EDUCATION: PATHWAY TO OVERCOME GENDER INEQUALITIES &ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how education can prove to be an instrument in overcoming the problem of gender inequality and how policy makers can make policies that may result in reducing gender inequalities. This paper also emphasize on how gender issues can be prioritized in strategies for reducing inequality and poverty. In specific terms if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure. Gender aspect of education is a direct link between illiteracy and women's security. Not being able to read or write is a significant barrier for underprivileged women; since this can lead to their failure to make use of rights they have legally (to own land or other property, or to appeal against unfair judgment and unjust treatment). Gaps in schooling can, therefore, directly lead to insecurity by distancing the deprived from the ways and means of fighting against that deprivation, illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves, "not to be able to read or write or count or communicate is a tremendous deprivation. The extreme case of insecurity is the certainty of deprivation and the absence of any chance of avoiding that fate".

The link between education and security underlines the importance of education as analogous to a basic need in the twenty-first century of human development.

Introduction

"Gender inequality hurts all members of society, not just girls and women."

--World Bank

GENDERED EDUCATION GAPS: SOME CRITICAL FACTS

While a moral and political argument can continue to be made for the education of girls and women, some facts speak powerfully to the issue at hand. Girls accounted for 53 per cent of the 61 million children of primary school age who were out of school in 2010. Girls accounted for 49 per cent of the 57 million children out of school in 2013. In surveys of 30 countries with more than 100,000 out-of-school children, 28 per cent of girls were out of school on average compared to 25 per cent of boys. Completion of primary school is a particular problem for girls in sub-Saharan Africa and Western Asia.[3]

Surveys in 55 developing countries reveal that girls are more likely to be out of school at a lower secondary age than boys, regardless of the wealth or location of the household. Almost two thirds of the world's 775 million illiterate adults are women. In developing regions, there are 98 women per 100 men in tertiary education. There are significant inequalities in tertiary education in general, as well as in relation to areas of study, with women being over-represented in the humanities and social sciences and significantly under-represented in engineering, science and technology.

Gender-based violence in schools undermines the right to education and presents a major challenge to achieving gender equality in education because it negatively impacts girls' participation and their retention in school. In addition, ineffective sexual and reproductive health education inhibits adolescents' access to information and contributes to school dropouts, especially among girls who have reached puberty.

The education of girls and women can lead to a wide range of benefits from improved maternal health, reduced infant mortality and fertility rates to increased prevention against HIV and

AIDS.[4] Educated mothers are more likely to know that HIV can be transmitted by breastfeeding, and that the risk of mother-to-child transmission can be reduced by taking drugs during pregnancy.

Each extra year of a mother's schooling reduces the probability of infant mortality by 5-10 per cent. Children of mothers with secondary education or higher are twice as likely to survive beyond age 5 compared to those whose mothers have no education. Improvements in women's education explained half of the reduction in child deaths between 1990 and 2009. A child born to a mother who can read is 50 per cent more likely to survive past age 5. In sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated 1.8 million children's lives could have been saved in 2008 if their mothers had at least a secondary education. In Indonesia, 68 per cent of children with mothers who have attended secondary school are immunized, compared with 19 per cent of children whose mothers have no primary schooling. Wages, agricultural income and productivity—all critical for reducing poverty— are higher where women involved in agriculture receive a better education. Each additional year of schooling beyond primary offers greater payoffs for improved opportunities, options and outcomes for girls and women.

In the varied discussions on the post-2015 education related agendas, there was strong consensus that gender equality in education remains a priority. Various inputs noted that inequalities in general, and particularly gender equality, need to be addressed simultaneously on multiple levels—economic, social, political and cultural. A response on behalf of the International Women's Health Coalition maintained that "all girls, no matter how poor, isolated or disadvantaged, should be able to attend school regularly and without the interruption of early pregnancy, forced marriage, maternal injuries and death, and unequal domestic and childcare burdens".

Other inputs highlighted the importance of ensuring access to post-basic and post-secondary education for girls and women. Referring to secondary education, the German Foundation for World Population noted that the "completion of secondary education has a strong correlation with girls marrying later and delaying first pregnancy." While access to good quality education is important for girls and women, preventing gender-based violence and equality through education clearly also remains a priority.

