

Paper for UNESCO 15 year Review of the Beijing Platform of Action

Gender Equality and Women and Girls' Education, 1995-2010: How much is there a space for hope?

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Introduction

The Beijing Platform of Action has the education and training of women as a second strategic objective noting that “education is a human right ...an essential tool for achieving the goals of equality, development and peace”. The six components of the strategic objective focus on ensuring equal access to education, the eradication of illiteracy, and improving women’s access to vocational education, science and technology and continuing education. There is also a stress on non-discriminatory education and training, resources for monitoring and implementing strategic reforms, and the promotion of lifelong learning. Education is associated with learning in formal institutions like schools or universities and in informal settings of, for example cultural groups, or through the media. Training is associated with instruction linked to particular skills, generally associated with work.

Beijing Strategic objective two - *education and training of women* - sought to:

1. Ensure equal access to education
2. Eradicate illiteracy among women
3. Improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education
4. Develop non-discriminatory education and training
5. Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms
6. Promote life-long education and training for girls and women

Fifteen years on from the Beijing Declaration, elements of the strategic objectives in education and training have been realised. For some women, in some regions of the world, there have been substantial achievements in accessing and progressing through education and training. But, despite considerable expansion of provision since 1995, for which due credit must be given to governments, multilateral organizations, employers and a range of popular organizations, large numbers of women and girls still have little or no education. They comprise nearly two thirds of the one billion people in the world who have had no schooling or left school after less than four years instruction.¹

Framing initiatives in the education and training of women towards realising the Beijing goals of “equality, development and peace” has been enormously difficult. This has partly been because of the persistence of gender inequalities within education and training systems and practices, and

¹ Unterhalter, E., 2009, ‘Access of women and girls to education and training’. Paper prepared for the DAW Expert Group Meeting on the Beijing Platform of Action and the MDGs, Geneva, November.

partly because of a narrowing interpretation of the issues entailed by the six strategic objectives agreed at Beijing.

In order to analyse these intertwined processes this paper first sets out some of the main achievements towards gender equality in education since 1995, and then identifies some major challenges.

The challenges are associated, firstly, with a narrowing of ideas and visions about women and girls' education amongst some of the most powerful institutions, notably governments and multilateral organizations. Central to this process is the disconnect between advocates of movements promoting education, women's rights and other social relations key to gender equality. Indeed, the disconnects between education and women rights' advocates inhibit action and diminish the potential of education and training as a site to develop the insights needed to challenge discrimination elsewhere in society.

Secondly, a range of silences, particularly concerning the lives of girls who do not attend school and violence in or around school, has made the development of policy and practice in these areas particularly difficult.

Thirdly, the ways in which current intersecting global crises associated with the economy, climate change, and shortages of food exacerbate many of the persistent inequalities associated with education and training, require new strategies.

Principal achievements towards gender equality in education and training observed and documented since 1995

There has been progress since 1995 in all the six areas identified in Strategic Objective, albeit with considerable regional variations. Most progress has been made in securing access to primary education, and the least in eradicating illiteracy amongst women.

Ensuring equal access to education

Since 1995 there has been considerable expansion of enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education in all regions of the world. Even in areas where there were once large gender gaps, a narrowing can be observed. Expanding opportunities in education for women and girls since the Beijing Declaration should be considered as one of the most important social revolutions of our time. Thus, while in some regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab states and South and West Asia, the difference between the proportion of school age girls and boys in primary school is still notable, it had narrowed considerably since 1995. **Although in Africa in 2007 29% of school age girls were out of school , this is a considerable advance from 1990 when less than half of all school age girls were in primary school.**² In secondary education there has also been some progress to expanded access, and in Latin America and the Caribbean there are a greater proportion of girls than boys in secondary school. But in all regions the size of the gender gap has not closed dramatically, and in Africa less than a quarter of teenage girls attend secondary school, while in South and West Asia the proportion is less than half. Gender gaps in higher education have narrowed most dramatically, and in North America and Western Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean there are considerably more women

