

Gender in Education: An overview of developing trends in Africa

Abstract

The last decades of the twentieth century saw many concerted efforts in research into gender issues all over the world. In Africa, international bodies and educationalists began in the 1960s to look into the way girls and women were faring in Education. Their findings were depressing. By 1970s pro-female initiatives by some African governments to encourage enrolment of girls in schools were started. Consequently, low enrolment figures indicated in the earlier years (1960-70) were in the 1990s shown to have improved. In Malawi statistics indicated that girls comprised 54% of the pupils enrolled in 1990, an increase from 44.8% in the previous years. While in Zambia, Kenya and Nigeria females constituted nearly 50% of the children enrolled in grade one (FAWE 1996). This paper sets out to explore these trends of gender in education in Africa, but specifically singles out and uses Kenya as an example. The paper looks at such questions as: to what extent do the latest figures match practice and reality on the ground? Do these figures mean that gender has adequately been dealt with? Is gender research still relevant in Africa in the twenty first-century? An argument is advanced to suggest that the figures belie actual reality; that gender disparity still persists despite the efforts of some Governments and policies put in place. (It should also not be forgotten that in some countries mainly Franco phone the figures are still quite low). The paper therefore aims to encourage teachers and researchers to recognise prejudicial practices which may still disadvantage girls particularly within classrooms, even where policy and statistics suggest that equality has been achieved.

1.0 Introduction

Gender has a pervasive influence whether we like it or not. If we see gender as the socially constructed attributes of an individual, related to his or her sex, there is almost always gender differentiation in any given context, where one is seen as either male or female and treated as such. Such differentiation of course does not necessarily always translate into discrimination or disadvantage. There is reason to believe, for example, that the rights of some African women may have been safeguarded through careful gender differentiation. This was until the advent of modernisation where the notion of gender differentiation was used, as in western countries, synonymously with sexism. Sexism means negative discrimination, usually of females. Gender inequalities and sexism in education we now know continue to play a significant role in the slow development of African economies. Disregard for and discrimination against 50% of the population (females) contributes to slow and poor performance in most African countries.

Education is societal institutionalised set of practices. It plays a big role in the construction of learners' gender in that it passes society's dominant values. However, it is also in education where changes can be worked out.

Language too plays a big role in gender issues. Language use is a social practice acting as a shaper of other practices within the society. The relationship between social practices (linguistic practices and gender roles/relations/identities) is a dialectal one, a two-way process. This means that language both influences and is influenced by societal practices including those pertaining to gender. Space will not allow me to go into issues of language and gender. The focus of this paper will be on gender in education.

1.1 A historical overview on gender trends in Africa.

In the 1960s, when most African states began to gain their political independence, there was considerable gender disparity in education. Girl's enrolment figures were very low throughout the continent.

In May 1961, the United Nation's universal declaration of human rights and UNESCO's educational plans for Africa were announced in a conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A target was set to achieve 100% universal primary education in Africa by the year 1980. The implementation in the 1970s of the free and compulsory Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme in several countries for example, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, Zambia and Tanzania, which were signatories of that declaration, was in line with this UN Plan.

Ever since, UNICEF and UNESCO among many other bodies have sponsored affirmative moves, research and conferences within Africa on the education of girls. One such conference was the pan-African one held at Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, in March/April of 1993. At this conference (three decades after the UN declaration of the 1960s) it was observed Africa was still lagging behind other regions of the world in female access to education. More depressing findings on girls' enrolment were reported, for example, by Marangu 1985 on Kenya, Abraha, Fuller, Holloway and, and King

1991 on Ethiopia, and Obasi 1997 on Nigeria. It was also noted that gender disparity existed in education generally and that there was need to identify and eliminate all policies that hindered girls' full participation in education. To explain the fact that more boys than girls participated in education, a host of constraints were identified. 'African tradition' was named as top of the list. 'African tradition' was explained as (what is generally observed in most parts of Africa) one that attaches higher value to a man than a woman, whose place is believed to be the kitchen. The imbalance in boys and girls' participation in schooling was therefore linked to the age-long belief in male superiority and female subordination. This situation was further explained as aggravated by patriarchal practices which gave girls no traditional rights to succession. Therefore, the same patriarchal practices encouraged preference to be given to the education of a boy rather than that of a girl.