Gender-based discrimination in education is, in effect, both a cause and a consequence of deep-rooted differences in society. Disparities, whether in terms of poverty, ethnic background, disability, or traditional attitudes about their status and role all undermine the ability of women and girls to exercise their rights. Moreover, harmful practices such as early marriage, gender-based violence, as well as discriminatory education laws and policies still prevent millions of girls from enrolling and completing their respective education.[5]

Additionally, given the extensive and growing participation of women in income generating activities, education for girls and women is particularly important, especially in attempting to reverse gendered patterns of discrimination. Not only is it impossible to achieve gender equality without education, but expanding education opportunities for all can help stimulate productivity and thereby also reduce the economic vulnerability of poor households.

GENDER EQUALITY, EQUITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Equity is the strongest framing principle of a post-2015 rights-based agenda, and underlines the need to redress historical and structural inequalities in order to provide access to quality education at all levels. This heralds what was effectively one of the strongest themes that emerged in the post-2015 education consultations, i.e., a rights-based approach in which rights are indivisible. This implies that all aspects of education should be considered from a rights perspective, including structural features of education systems, methods of education, as well as the contents of the education curricula. Indeed, overcoming structural barriers to accessing good quality education is vital for realizing education rights for all.

In related post-2015 consultations, equity is affirmed as a fundamental value in education. Several inputs noted that inequality in education remains a persistent challenge. This is connected to a focus in the Millennium Development Goals on averages without an accompanying consideration of trends beneath the averages. Many contributions in the education consultation, as well as in the other thematic consultations, highlighted the lack of attention to marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Equal access to good quality education requires addressing wide-ranging and persistent inequalities in society and should include a stronger focus on how different forms of inequality intersect to produce unequal outcomes for marginalized and vulnerable groups. Post-2015 consultations suggest that overcoming inequality requires a goal that makes national

governments accountable for providing minimum standards and implementing country specific plans for basic services, including education. Equity in education also implies various proactive and targeted measures to offer progressive support to disadvantaged groups.

Amartya Sen notes empirical work which has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by their literacy and educated participation in decisions within and outside the family. Even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in many developing countries (which leads to "such terrible phenomenon as a hundred million of 'missing women') seems to go down sharply, and may even get eliminated, with progress in women's empowerment, for which literacy is a basic ingredient".

In the summer of 2009, the International Labour Organization (ILO) issued a report entitled "Give Girls a Chance: Tackling child labour, a key to the future", which makes a disturbing link between increasing child labour and the preference being given to boys when making decisions on education of children. The report states that in cultures in which a higher value is placed on education of male children, girls risk being taken out of school and are then likely to enter the workforce at an early age. The ILO report noted global estimates where more than 100 million girls were involved in child labour, and many were exposed to some of its worst forms.

Much of the research around women and education highlights the importance of investing in the education of girls as an effective way of tackling the gamut of poverty. This is in line with assertions made in numerous other references, which also point to a strong link between education, increased women's (as opposed to girls') labour force participation, the wages they earn and overall productivity, all of which ultimately yields higher benefits for communities and nations. In other words, it pays to invest in girls' and women's education.

GENDER SOCIALIZATION

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Western feminist stalwarts, such as Simone de Beauvoir, were elaborating the difference between biological 'sex' and social gender. Anne Oakley in particular, is known for coining the term gender socialization (1979), which indicates that gender is socially constructed. According to Oakley, parents are engaged in gender socialization but society holds the largest influence in constructing gender. She identified three social mechanisms of gender socialization: manipulation, canalization, and verbalization (Oakley, 1972). Oakley noted that

gender is not a fixed concept but is determined by culture through the use of verbal and nonverbal signifiers and the creation of social norms and stereotypes, which identify proper and acceptable behavior. The signifiers are then perpetuated on a macro level, reinforced by the use of the media, as well as at the micro level, through individual relationships.

The concept entered mainstream lexicon on gender relations and development dynamics, and through criticism and counter criticism, 'gender socialization' itself became an important signifier. As a tool to highlight discriminatory practices, laws and perceptions (including stereotypes), gender socialization is often identified as the 'root cause' which explains various aspects of gender identities, and what underlies many gender dynamics.

In 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defined gender socialization as "[T]he process by which people learn to behave in a certain way, as dictated by societal beliefs, values, attitudes and examples. Gender socialization begins as early as when a woman becomes pregnant and people start making judgments about the value of males over females. These stereotypes are perpetuated by family members, teachers and others by having different expectations for males and females."

There is, therefore, a clear interaction between socio-cultural values (and praxis) with gender socialization. This only partly explains why it is that in many developing societies there is a persistent prioritization of women's 'domestic' roles and responsibilities over public ones. Most young girls are socialized into the 'biological inevitability' of their socially determined future roles as mothers. This is closely connected, in many relatively socially conservative contexts, with the need to ensure (the prerequisite of) marriage.

