

**Women and girls education in the third world: some global constraints**

Educación de mujeres y niñas en el tercer mundo: Algunas restricciones

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**Resumen**

En este artículo se presenta una reflexión sobre el problema global del acceso a la educación que tienen las mujeres y las niñas. Describo tres factores que restringen dicho acceso. Considero que es muy importante para los responsables de formular políticas, los gobiernos, las ONG, los donantes internacionales, etc., ser conscientes de que en la formulación de planes para mejorar el acceso y el logro en la escuela para mujeres y niñas, es necesario examinar las diferentes capas del tejido social y diseñar acciones que involucren diferentes sectores de la población, porque no es sólo las mujeres que tienen que ser educadas, sino toda la sociedad en general.

**Palabras clave:** Educación de mujeres y niñas; marcos de referencia en educación de mujeres y niñas; educación de mujeres y niñas en el tercer mundo.

**Abstract**

This article presents a reflection on the global issue of the access women and girls have to education. I describe three factors that affect it. I consider that it is very important for policy makers, governments, NGO's, international donors, etc. to be aware that when formulating plans to improve access and attainment to school for women and girls, it is necessary to examine the different layers of the social fabric and design actions that involve different sectors of the population, because it is not only women who need to be educated, it is the whole society.

**Key words:** Women and girls' education; gender in education frameworks; women and girls' education in the third world

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## Introduction

In the year 2000 the United Nations set the “Millennium Development Goals”. The eight goals aim at improving the life conditions of the population of developing countries. Two of those goals deal specifically with women and girls’ education, and they are MDG 2 (“Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling”) and MDG 3 (“Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015”).

As reported in the literature (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; Cortina & Stromquist, 2000; Bloch, Beoku-Betts, & Tabachnick, 1998; Chanana, 1994) third world governments along with NGO’s and other organizations have been working towards facilitating women and girls access to education. Their philosophy has varied according to the framework in which these

agencies set their projects. Some have adopted a WID framework, others GAD, post-structuralism, and human development approach (I will describe each one further) Unfortunately, irrespective of the approach, there are still many constraints that hinder women and girls’ access and/or attainment to school and need to be overcome taking into account the particular contexts in which they exist.

Although the literature mentioned above, and other reports present mainly the positive aspects of different initiatives aimed at promoting women and girls’ education, reading between the lines it is possible to identify some factors that hinder the total success of those projects. In a survey of articles, and chapters in books about Africa, India and South Asia, and Latin America I have identified some constraints, and have grouped them in three categories: 1) Cultural practices; 2) Economic situation; and 3) Teacher preparation.

In the first part of this paper I present an overview of the main approaches to gender

in education according to Unterhalter (2005) and how they relate to education projects. Then I discuss the three categories mentioned above which are, by no means, exhaustive; they are, to some extent, overlapping. I selected them because I found that different authors mention them, some in a very explicit way, others in a veiled form, but they are always present. To accomplish this task, I have selected two or three studies per category to illustrate the category.

#### **Four approaches**

According to Unterhalter (2005) issues of gender in education, development, and equality have called the attention of academics since 1970. She has identified four major approaches, and although there is some overlapping, she offers a characterization of each one of them that allow drawing some differences.

The first approach is Women in Development (WID) its beginnings can be traced back to 1970's thanks to the work of Ester Boserup who documented that despite

women's contribution in rural Africa they were not taken into account for developmental projects. This approach is linked to the concept of modernization, and advocates for including women in development planning. One of the main drawbacks of this approach is its simplistic and essentialist view of concepts such as gender, education, development, and empowerment. Gender is related to women and girls and used to describe biological characteristics; education is offered to women but it is aimed at benefiting others; development and empowerment are understood in economic terms.

The philosophy behind this approach is that women need to be educated for the benefit of others, and it is represented in the slogan "If you educate a woman you educate a nation". Very little attention is devoted to women *per se* and their needs are not an issue. The policies formulated under this framework stress the importance of the number of girls at school, number of girls portrayed in books, waivers in school fees, and other aspects of the like; but fail to

examine women and girls' deeper circumstances that lead them to be discriminated, undervalued, and mistreated.

The second approach presented by Unterhalter is Gender and Development (GAD). It started to develop in the late 1980's and is ideologically related to Structuralism and Marxism in the sense that it questions inequality and oppression. This approach grew out of the inadequacy of the conceptualization of women and gender by mainstream theories. An important contribution of GAD was the distinction between two types of gender: **gender needs**, and **strategic gender interests**. **Gender needs** are day-to-day necessities like food, water, and shelter. **Strategic gender interests** have to do with challenging institutionalized forms of gender discrimination, sexual violence, lack of political representation, and discrimination at work.

This approach originated in women's organizations, and in debates about the mainstream approach to feminism that was

applied in the third world. Since GAD conceived of school as related to the State, they did not pay much attention to formal education.