² Unterhalter, E, 2007, Gender, schooling and global social justice, London: Routledge, 157-164; UNESCO, Global Monitoring Report 2010, Paris: UNESCO, 342

than men enrolled at this level. . But in some regions very tiny proportions of women attend university (4% of young adults in Sub-Saharan Africa and 10% in South and west Asia in 2007 (GMR, 2010, 358)

Thus since 1995 gender equality in the distribution of education has improved in all areas of the world and in all phases, but many challenges still remain with regard to expanding the level of provision, the quality of instruction, and the form of education experiences. Nonetheless a number of important actions have been taken to help ensure girls enrol and remain in school. Considerable investments have been made in building schools closer to areas of settlement, training more women teachers, and providing water and latrines in schools; in many countries fees have been abolished or substantially reduced. Thus, for example, the abolition of fees in Malawi, Ethiopia, Kenya and Ghana resulted in an enormous increase in the number of children attending school with girls as well as boys enrolled. Active campaigns to encourage parents to send children to school have been undertaken, sometimes imaginatively linked, as in India, with the Mahila Samkhya programme with support for women's mobilisation, credit, literacy and employment projects.

Conditional cash transfer programme are now being widely used in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa to give money either to mothers or families on condition children attend school and are showing some positive results provided in improved rates of girls' enrolment and attendance at school and, in some countries (notably Mexico) women's access to health services, particularly associated with pregnancy and breastfeeding. However questions still remain regarding whether these programmes are adequate to address improved attainment at school, unequal gender relations within households and communities, and improvements in women's access to longer-term resources.³

Eradicating illiteracy among women

There has been some progress on eradicating adult illiteracy, but this has been immensely slow. While the proportion of women who are literate has increased in all regions from the mid 1990s, with dramatic improvements in the Arab States where only 46% of adult women were literate in 1985-1994, compared to 60% in 1995-2004, and improvements on a smaller, but no less significant scale have taken place in South and west Asia (with literate women shifting from 34% to 47% of the population between the mid 1980s and 2004) and Sub Saharan Africa (with shifts over the same time period from 45% to 50%).⁴ But the large numbers of women and men without literacy remains a grave injustice. Women comprise the largest proportion of adults without literacy in all regions of the world, and these patterns have not changed dramatically since 1995. Girls who do not attend school are the most likely to have low levels of literacy skills as adults, and although, they no longer comprise the majority of children out of school in some regions (East Asia & the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and North America and Western Europe) in all other regions they are a sizeable majority of those not attending (61% in the Arab states in 2005 and 59% in South and West Asia).⁵

Although the improvement of literacy rates among women has not been achieved, much innovative work has been done. Large government-run programmes, like the Total Literacy

³ See for example Molyneux, M., 2008, 'Conditional cash transfers' Pathways to Empowerment Brief. Available online at http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Pathways_Brief_5.pdf and Rawlings, L.B. 2005. "Evaluating the Impact of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs," World Bank Research Observer, Oxford University Press, vol. 20(1), pages 29-55.

⁴ UNESCO (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009* Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2009-governance/>

⁵ UNESCO (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009* Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2009-governance/>

Campaign in India, have not only given women access to literacy, but also catalysed a range of other social changes allowing women to take a larger part in local politics and economic activities outside their homes. In addition many smaller initiatives associated with social movements, civil society organization and NGOs have promoted literacy, sometimes in conjunction with initiatives linked to land titling or campaigns for improved health or credit.

“Improving women’s access to vocational training, science and technology and continuing education”

Since 1995, an increased number of jobs have become available for women in the education sector which has meant expanded opportunities for vocational training for work in education. These jobs have been not just in lower primary education, but also in upper primary, secondary and tertiary education. However it remains the case that women are over-represented in the lower paid and lower status occupations associated with education (generally early years and lower primary school teaching), and under-represented in higher paid and higher status work be it in teaching or management.

Unfortunately, there has been little systematic data collection worldwide of women’s access to vocational training, which limits our appreciation of the magnitude of the gaps and challenges. Although in a number of countries in Western Europe and North America there have been initiatives to give women opportunities in technical fields, once considered male preserves, however many have not gone to scale, and in the UK, for example, women remain over-represented in vocational courses linked to childcare and hairdressing, and under represented in courses associated with information technology, construction and engineering. In many countries, while training is provided to women and men by agricultural extension officers, criticisms abound that the training women receive does not allow them to market the crops they grow efficiently or give them access to important inputs of fertiliser or new seed varieties.