This cultural situation was well assessed and outlined, because most parts of the continent held these beliefs. However, in terms of enrolment, this assessment probably failed to take into account those countries which form few pockets within the continent where there has been a marked improvement in the enrolment of girls. For example, females now constitute 50% of the children enrolled in grade one in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Rwanda. There has been a rise from 22% in 1961 to 50 % in 1990, in primary school, and 4% at secondary level in 1970 to 15% in these countries. In some countries of the south (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Mauritius), female enrolment levels actually exceeded that of males at both primary and secondary levels (FAWE 1996). This situation may be explained by the affirmative action programmes carried out and the fact that southern countries are richer than those in sub-Saharan Africa. It is only in Franco-phone countries, and other countries such as Somalia, Mali, Liberia and Ethiopia, where female enrolment is below 30%. This could be attributed to poverty, wars or lack of commitment to affirmative action.

Significantly, however, the contention of this paper is that the problems of girls in education are not just about enrolment figures but the practices on the ground. In the following paragraphs, I use Kenya to elaborate this point. I show that, though Kenya has

in fact done well in enrolment figures, a lot still needs to be done. In Kenya, as is the case in countries which have been mentioned as having succeeded in enrolment figures, there are still other problems, such as high drop-out rates of females students, poor performance, reluctance on the part of females students to enrol in science based courses and poor classroom participation. For this paper, I will focus on enrolment, performance and classroom participation below.

2.0 The Kenyan case

Up to the 1970s, considerably more boys than girls participated in education in Kenya. The Kenyan woman, like her sisters in other parts of Africa, had more than her fair share of obstacles to overcome. Traditions as mentioned above were major constraints (Eshiwani 1982). She had to overcome her native traditions whose philosophy was that a woman's place is at home. However, with the Government's intervention and public awakening, parents began to send and keep their girl children in school. Consequently, women's involvement became more visible, as attested by the following tables.

Tables 1 (a)

Year	Number of girls	Number of boys
1991	2659.0	2797.1
1992	2723.4	2806.8
1993	2667.5	2761.1
1994	2742.0	2814.8
1995	2742.7	2802.3
1996	2754.3	2843.4
1997	2797.1	2880.2
1998	2925.1	2994.5

Enrolment in Primary schools in Kenya (Source Examination Council of Kenya. 1994)

Tables 1 (b)

Year	Number of girls	Number of boys
1990	264766	353695
1991	268730	345788
1992	275690	353372
1993	236146	295196
1994	273400	336439
1995	290581	341807
1996	305327	352926
1997	323625	363848
1998	327098	373440

Enrolment in Secondary schools in Kenya (Source Examination Council of Kenya. 1994)

From the tables above it can be noted that, purposeful plans of action led to an increase in females in schools after 1990. While more boys than girls were enrolled in 1991, a difference of 138 thousand, by 1998 the difference was only 69.4 thousand (table 1). In secondary school, the increment in girls' enrolment was at 62,332 by 1998 up from only 3,964 in 1991, while that of boys was 19,745 (table 2) in the same period. There is still not quite equal numbers of girls and boys. Tables 1 a and b show that enrolment figures have gone up for both boys and girls. But there is still a small margin between the two groups before equality can be achieved. However, girls appear to be doing better in terms of how fast they are enrolling in schools. Such trends cause us to examine one of the questions we asked at the beginning. Have we adequately dealt with gender? Probably not quite so. The leap in enrolment figures did not bring about a leap in performance. Girls' poor performance has been reported in other studies, for example, Eshiwani 1982. The following tables also attest to this:

Tables 2

(a)

