

Monitoring gender equality in education



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In the past, it was common to use the notions of gender parity and equality interchangeably in the context of education. However, although the two are still regarded as being linked, they are increasingly being seen as having different connotations. The Education for All (EFA) initiatives recognised gender equality as separate from gender disparity by making a clear distinction between the two in goal V of its Dakar declarations:

Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement of good quality education.

(Dakar Declarations; Education for All, 2001)

The national and international commitments made by countries to the above goal make it important to have a framework for monitoring the progress towards that direction. However, it is not easy to monitor progress towards gender equality, as unlike parity it is essentially a qualitative concept. It is now common knowledge that a large number of countries have missed the target of eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education, many of them being in the Commonwealth. However, it is difficult to make similar assertions about the state of gender equality in education given the lack of clarity regarding what defines gender equality in education and the ways to monitor that.

What is gender equality in education?

It is important to realise that a focus on gender equality does not mean ignoring the issue of parity. Attaining gender parity in participation rates for various stages of education remains crucial but that alone is not enough to attain gender equality in education. Gender equality in education can be defined in several ways. Taking a cue from the capability approach, gender equality in education can be defined as ensuring equality of entitlement, equality in the opportunities and equality in the capacity to exercise the entitlements and use the opportunities for both boys and girls belonging to diverse social, ethnic, linguistic or economic groups. The notion of equality also refers to relational aspects and is linked to the issue of justice and freedom.

Gender is a social construct, referring to the ways in which societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. It is often mistakenly equated with the biological category of male and female. Gender is a conceptual category referring to

masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, and roles and responsibilities. Femininity does not exist in isolation of masculinity. The construction and power of the one determines the construction and power of the other. This also leads to various forms of inequality and disparity between men and women, impacting their capacities and lives in a significant manner. It is in the interest of both men and women to move away from existing unequal relations of gender. Education can be and often is perceived as a process of expanding human capacities to contribute to the making of a just, equal and compassionate society. However, education is not necessarily always a process of empowerment and transformation. It has equal potential or danger of being a process of socialising learners into existing norms, values and power structures, and reinforcing unequal relations. The challenge lies in stopping education being a process for naturalising existing unequal relations and making it a process of empowerment. Empowerment is a process of gaining control – over self, over resources and over decision making. Empowerment has an individual as well as a collective dimension, especially when used in the context of gender.

Gender identity and school performance

Conformity to established societal norms for masculine and feminine gender identities does not work against girls alone. A number of countries, including several in the Commonwealth, are experiencing educational under-performance of boys, which is being linked to the issue of conformity to what is described as 'hegemonic masculinity' by some. Seen from this perspective, school and education are viewed as 'feminised'. Boys are not supposed to have academic orientation and should not have any allegiance to teachers, as it would be tantamount to betrayal to peer perception of 'manhood'. Certain disciplines such as language are considered 'feminine' and therefore boys are not supposed to do well. The same perceptions work against girls when they are not encouraged to pursue or are not perceived as having the capability to do well in science and mathematics. Therefore, gender equality in education also implies education processes working towards changing these notions of gender identities that work against both boys and girls.

In this context, it is important to note that gender equality is not viewed in isolation of other forms of inequalities that exist in different societies. It is also important to recognise that such a definition of gender equality in education implies moving beyond



access and moving beyond only instrumental arguments in favour of girls' education. Education of women is often justified in the interests of supplementary income generation, lower fertility rates and population control, better mothering skills, and improving familial and social cohesion. These are important but most of these interests locate women and girls within the family as mere functional units. Their rights and identity as individual human beings are not recognised by these arguments. The role of education in the cultivation of knowledge and empowerment of self is not given much importance. In such situations, even when the access opportunities improve, education does not necessarily play an empowering role.

Studying the facts and creating new opportunities

Monitoring progress towards gender equality in education therefore requires monitoring of the facts. For example, (i) whether the education system clearly defines the entitlements and rights; (ii) whether adequate and appropriate opportunities have been created to ensure that the entitlements and rights can be translated into real opportunities; (iii) whether interventions are designed in a manner that all, especially those who are vulnerable for any reason, are capacitated to access the opportunities; (iv) whether education processes are empowering and provide space for reexamining existing norms and relations; and (v) whether the larger environment is enabling enough for both boys and girls, and men and women, to apply their choices and transform the society into a more equal and compassionate one.

Suitable indicators need to be developed for all the above in order to monitor progress. It is possible that the equality exists in one case but is not supported by others, and hence the pace of change is slow. These can be elaborated and illustrated with a few examples. The presence or absence of a compulsory basic education act that ensures that all children in a particular age-group would receive education is an indicator of defining entitlement. However, converting the entitlement into real opportunity would require that both boys and girls belonging to all social and economic groups have access to functional schools. This might mean special provision for certain groups if that is what is required for specific reasons. For instance, if a particular ethnic group does not consider it safe to send their adolescent girls to co-educational schools, it becomes crucial that single sex

girls' schools are provided in such areas. The education process could be such that in the long run, educated women stop demanding single sex girls' schools for their daughters, and that would be an indicator of the learning process being empowering and geared towards transformation. The need for specific rules and counselling facilities in schools is necessary in areas where pregnancy is common among adolescent girls, and also in areas where boys face excessive peer pressure to indulge in violence. The availability of all kinds of courses and subjects, and the provision of encouragement to both boys and girls to opt as per their choices without getting typecast as feminine and masculine, is itself a big challenge of many education systems. It is obvious that merely having a school does not mean having adequate and suitable schooling opportunities in all kinds of situations.

Therefore, the need for a detailed framework to monitor progress towards gender equality in education is obvious. This framework has to be based on a common understanding of gender equality and its application to education. The issue of measurement is often raised in the context of qualitative notions and indicators. It is true that measurement is more complex and somewhat subjective in the case of qualitative concepts, and it is also true that it is possible to develop qualitative indicators if the definition is clear and the objectives well defined. However, a bigger challenge is to accept the notion of gender equality and commit to the fact that education can be a process of empowerment and transformation. Once this is accepted, it will be easier to develop a conceptually rich and contextually well-informed framework with adequate flexibility to be adapted in various situations.

References

Dakar Declarations, (2001). Education for All.

Biographical notes

Dr Jyotsna Jha joined the Commonwealth Secretariat in September 2005 as Advisor, Education and Gender, and Education and HIV & AIDS. Prior to that, she worked for several years in India, serving in both government and non-government organisations – in both national and international agencies.