Women’s access to work in science and technology has expanded, but they remain a minority of those engaged in research in this field. Worldwide, in 2009 women comprised just over a quarter of researchers in science and technology, but there are variations between regions and fields. Thus women are a minority of students and researchers in the field of information technology, but can comprise up to half of students and researchers in some Latin American countries, and in a number of African countries, particularly in health science research they comprise nearly 50%. . In Asia, women constitute only 18 percent of science and technology researchers overall, while in Europe, women comprise 29 percent of S&T researchers.⁶

Develop non-discriminatory education and training

In many countries attention has been given to improving the quality of schooling in order to enhance gender equality. A number of extremely innovative programmes have been developed with regard to working on whole school or programmatic approaches to implementing gender equality in curriculum, teaching and management. Such initiatives have generally been documented in relation to NGO initiatives. For example, important projects have been carried out by organizations, such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), who work with teachers and learners in government-run schools to reflect together on how to make schools more gender equitable. Many initiatives have been undertaken to develop the curriculum to include material on gender equality or revise textbooks and other teaching materials to remove

⁶ Rathgeber, E., 2009, Women and girls in science and technology: increasing opportunities in education, research and employment. Paper prepared for Division on the Advancement of Women Expert Group Meeting on “The impact of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals” United Nations Office at Geneva 11-13 November 2009

biased content. Prominent NGOs such as ActionAid and Care have been extremely active in advocacy campaigns with governments and the wider public to change practices and mentalities. Finally, governments, notably in South Africa, have given increasing attention to how to work with girls, boys and teachers to change attitudes and whole school policies.

In some countries, for example India and Pakistan, activities to support women's participation in village education committees or school management committees have not only secured a significant space for women in decision-making, but have also contributed in a number of instances to improving the *quality* of education. In a number of countries, such as Uganda, India and Bangladesh, there have been initiatives to train teachers with particular attention to gender issues.

In higher education, Women's and Gender Studies departments have developed as an innovative area of research and teaching, and in many disciplinary areas the question of gender has been given due weight. Many universities in the global north and south have reformed management and revised pedagogies to better address questions of gender equality. Thus attention has been given to affirmative action programmes relating to staff appointment and student recruitment in for example the USA, South Africa and some universities in India, while reforming pedagogies to reflect on questions of gender are documented in a number of countries, for instance Australia, the UK, Brazil, and Argentina.⁷

Allocate sufficient resource for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms

Considerable progress has been made since 1995 by UNESCO and other organizations in producing sex-disaggregated data on education. Most data has been collected in relation to school enrolment, attendance and progression, and some data to monitor reform on higher education has also been assembled. However there are gaps in monitoring reform; in particular monitoring of training, the range of literacy programmes and gender equality initiatives.

Most resources from governments and multilateral and bilateral organizations have gone into the expansion of primary school. Although gender is often identified as a cross-cutting area in large-scale aid programmes, for example in the KESSP (Kenya Education sector Support Programme), very little resources have generally been allocated for training staff in how to monitor and assess the gender equality dimensions of reforms. In some countries women have played a significant role in scrutinising education budgets to make sure they are gender equitable. For example, in Rwanda women parliamentarians worked to review finance for education; the Tanzania Gender Network has worked for more than a decade commenting on government spending and building capacity in civil society organization to do this at a local level⁸. A number of guides have been written on how to mainstream gender in education policies and practice and on how to attend to gender issues in teacher training or mentoring campaigns.

