poor learner achievements. However, there was no direct correlation between poverty and learners' physical access to schools in South Africa, as schools in the poor Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces had the highest levels of access to schooling (Shindler & Fleisch 2007). The findings of the study conducted in the Libode

district (South Africa) concur with this observation. Poverty on the other hand seems to be a much greater barrier to children's physical access to education in Sudan.

In both countries, but more especially in Sudan, the impact of socio-cultural factors on children's education was evident in terms of participation and retention of learners in school. The school system reinforced and reproduced culturally conceived gender stereotypes which, according to Prinsloo (2006), are invisible forms of exclusion. In both countries, girls were vulnerable and were victims of sexual abuse and rape. As Unterhalter (2005: 84) reminds us, '… high levels of sexual violence reported in schools are one feature of the ways in which participation is not a simple process of enrolment and retention and passing exams'; likewise empowerment of women and girls in both South Africa and Sudan might not be a simple process of changing traditional practices (Meer 1992). Education becomes meaningful when it provides children with 'epistemic access', i.e. access to learning and content knowledge (Morrow 2007).

Having equal enrolment of boys and girls in schools does not guarantee gender equality and quality of learning for both boys and girls, although we acknowledge it is an important first step. However, access to education and gender equality should go beyond numbers to include equality in terms of learning opportunities and resources, treatment at school, equal participation and employment opportunities across socio-cultural and racial lines. Schools should confront any barriers towards gender inequality by building caring and nurturing environments for both girls and boys, with the aim of bridging gender inequality gaps (Carinci & Wong 2009; Philaretou 2007). Furthermore, moving beyond quantity to quality of educational opportunities is necessary for meaningful, inclusive and non-discriminatory education, as 'there will be no gain from universal education if it does not translate into efficient learning and success' (Omwami & Keller 2010: 25). Gender-sensitive and safe environments are key factors in keeping girls in school (DFID 2005).

The main gap identified in this article relates to the difference between the global discourse on gender equality and access to education and how this is translated into action in schools. Although there is increasing recognition of the crucial need to address issues beyond educational access, this literature continues to dominate. Thus, the evidence from this study seems to suggest that more work needs to be done in terms of awareness-raising with regard to challenges to gender equality and access to meaningful learning.

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