Subject	1990	1991	1992	1993
English	*-3.9	-1.7	-1.9	0.0
Kiswahili	*+2.0	-2.7	-1.0	-0.1
Mathematics	-11.9	-14.3	-12.2	-12.5
*Sci & Agric	-17.2	-19.6	-19.4	-20.7
*GHCR	-18.6	-20.4	-16.7	-17.8
Art, Craft & Music	-10.6	-13.9	-11.8	-12.0
*HoSci & Bus Ed	-6.9	-7.6	-7.5	-5.9

Differences between females and males performance in the KCPE

(Source Examination Council of Kenya. 1994)

*GHCR- Geography/History/Civics and Religion

*Sci Agric

*HSci8 BuEd- Home Science and Business Education

* KCPE- Kenya Certificate of Primary Education

*-3.9-indicates that the proportion of female candidates in this category was lower than that of males by 3.9%

*+2.0 - indicates that the proportion of female candidates in this was higher than that of males by 2.0.

(b)

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Female	56.7	48.0	49.7	64.6	65.5
Male	57.0	48.3	50.8	64.7	65.5
Difference	-0.3	-0.3	-1.1	-0.1	0.0

English Maximum score=200

Female	17.9	20.5	26.3	18.5	22.6
Male	27.1	31.0	38.6	28.8	33.9
Difference	-9.2	-10.5	-12.3	-10.3	-11.3

Math: maximum score = 200

Female	41.2	29.5	22.0	28.0	34.8
Male	46.1	35.4	27.8	35.6	43.3
Difference	-4.9	-5.9	-5.8	-7.6	-7.4

Physics: Maximum score = 140

Mean scores in KSCE 1989-1993 All candidates, i.e. mixed and single sex schools)

(Source Examination Council of Kenya. 1994)

According to these tables (b), girls performed poorly compared to boys in all subjects, except English in which girls were on par with boys in 1993, (65.5 for all). Also the margins were not significant e.g., 0.3 in 1989 and 1990, 1.1 and 0.1 in 1991 and 1992 respectively. The Examination Council of Kenya further reported that, in mixed schools, girls performed poorly in all subjects. In single sex schools girls did worse than boys in all subjects except English. They also performed poorly at primary school.

It seems that gender issues need to be tackled from different fronts. One such front is the policy level, another could be at the ground level (the school and community) where these gender issues are directly experienced and lived. My observation here is that, while much has gone on at the policy level in Kenya, only a little has been done at school and community level. As such there is still a lot that remains to be done. Teachers particularly could be involved in this. However, before teachers can participate fully, we need to know what goes on in the classroom in terms of gender. Unfortunately, while a lot of gender programmes have been carried out, not much research has been done within the classroom in the continent. Our understanding of gender in classroom

practices is most often based on what has been studied in Western Europe and North America. I would like to argue that there is always a cultural angle in studies of social practices. As such, there is need to conduct studies within Africa and in classrooms so as to keep an eye on what is culture specific. Fortunately, a few studies have begun to be done on Africa by Africans (i.e. Ogbay 1999 on Eritrea) which give us insiders' valuable understanding of gender in classroom contexts.

3.0 What goes on in classroom? Some evidence from Kenya.

At this juncture I would like to make an argument based on a research project I carried out from 1995 to 1998 in a secondary school classroom in Kenya. Out of this research emerged interesting revelations which may be worthy of further consideration by teachers and researchers in helping us reconcile policy on gender (particularly on enrolment) and actual classroom practices.