Promote life-long education and training for girls and women

The popularity of the idea of continuous education has increased enormously since 1995 and many programmes enrol large numbers of women and girls, particularly programmes for older learners in Western Europe, such as University of the Third Age. Innovative programmes have been set up to help young women who have had to leave school to work re-enter the education

⁷ Leathwood, C. and Read, B., 2008, *Gender and the changing face of higher education* Buckingham: Open University Press

⁸ Aikman, S and Unterhalter, E. (2007) *Practising Gender Equality in Education* Oxford: Oxfam. Available online at <http://publications.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam/display.asp?K=9780855985981>

system. COBET in Tanzania is one such initiative, where girls and boys can study at flexible times and take appropriate national examinations to re-enter the school system. Other important initiatives in this field work with mothers to prepare children for entry to school, a particularly important step for families, such as the Roma in Eastern Europe, where parents themselves have not attended school. In a number of countries innovative programmes support training for women linked to work in health promotion. One examples is work in Bangladesh with grandmothers, who have experienced breastfeeding, to support them to promote this important protective practice amongst younger women. Another is work with lay counsellors on HIV in South Africa, to enable them to provide better access to the health system for people worried about the stigma associated with the disease. Many instances of training within a lifelong learning perspective are linked with work on women's income generation, access to wider audiences for cultural work, and deepening insights linked to voter education. These expanding fields have provided much scope for the creativity of women's organisations, although initiatives have often not had significant resources that could enable them to move from small local undertakings to significant national or regional programmes.

Overview of Achievements and Gaps since 1995

It is evident that in all the areas identified at Beijing there have been advances, but these have been unevenly distributed and measured across the world and in some cases much more progress has been made than others. In all the six strategic areas outlined, the full substance of the Beijing vision has struggled to be realised. The reasons for this are different in particular contexts, but three areas stand out as significant obstacles:

- The disconnections and boundaries between work in education and other sectors that support the advancement of women and girls and gender equality
- Silences regarding gender inequalities in education (both in formal and non-formal settings)
- Interlocking crises which affect education and exacerbated the reproduction of gender inequalities

I. Boundaries and disconnections

Progress on gender equality in education and the building of meaningful partnerships to advance opportunities for women and girls have been hindered by the ways in which boundaries have been drawn defining the terrain of policy and the principal actors in this area on rather narrow terms. Institutions, which could have been productively engaged with each other, to connect the different elements of Strategic Objective B and other aspects of the Platform for Action have often worked apart.

Unfortunately there has been a lack of involvement by many women's organizations with questions of education and very little work by those engaged with education with key issues for the women's movement concerning violence, poverty or civic rights. Generally there have been inadequate forums available for women to participate in education policy formulation or critique.

Finally, policy, ideas about practice and resources have not flowed easily between global, national and local levels.

Global policy, local implementation

Gender equality in education has occupied a prominent space in global policy making over the last two decades: the importance given to the education and training of women (strategic objective 2) and concerns of the girl-child (strategic objective 12) in the 1995 Beijing declaration, were, to some extent, picked up in both the 2000 the Dakar Platform of Action on Education for All (EFA), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The Dakar Framework for Action, 2000

Goals

- (i) expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
- (ii) ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
- (iii) ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes;
- (iv) achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;
- (v) 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 in basic education of good quality;
- (vi) improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Source: http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/ed_for_all/dakfram_en0.shtml

The Millennium Development Goals (related to gender equality and education)

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education, ensuring that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women, eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015

Source: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

These frameworks have resulted in global mobilization around gender equality in education and the establishment of new forms of global partnership, such as the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), launched at the Dakar Conference in April 2000. In many countries constitutional commitments and key policies affirm the importance of gender equality in education, sometimes

drawing on these international frameworks. Since 2000, there has been considerable attention in both international and national policy making to interventions aiming at improving access to schooling for girls and boys.

However, research suggests that in Kenya and South Africa education officials tasked with delivering on the commitments contained within international policy, feel detached from engaging with the content and meaning of global frameworks, viewing them simply in terms of an obligation to report. Moreover, research in a number of different countries and organizations has pointed to the difficulties of translating broad global ambitions for gender equality in education into action at local level. Schools and local communities often feel distanced from both global and national policy processes. In the words of a South Africa head teacher the goals for EFA and the MDGs are “heard a long way off”, while little concerted effort goes into supporting teachers or local district education officials to implement them.⁹

In some cases, the failure of policy to effectively flow between global, national and local spaces may be associated with an inadequate flow of resources: generally there has been a lack of aid and other financial flows directed towards gender equality in education. Direct budgetary support makes it difficult to track how aid is spent. However, it is evident that the money promised in 2000 to support EFA has not flowed fast or efficiently enough and has not adequately reached the poorest or focused on gender equality.