Different from WID understanding of equality, GAD considers that equality is granted when social obstacles, Unterhalter mentions the following: "unfair laws; labor-market practices; management regimes in institutions; barriers to women's decision making in all settings; inequitable processes with regard to the distribution of time, money and schooling" (p. 22) In this sense, GAD's concern is women and not how women can benefit others.

Unterhalter defines the third approach as post-structuralist. It developed in the 1990s and challenges the westernized methodologies of the other two previous approaches. Different from WID and GAD that developed out of politics and practice, this approach emerged from scholars in universities, who contested the way developed countries conceived of the third world. For Post-structuralists equality is not

at issue, but difference is, and it is critical to recognize it. An important concern for the advocates of this approach is identity, which to them is fluid and multiple, for this reason, they address subordinated identities like gay, and lesbian identities, or Dalit (in India) Unfortunately, Unterhalter reports that very little work has been done following this approach.

The final approach is capability approach and emerged in the 1990s. Its advocates state that education provision should not be based on education as a benefit for the society or for the future, but on the human capabilities. Besides, they consider that this approach is multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary. According to Unterhalter, this approach should draw on other approaches to become a useful framework for policy making.

By and large, the four approaches described above have influenced the design and implementation of policies aimed at promoting women and girls' education since the 1970s. Each one of them has its strengths and weaknesses so an eclectic approach

could bring more benefits. In the following section, I discuss the common factors that constraint women and girls access/or attainment to school based on some studies conducted in Africa, Bangladesh, Peru, and Paraguay.

### *Factors that hinder women and girl's access and/or attainment to education*

#### *Cultural practices*

The label "cultural practices" is ambitious and I do not intend, by any means, define it here. I use it only to frame practices people execute in two third world countries: Bangladesh and Paraguay, and which are key factors in the decision of sending or not sending girls to school. In this category I have included dowry and religion as two influential cultural practices, and will address them below.

#### Dowry

Raynor (2005) reports on a case study she conducted in Bangladesh in which she

wanted to explore the “attitudes towards girls’ education and educated girls and women” (p. 83) she undertakes this task because reports on a government initiative called Female Stipend Program (FSP) fail to describe the impact of the program at the family or individual level.

The national constitution of Bangladesh decreed equal rights to men and women in 1972, in 1979 the national government ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, and in 1980 the government issued the Prohibition of Dowry Act. Nevertheless the impact and effectiveness of these official policies have been very little.

The first FSP program was launched in 1982, and reports state it had positive results. In 1994 NORAD, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the government implemented the Nation Female Stipend Program. This initiative was framed within a WID approach. One of their objectives, besides providing women access to

education, was to delay the marriage age and therefore early pregnancy.

Raynor conducted her case study using interviews, questionnaires, observation, and documents review. In her findings she reports the voices of her interviewees, both men and women. Reading between the lines, it can be concluded that dowry is a heavy determining factor in women’s education. For both parents and daughters, the decision of girls’ education is conflictive. If parents can afford their daughter’s education, they can not afford the dowry. The girls are in a similar dilemma: education or marriage, because they are mutually exclusive, that is, if a woman decides to be educated, most likely she will not get married because then her dowry would be too high.

### Religion

Religion is another cultural practice that needs to be addressed in order to find strategies that respect people’s beliefs and at the same time show that women’s education is not a threat to those beliefs. Although religious organizations play an important

role in governmental decisions in different countries around the world, it has been especially true in Paraguay. In her report on a policy in Paraguay called PRIOME, Project of Equal Opportunities and Results for Women, Colazo (2000) mentions the significant influence of the Catholic Church in educational policies. Their influence extends to people's perception about women's education, and a great deal of the resistance to the PRIOME project has to do with Catholic beliefs.

People expressed their concern about implementing gender perspective in education, and some of their reasons were that Maria (Christ's Mother) had the specific role of being a mother; that the first woman was created from a man's rib, so women are not supposed to be superior to men; and that boys and girls would become homosexuals if they do the other gender activities.

While it is important to respect everybody's beliefs, I also think that it is necessary to establish a balance between the dogmas of religion and more modern understandings of

those principles. Otherwise, discrimination and segregation will continue, not only towards women, but also towards members of the society who choose to adopt different gender and sexual orientations.

### **Economic situation**

According to Cortina (2000) donor countries and multilateral agencies see education as a way to reduce poverty, for this reason they have invested in educational projects in the third world. Unfortunately, due to cultural practices in the third world countries that discriminate women in the job market, parents do not see the usefulness of sending girls to school because they will not obtain working positions, anyway. Also, boys and girls responsibilities are not equally distributed within the household so girls have to sacrifice school time to fulfill their house chores. Therefore when parents face the decision of sending their children to school, they opt to send their sons because they can compete in the job market and contribute to the economy of the household. Girls must stay at home taking care of

younger siblings and doing other chores while parents work in the fields. Adding to gender discrimination, there is the issue of the expenses for uniforms, school supplies, transportation, food, etc. In this sense, parents have little motivation to send their daughters to school.