The research I undertook aimed to examine gendered identities in the science classroom. Physics lessons were observed because this is one subject where girls generally perform poorly. The outcome of this research showed gender differentiation similar to that reported in other research (for example, teacher differential talk to boys and girls, Swann and Graddol 1988, French and French 1984). However, the most important contribution of this research was in unearthing and documenting, culture-specific and historically-located gendered classroom behaviour and practices. The research showed that girls and boys engaged in different activities within the same lesson with girls showing minimal involvement in activities requiring physical exertion. There was also teachers' differential treatment of girls and boys, but in this case teachers were harsh on boys and very gentle with the girls. While this has been noted in other research such 'task demarcations' and teachers' differential treatment by gender in this study was underpinned by society's cultural beliefs. There is a Kenyan cultural belief that boys should not be 'softened'. They are expected to be tough, active and brave while girls are often treated as 'soft'. As such, teachers' treatment of boys and girls in these classrooms reaffirmed gender in accordance with cultural norms which define masculinity and femininity (Kitetu 1998).

The conclusion of this research was that gendered identities are constantly constructed within the classroom and that these identities and classroom practices were influenced by what was within and outside the immediate walls of the classroom: the wider society. It is however, in the classroom situation where teachers can be sensitised to be on the look out for gendering, as they are aware of the gendered cultural practices (gender roles, beliefs, stereotypes) which could interfere with learning. As Cameron (1997) aptly says;

Gender is regulated and policed by rather rigid social norms, but this does not mean they [men and women] are reduced to automata, programmed by early socialisation to repeat forever the appropriate gendered behaviour...they are conscious agents who may engage in acts of transgression, subversion and resistance. As active producers rather than passive producers of gendered behaviour, men and women may use their awareness of gendered meanings that attach to particular ways of speaking and acting to produce a variety of effects.'(p.50)

In short, teachers may be able to encourage their students to resist gendered notions that interfere with their learning.

3.0 Is gender research relevant in Africa in the twenty first century?

For countries in Africa that have managed to bring enrolment figures for boys and girls to comparable levels, is the fight over? The answer is no. According to FAWE (1996), there are still problems of performance, dropout rates, choice of subjects and general participation in the classroom. The aim of this paper was not to unpack these here, but below I give some suggestions for areas which are within the influence of the teacher and researchers, and which could possibly be tackled.

3.1 Some possible areas to explore

First we need to bear in mind the notion that gender is socially constructed, not natural or invariable. It may be good to understand and then figure out how to deal with the following:

- I) Cultural identities versus school identities. For example, to what extent is the cultural feminine identity of 'good girls stay at home' in collision with school

identity of 'studious pupils work long and hard in school- may even stay back after school to catch up on homework'?

- II) Cultural gender interpersonal relations versus school gender interpersonal relations. For example, how is the cultural norm on interpersonal relations which dictates that members of the opposite sex do not stand talking alone or sit together in a room, on a collision path with teachers (male or female) giving tuition to pupils of the other sex or even with male-female pair work.
- III) Cultural gender roles versus Educational/school roles. Certain cultural gender roles and behaviours, for example climbing or riding, talking, etc, will be on collision path with certain school roles.

It is in coming to grips with the interplay of social practices and education practices and giving appropriate responses to these that teachers and researchers can make a meaningful contribution to gender issues in education, and in particular to improve the education of girls.

4.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I started by tracing trends in Africa of dealing with gender in education. I mentioned the initial moves by several countries of encouraging enrolment numbers through the (UPE) Universal Primary Education initiatives. I problematised this by arguing that although the policy to make education accessible to all was and still is very noble one and must be done, yet concentrating on improved statistics alone belies the actual practice on the ground. Such a focus is narrow and defeats our aim of dealing with gender (which is not stable) in education in two ways. Firstly, it confines Africa into a 'non-postmodernist' cocoon, where a problem and its solution is viewed from a certain given perspective; 'there used to be a problem with X but we solved it or are solving it with XYZ'. Secondly, we now know from examination performance of girls and boys and also from the few classroom research studies done that all manner of gendered identities are constructed in the classroom. Therefore, issues of gender in education can not be righted by simply/only getting our enrolment figures right –i.e. equal for boys and girls. It therefore behoves researchers and teachers in Africa to

continue monitoring policies, classroom practices, and more so the cultural gendered practices which have so much influence on the gendered happenings of the classroom.

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