Policy weaknesses are also linked to lack of processes of dialogue and engagement. Government interactions with civil society organizations are often limited just to mobilization for enrolment campaigns and not for deeper processes of dialogue and critique. Meanwhile, schools, communities, and officials working at local levels often do not feel able to engage in discussion around policy relating to gender equality. In some cases this results in resistance to the notions of gender equality contained within the Beijing Platform for Action and other global frameworks, as these are seen as externally imposed “elite agendas” or as being in conflict with particular local values, beliefs or cultural traditions.

Working with women

The way in which gender equality policy evaporates as it moves between global, national and local spaces is compounded because of a lack of coordinated attention to ensuring women’s participation in decision-making about education. Governments do not consult with a wide range of women’s organizations when reviewing education policy. Instead, they tend to focus on organizations that campaign on specific education issues, for example, those that distribute sanitary towels in Kenya, or organize girls’ clubs.

In addition, there have been limited attempts to make connections between civil society organizations that campaign on education and women’s rights at either local or global levels. There are notable exceptions: there are examples in Latin America and India of partnerships built between movements to promote literacy campaigns. While women’s organizations around the world have given prominence to high levels of violence against women, issues that encompass both education and gender equality are rarely taken up in education departments and campaigners: discrimination against teenage girls and adult women’s literacy are two examples of this neglect.

⁹ Unterhalter, E., North, A., Karlsson, J., Onsongo, J., & Makinda, H. (2009). Four forms of disconnection: Negotiating gender, education and poverty reduction in schools in Kenya and South Africa, Working Paper 1, Gender, education and global poverty reduction Initiatives. Available online at http://www.ioe.ac.uk/Working_paper_1_final.pdf

Although the Beijing Platform for Action contains a strong focus on women's literacy and access to education and training programmes in a lifelong learning perspective, the Education for All movement has tended to focus on formal schooling and paid less attention to education beyond the school space. Adult and continuing education, women's literacy programmes and vocational training are often not included in education sector plans. In many cases they are seen as falling under the remit of separate departments or ministries. Provision is often not made for women or adolescents who participate in vocational training or literacy courses to re-enter the formal schooling system, obtain equivalent qualifications or gain employment in the formal economy. Programmes that undertake this work are often only sporadically evaluated and little policy has developed on the basis of their achievements and difficulties.

Parity or equality

This separation of formal education from non-formal and adult education and training is reinforced by the MDG framework and the narrow framing of gender equality and education within the MDG framework in terms of parity – that is equal numbers of girls and boys in schools. This narrow policy formulation has established boundaries between policy in support of the MDG and concerns of women's rights activists.

Much global education policy has drawn on the MDGs' emphasis on parity, focusing on "what works" to get girls in school. Such an approach, which has often employed instrumental arguments about the economic returns to educating girls, rather than emphasising rights in and through education and the transformation of gender relations, has often discouraged women's rights activists from engaging in education campaigns.

In some contexts an exclusive focus on girls' education has also led to confusion about gender equality goals. Thus, when, as for example in a country like South Africa, more girls than boys are in school, officials come to think they have "done" gender, although issues remain concerning economic, political and social rights, violence, and ideas about masculinity and femininity that undermine equality concerns. In short, gender issues come to be viewed in terms of enrolment numbers in schools and these are often considered as separate to concerns around equality in society as a whole.

Disconnected social policy

An artificial separation of the school from wider social processes has also led to a failure to adequately address the ways in which issues of gender equality in schools interact with issues relating to poverty, health, HIV, housing and work.

In only a very few countries has comprehensive school feeding been introduced and all school fees and levies abolished despite the multiple advantages associated with gender equality in education and awareness that poverty keeps children – especially girls - out of school and that lack of nutrition means it is very difficult for them to learn.