Most related studies maintain that women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer and healthier babies than women with no formal education. The World Bank estimates that one year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10 per cent, particularly where secondary schooling is undertaken.

In fact, because women with some formal education are more likely to seek medical care and be better informed about health care practices for themselves and their children, their offspring have higher survival rates and are better nourished. Not only that, but as indicated earlier, these women are less likely to undergo early pregnancy. Being better informed increases the chances of women knowing how to space their pregnancies better, how to access pre and post-natal care,

including prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and family planning in general. The World Bank estimates that an additional year of schooling for 1,000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths.

The World Bank, along with UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund highlight in several of their reports the intergenerational benefits of women's education. An educated mother is more likely, it is maintained, to attempt to ensure educational opportunities for her children. Indeed, the World Bank specifically notes that " in many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for an additional one- third to one-half year".

In short, girls' education and the promotion of gender equality in education are critical to development, thus underlining the need to broadly address gender disparities in education.

The rhetorical question that needs to be raised here is whether the consistent elements of gender socialization in the region, and the confusing messages for both sexes, can only lead to entrenching processes of gender inequality. At the very least, it is safe to argue that gender socialization, combined with the continuing discrepancies in education opportunities and outcomes not only provide a negative feedback loop, but effectively contribute to entrenching patriarchal norms.

Political events and the endorsement of political leadership are often catalytic, if not necessary determinants, of policy change. In fact, most education reform programmes are often linked to political dynamics. To date, such reforms are typically launched through a political or legal act. In most cases, countries prioritize aspects such as forging a common heritage and understanding of citizenship, instruction in particular language(s), and other means of building capacities as well as popular support for party programmes. All developing country governments have, at one time or another, put special effort into including girls in the education system. While there is a continuous role for policy makers and governments, it is increasingly clear that the socio-cultural terrain is where the real battles need to be waged in a studied, deliberate and targeted fashion.

Influencing the way people think, believe and behave; i.e., culture is the single most complicated task of human development. And yet, in policy and advocacy circles globally, this particular challenge still remains largely considered as 'soft' and, at best, secondary in most considerations. What is maintained here is that within the current global geopolitical climate, particularly where

an increasing number of young men—and now also young women—are reverting to extremes such as inflicting violence, and where this is often exacerbated by socialization processes which often enforce certain harmful practices (e.g., early marriage) and outdated forms of gender identity and roles, then culture needs to be a high priority.

Needed cultural shifts require several key conditions. One of these is the importance of bridging the activism around gender equality and doing so by involving both men and women. While this still remains anathema to many women's rights activists, it is nevertheless necessary that men become more engaged in gender equality work, and that women realize that their rights are incumbent on the systematic partnership with men and on appreciating the specific needs and challenges that young boys and men themselves are struggling with.

Another critical determinant of cultural change is that it has to be from within. Those who have worked with human rights issues more broadly have had to learn the hard way that any change that appears to be induced 'from outside', even if responding to a dire need and with perfectly sound reason, is destined for failure in many cases. Sustainable change has to be owned and operated locally. This points to the importance of identifying the 'cultural agents of change' in any given society, which include both its men and women activists, religious leaders, traditional and community leaders (in some cases these categories converge), media figures, charismatic community mobilizers, and especially youth themselves, who are the most critical agents of change.

At the same time, it is a fallacy to think that there can be no linkages whatsoever between local ownership and external dynamics. International, especially multilateral, development partners have an important role to play in facilitating the bridge building between and among the cultural agents of change themselves on the one hand, and between them and their respective policymakers on the other. But in this day and age of technology and increasing speed of technology, international development actors, as well as transnational academic actors, are already facilitating the building of bridges between youth. Some of this is already happening through a plethora of fora (including social websites), and the impact remains difficult to gauge.

All this points to the fact that education in the traditional sense of school enrolment, drop-out rates, curricula development, and structural dynamics thereof are in multiple stages of transition. It remains to be seen how, and in what way, new forms of education, knowledge acquisition, and

information sharing will significantly change patterns of gender socialization itself. It is too soon to definitely assess the shifting sands we are standing on. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to either overestimate the power of entrenched patriarchy, or to underestimate the capacity of women and men to significantly refashion their realities. At the same time, the changes in the culture of international development goal setting are already producing critical insights and inputs which are shaping the agenda of global, regional and national dynamics for upcoming decades.

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