Gender Equality in Primary Schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: Review and Analysis

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GENDER EQUALITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Gender inequality in education is a long and hard struggle being endured by many nations even today. Developing countries find themselves mostly affected by this impediment to social progress. Clearly it is an issue that has wide reaching consequences as countries struggling with gender issues in education are having trouble moving forward socially and economically. Education has a critical function in the advancement of social and economic progress (Nwomonoh, 1998; World Bank, 95). Without education, this region will remain to be stricken with poverty and economic stagnation. Sub-Saharan Africa includes forty-two countries situated on the African continent south of Saharan Africa, and six island nations adjacent to it. Some of these nations include Angola, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It is important to note that one third of the region's primary school age children are out of school, with 54% of Africa's primary school-age children concentrated in the Sub-Saharan African region which accounts for 35 million kids. However, the changes that have been done in the past decade had already made some notable progress. In 2006, the net enrollment ratio in the region

rose to 70% from 56% in 1999. This is indeed a big step towards the right direction. There is still a lot of work to be done, but the awareness and the intentional steps done to address gender inequality in primary education can finally address this problem for good.

Keywords: gender inequality, social disparity, primary school, primary education, women, international movements

Introduction

In Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) declared, "everyone has the right to education." In 2000, the agency implemented the Millennium Development Goals, citing achievement of universal primary education by 2015 as one of its core objectives. For its part, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) through its Education for All (EFA) initiative, adopted objectives centered on providing free and compulsory primary education. One of the organization's goals is to achieve gender equality in primary education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring that girls obtain complete and equal access to and accomplishment of fundamental education of good quality.

These forward-looking measures apply to all nations including those in the Sub Saharan Africa. But why is gender equality still an issue in the region? This paper seeks to answer this inquiry while presenting the possible solutions that prove to be effective on the other parts of the world and even to Sub-Saharan Africa in the past few years. This paper will also present the current situation of education in the region and how gender plays a big role on who gets the better deal in primary education.

Sub-Saharan Africa is singled out in this study because of the special attention given to it by the global community represented by the UN as far as gender inequality in education is concerned. The region is huge with millions of female students subjected to limited learning opportunities in primary school. This makes it an

ideal place to look closely into the problem of gender inequality in the context of education.

This paper will also review notable international movements, initiatives, programs, and policies that were applied in Sub-Saharan Africa to close gender and social gaps at primary level education.

Gender Inequality in Primary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

The access of girls to primary education in the region is a source of concern for international organizations such as UNESCO. In Africa alone, 72% of school age female children have never been enrolled to school compared to 55% of male children not able to access primary education. In Nigeria, 69% of un-enrolled kids are female, while only 31% are males. In Burundi, the disparity of male and female students reaches 20% between the two genders, with the girls left behind in accessing quality education. This is the same case in Guinea and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2009).

In 2006, the gender parity index in Sub-Saharan Africa rose to 0.89 from 0.85 in 1999. A GPI of below 1 indicates that the index is in favor of male students. Fifteen of the 41 countries that make up the region have already reached gender parity in education. This is the good news. The other side of the story is that more countries in the region need more help in addressing the same problem.

Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for half of the primary school-age children who are not in school worldwide. That number alone can point to a devastating picture of primary education in the region. Although there are 137 million kids that started primary school in the region it is expected that more than 30 million of these children will drop out before even making it to the last grade of primary school. This points to a 25% dropout rate, the same figure that was seen 12 years before. But a bleaker picture is seen for female

primary school students in Sub-Saharan Africa. A poor Hausa girl can only manage an average of 0.3 year of education compared to nine years of education an urban girl in Nigeria can get. Male students have higher enrollment and completion rates painting a clear image of the current status of gender inequality in the region.

Despite the initial success of the Jomtien Declaration, gender inequalities within the Sub-Saharan Africa region are still evident even after a decade of focused efforts. Statistics reveal that for every three students who were denied full and equal primary education, two of them were female. This basically relegates girls to the traditionally-held gender role of staying at home, doing household chores, taking care of children, and performing other unpaid work. Despite the fact that educating girls yields a higher investment return for a country's economic development, this insight is not noticeable in most national policies (UNGEI, 2009).

Primary education in the Sub-Saharan Africa starts at kindergarten until elementary level, with students finishing up primary school in 14 years of age. In the year 2000, 45% or 37.2 million children ages 10-14 did not complete primary school, with 11.5 million of these are girls (only 9.3 million of these are boys in comparison) pointing to obvious inequality of access to education in the region (Lloyd, 2003).

What is really at stake when education is not afforded equally to girls like what is provided for male students? What is the price of gender inequality in education, more specifically in primary school? When countries advance the rights of women, it also advances humanity. Uneducated girls are more at risk than boys to become marginalized. They are more vulnerable to exploitation. They are more likely than educated girls to contract HIV/AIDS, which spreads twice as quickly among uneducated girls than among girls that have some schooling (UNICEF, 2007).