In her study about education of girls in Kenya, Coalition (2005) gives an account of the factors that hinder their education, and among those factors is the economic one. She carried out her research study in 2003 using in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with different members of the educational community, and reviewing official documents and research reports.

My conclusion after reading this report is that the economic factor takes different forms. One of them is early marriage for girls. Parents encourage their daughters to marry young to assure they will get a rich husband. Therefore, parents do not think that women can bring income to the house from other source different from marriage.

Another form of the economic factor is who benefits from women's education. Parents consider that if a woman becomes educated, they will not profit from that because she will marry and leave their home, instead, if a boy becomes educated, he will provide for his parents. Another face of this factor is that if women become educated it is harder for them to find a suitable husband, which implies that she has to live with her parents and they have to provide for her.

Granted that parents agree to send girls to school, the economic factor still plays a negative role. Coalition reports that although primary education is free, students have to pay for their own utilities. Besides that, schools, in general, have a very poor infrastructure that does not offer even the minimal facilities for girls, for example bathrooms, and running water.

In Latin American cultural structure, women's marriage is not a determining factor in their education. Nevertheless, other economic constraints play a role in opting for women's schooling. As Cortina (2000)



states “Child labor and education are directly linked, since poverty, which keeps children out of school, would rise without the supplementary income that children bring to the home, and under the duress of poverty, family survival takes precedence over children’s education” (p. 185) In this case, it is children’s income contribution to the household what influences the decision of whether sending girls to school or not.

Apart from that, the belief that there is a direct relationship between education and poverty (meaning that being educated automatically will increase the person’s income the effect of education on poverty) does not fit reality. The social, political, and economic situation of our countries is very complex, and many times, people, although educated, find themselves without choices, as stated by Cortina (2000) “we know that it is not only lack of schooling that keeps people poor. It must be acknowledged that poverty and its alleviation are complex issues that go well beyond the realm of education” (p. 185) To give an example, in Colombia unemployment rates were as high

12.4% in 2001 (Arango, and Posada, 2001) and despite the fact that people are becoming more and more educated, poverty persists.

In this regard, efforts to promote women and girls’ education in the third World countries, need to have a comprehensive approach in which different areas are involved in order to ensure higher indices of success.

#### *Teachers’ Education*

Finally, I would like to discuss the influence of teachers’ education in girls’ attainment to school. I will report on two studies that provide information about this matter.

Ames (2005) conducted a study in 1990 to examine the educational situation of rural girls in the Andean region in Peru. She found that despite the fact that in 1990 most Latin American countries had achieved a 96.6 % of primary enrolment, gender inequality had not been resolved.

She found, among the many reasons for the persistence of gender inequality, that the lack of teachers’ preparation played an

important role in it. It was manifested in different ways. The methodology implemented relied heavily in drilling and repetition. In Peru there is a high percentage of population whose mother tongue is Quechua, and although some teachers spoke the language, they conducted their instruction in Spanish, which in consequence marginalized students who did not speak Spanish. The scarcity of materials contributed to teachers' limitations, but when they had materials, they did not use them because they were afraid that students would damage them. Teachers' beliefs also influenced their performance because they considered that silence and obedience was a sign of good learning and to enforce it they would sometimes use physical punishment.

Besides this aspects that affected boys and girls the same, the lack of teachers' education in gender perspective led them to value boys more than girls and considered that girls were not worth the effort to teach them. Instead teachers contributed to the perpetuation of gendered roles by assigning girls domestic chores like washing the

teacher's clothes, doing her dishes, or baby sitting her child.

In this way, school and education do not become a site for girls' empowerment but a site for the continuation of roles that aim at keeping women subordinated, undervalued, and powerless.

Girls in Kenya do not have a better panorama. In the study conducted by Coalition (2005) she reports a similar situation to the one described by Ames. Teachers do not have enough materials; they do not value girls and think they are not good to learn science and technical subjects; teachers ask girls to run errands for them and perform house chores. Adding to this, male teachers (along with boys) harass girls and look for sexual favors.

If this is the situation girls have to deal with everyday, it is understandable that they decide to stay out of school. Their decision does not respond to a rejection of education *per se* but to the side effects of attending school. In this sense, girls do not have a choice.

## Conclusion

Four approaches have illuminated the design and implementation of initiatives around the third world in their search to provide women and girls access to education. Each of the approaches has strengths, and weaknesses, and one has been contested by the following. Regardless of the approach, the literature reported here and other studies show that there have been advances, but also, there are still complex issues that need deep attention.

I have described three of these factors. I consider that is very important for policy makers, governments, NGO's, international donors, etc. to be aware that when formulating plans to improve access and attainment to school for women and girls, it is necessary to examine the different layers of the social fabric and design actions that involve different sectors of the population, because it is not only women who need to be educated, it is the whole society.

It is also important to consider that, although third world countries share a great deal of

characteristics, we also differ in certain aspects, and those aspects need to be treated individually. Advocates of educational initiatives need to think: education for whom? What is the purpose of education? What kind of empowerment is needed? And then design policies for that particular and unique context.

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