The perils of gender inequality in primary education do not stop there. These marginalized female students will eventually become

adults and because of the lack of good education they will have a lesser say in social and political matters giving them lesser means to support themselves and their interests in the society. Women's limited access to credit, land, and education will also marginalize their legal rights in the society and in turn make the family they are raising on their own (without a male head) suffer in many ways. Health care, proper nutrition, and access to quality education can be a problem later on as children raised only by their mothers will have the same fate as hers as far as societal opportunities are concerned. All of these problems started with not being able to access good primary education. It becomes an endless cycle of women not maximizing their rights to live fully in a specific community.

Global Movements toward Gender Equality in Education

Gender inequalities in Sub-Saharan Africa primary schools continue to marginalize female students. The regular omission of girls and women from school transmutes into a less educated and cultured labor force, ineffective labor distribution, lost efficiency, and subsequently weakened economic progress.

For the last 30 years, there have been a myriad of movements initiated in numerous parts of the globe to address gender inequality inside classrooms, such as the Education for All World Conference held in Thailand in 1990. This clearly shows that gender issues in education need to be given priority in order for future generations to have a strong and equal foundation. International organizations such as UN agencies, the Canadian International Development Agency, and the World Bank also play a vital role in spreading international awareness related to gender equality.

The World Conference on Education for All held in 1990 at Jomtien, Thailand was considered as the most prolific and influential gathering focused on fair education for all (UNGEI, 2009). The conference called for treating primary education as part

of an individual's basic needs and fundamental rights and that each country should prioritize it above all else. Specifically, the Jomtien Declaration underscored the important role of the government in ensuring that girls have access to fair and quality education, and eliminating impediments that potentially hinder their active participation in class. Furthermore, the conference also stressed the following points:

- The education programs for girls should be free from social and cultural barriers.
- Girls should receive the full benefits of education programs just like boys.
- Fair opportunities must be given to girls not only in the educational aspect, but also in all facets of their lives.

Despite the initial success of the Jomtien Declaration, gender inequalities within the Sub-Saharan Africa region are still evident even after a decade of focused efforts. Statistics reveal that for every three students who were denied full and equal primary education, two of them were female. Because of this, the Millennium Declaration of 2000 as well as the Dakar Declaration of 2005 called on the international community and national governments to engage in more concentrated actions, set tangible goals, and determine the time frame needed to materialize the objectives of gender equality in primary education.

The extensive research of Brock & Cammish (1998) paved the way for the international community to recognize the complex factors that induce gender disparities in schools. The study focused on seven developing nations, which included three of the Sub-Saharan Africa countries, namely, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and the Seychelles. According to the study's findings, girls and women from these countries do not have access to fair education opportunities because of these prohibitive factors:

- Difficulties in physical access and geographic barriers;

- Political and religious beliefs;

- Malnutrition of girls;

- Socio-cultural beliefs as well as practices;

- Abrasive economic circumstances; and,

- Existing legal precedents that discriminate women in education.

Rather than regard these factors as problems, Brock & Cammish utilized them in the creation and outlining of recommendations for policymakers in the aforementioned countries. The recommendations serve as guidelines in the formation of policies that effectively promote gender awareness and equality (UNGEI, 2012).

After UNESCO launched its global EFA campaign in 2000, many countries took on a more vigilant stance on their policies that may induce, assist, or tolerate gender inequality in primary schools. Once governments are able to launch and implement initiatives that aim to provide equal and quality education to girls and women, they may be able to significantly reduce the gender parity inequalities in their regions. But until then, various international bodies dedicated to eliminating gender inequality will have to continuously sustain their efforts.

Although most African citizens consider gender inequality in these fields of study as inevitable, O'Connor (1998) believed that this issue could still be addressed through a deliberate analysis on cultural norms and attitudes toward gender parity in education in the said region. This investigation needs to be accomplished first in order for policies to comprehensively cover equal education opportunities to girls and women. In addition, Wamahiu (1996)

believed that the complex interplay between micro-level practices and macro-level policy also leads to gender inequality in classrooms. In order to bridge this gap effectively and make gender equality a reality, the "pedagogy of empowerment" needs to be implemented instead of the traditional "pedagogy of difference."

Because of this, the Millennium Declaration of 2000 as well as the Dakar Declaration of 2005 called on the international community and national governments to engage in more concentrated actions, set tangible goals, and determine the time frame needed to materialize the objectives of gender equality in primary education. In order to achieve the UNESCO EFA goals, the Dakar Framework for Action, agreed upon in 2000, sets out a two-part gender equity agenda: first, to achieve gender parity in school participation and second, to improve gender equality in educational opportunities and outcomes (UNESCO, 2010).

Interventions for Gender Equality in the Classroom

Regardless of the sheer number of international conferences, cross-regional studies, academic or social researches, and other global movements targeted toward equal education opportunities for all, the success of the campaign still lies in the hands of teachers and in schools. Despite the fact that most primary teachers can be successful in addressing these types of inequalities inside their classrooms, they cannot fully control external forces that strengthen these disparities such as peer pressure and what students learn about gender stereotypes from their parents and families.

One of the popular methods used nowadays to address gender inequality inside the primary school is Gender Analysis. Studies conducted by the Canadian International Development Agency (2011), Leach (2003), and United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (2012) provide an exceptionally good overview of this approach. Gender Analysis is essentially composed of methods used to understand four vital things: (1) the relationships between boys and girls, (2) the access of each gender to available

educational resources, (3) the activities involved to each gender, and (4) the constraints they confront relative to each other. Having a deeper understanding of these factors can help primary school administrators apprehend the various patterns of interest and participation, as well as the activities and behaviors that boys and girls have in social and economic structures (CIDA, 2011).

There are also government organizations like the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which empower girls and women through gender-responsive education. It is a pan-African non-government organization working in 32 African countries to help girls become educated women who have the knowledge, skills, and opportunity to play a role in governance and democratic processes and to influence the direction of their societies. The organization works hand-in-hand with communities, schools, civil society, and ministries to achieve gender equity and equality in education through targeted programs. The group uses a four-pronged approach to transform girls' education and to achieve gender equity and equality in education across Africa:

- Policy advocacy – influencing governments and other partners to review existing educational policies and adopt strategies to achieve greater and better participation of girls in education.

- Community advocacy – building public awareness on the social and economic value of girls' education so that citizens themselves take responsibility for the task and collectively work to support the agenda.

- Interventions – developing and promoting models that demonstrate that contexts can be created that are conducive to girls' enrollment, continuation and successful completion of the school cycle.

- Replication and mainstreaming – encouraging governments to adopt and generalize innovations that have demonstrated positive impacts on girls' schooling. (FAWE, 2013)

Progress in Gender Equality in Primary Education

For the longest time, girls have been denied the right to education in many parts of Eastern and Southern Africa. In countries like Angola, Comoros, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, girls bypass their basic right due to poverty, lack of sanitary facilities, poor access to school, and social customs such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. Because of these and other factors, the enrollment rate of girls in Sub-Sahara Africa primary schools is considerably lower than that of boys.

But of late, notable progress has been achieved towards obtaining gender equality in education in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to The World Bank's 2012 World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development. Over the past three decades, the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in school has experienced significant growth in all levels, with the most remarkable increase evident in the number of girls enrolled at the primary education level.

And, as organizations like the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) recognize the important role girls have in the development and growth of an economy, they have continuously embarked on international efforts that are targeted towards gender equality in the region and across the world. For instance, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), which works to promote girls' education, was launched in 2000. Its goal is to ensure that girls and boys have equal access to free, quality education by 2015. UNGEI has been influential in providing assistance to the development and implementation of strategic improvements in different areas in the Eastern and Southern African region. Currently, the group, with strong support from benefactors like Norway, has extensively contributed to the enhancement of girls' education in the region.

In addition, UNICEF is at the frontline of conducting research focused on how various factors that drive inequality interrelate to prohibit girls and boys from school. The task has been implemented through an international program called Out-of-School Children's Initiative (OOSCI) along with joint research with UNESCO to recognize the dynamics that play a part in gender inequalities.

Additionally, in 14 countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, UNICEF supported a number of gender audits to evaluate the needs of girls attending school and to recognize the obstacles they face in relation to education. Also, efforts like the Girls' Education Movement (GEM) and the Girls' and Boys' Education Movement (GBEM), under the UNGEI collaboration, were set up in Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, and Uganda to organize communities in order to provide support for girls' school retention and completion.

UNICEF also provided gender training for teachers in various regions in Africa, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia. To further promote gender equality and eliminate gender stereotyping, a UNICEF-backed child-friendly education (CFE) structure is being institutionalized in Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania. This involves the use of gender-sensitive curricula and textbooks as well as provision of different latrines for girls and boys.

Conclusion

Evidently, the international awareness on gender inequality in primary schools has been increasing for the past decades, and acceptance of the methods to eliminate gender disparity is gradually becoming widespread. This is mainly because of the continued initiative and efforts of various international groups to eliminate gender disparities in order to promote the fundamental human right of equal access to quality education. The continuous effort of these international bodies in the last 10 years has

contributed to the significant progress in the provision of equal educational opportunities to both girls and boys in primary school as well as in the development rate of offering equal access to primary education to all genders and nations. With these significant developments in terms of gender equality, the prospects for the accomplishment of gender equality in the Sub-Saharan African region has become optimistic.

There is still however room for improvement as statistics has shown that the Millennium Development Plan (MDP) goals previously projected by the UN are unachievable by the year 2015. But the picture of achieving gender equality in primary schools in the region is brighter than ever with progress showing through the years of focused efforts. This is proof that the situation is not as dire. Things can be done to better the odds of female students to access the same kind of education male students have freely enjoyed in the past. It might be true that the original goals cannot be met as originally planned but possibilities are opening up for academic equality efforts to finally break through the bondage of poverty and stagnation in Sub Saharan Africa.

This is proof that education and its equal access by both genders can mean more than just literacy but also social and economic growth. The challenges are plenty and are changing overtime but by being intentional and goal-driven, academic gender disparities can be addressed fast and permanently.

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