It is clear that different departments within governments or international agencies often do not co-ordinate their work, as is reflected in the admission of an official, interviewed in an international aid agency interviewed by a researcher collecting data on concerns with gender, that they "work in silos".¹⁰ The lack of attention to the connections between family livelihood, health, education and gender equality in government social policy, international development programmes and the campaigning work of NGOs is an important missed opportunity.

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Interview conducted as part of the Gender, Education and Global Poverty Reduction Initiatives research project. See <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/26514.html>

Thus, vertical and horizontal boundaries within government departments and between multilateral, national and local bodies have contributed to the attenuations of the Beijing vision. Furthermore, it has meant that there has been uneven progress across all areas, hampering efforts to take forward the realization of the full intention of education for “equality, peace and development”.

II. Silences

There are a number of persisting gaps and new challenges to achieve gender equality in education and training which were either not part of the Beijing vision, or have not been adequately discussed and addressed in the years that have followed. Silence about these areas has continued to make a full accomplishment of the strategic objective particularly difficult.

While the expansion of schooling for girls is perhaps the most significant indicator of progress towards gender equality in the years since Beijing, there remain questions about what happens to girls once they are in school, what happens to those girls who do not have access to school, and the fate of girls once they leave formal education.

Girls not in school

Dramatic increases in enrolment rates mask continuing exclusion from education of many girls. According to the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2009, an estimated 75 million children of primary school age, 55% of whom are girls, are still denied any form of education.¹¹ Poverty and other forms of social inequality magnify gender disparities in access to school. Girls in poor households in Mali, for example, are four times less likely to attend primary school, and eight times less likely to attend secondary school than those from rich households.¹² Girls in rural Peru miss school in order to fetch water, collect firewood, cook and clean in the home, take care of animals and younger siblings, and help with the farm work.¹³

In contexts hard hit by the HIV /AIDS pandemic, girls may be required to look after sick relatives. Girls as young as 12 years old are still withdrawn from school to be married, and girls who become pregnant are also denied education in many contexts. Even where alternative education is provided, as in the case of evening classes for pregnant school girls in Mozambique, many girls are unable to participate because of the risks of travelling long distances at night time.¹⁴

We know very little about the experiences and perspectives of these girls. Rarely have they been consulted. On the other hand, when researchers in Kenya, Ghana and Mozambique sought the perspectives of girls out of school, some girls refused to meet them, afraid of being punished for missing school. Others, already married, felt that the group was not for them as the transition to marriage marked them as women, removing therefore their right to education. Other girls agreed to meet the researchers in secret, for fear of violent repercussions by their husbands.¹⁵

Women excluded from education and training

¹¹ UNESCO (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009* Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2009-governance/>

¹² UNESCO (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009* Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2009-governance/>

¹³ Ames, P. (2005). When access is not enough: educational exclusion of rural girls in Peru. In S. Aikman and E. Unterhalter (eds), *Beyond Access*. Oxfam GB pp. 149-165.

¹⁴ Parkes, J., Januario, F. and Figue, A. (2009) Contested concepts in research and action on violence against girls in school. Paper delivered at UKFIET International Conference 2009. ActionAid International

¹⁵ ActionAid (2009). Working paper: Introduction to Baseline Study, Stop Violence Against Girls in School

Once they leave formal education, there are still major gaps in provision and resources for lifelong education and training for women.

Microcredit schemes have been seen as a major vehicle for women's empowerment, yet their expansion has not been matched by adequate opportunities for training to expand women's capabilities. They may for example receive training in how to keep accounts or raise chickens, with training provided by NGO's to help meet immediate material needs. But often these initiatives are not linked with national education and training systems, and do not help women to gain qualifications or achieve aspirations.

In addition, women are often expected to take on complex and challenging roles with inadequate training, leading to criticisms of their inadequate performance. In South Africa, for example, women have been used as AIDS counsellors despite receiving little education and training: the health system fails to take seriously the need to provide high quality support.

In post-conflict settings like Sudan, Sierra Leone and Mozambique, training for returnees has focused on the needs of men returning from fighting, neglecting the needs of those many women who have serviced the armies. For many of these girls and women, forced to provide sexual services to those fighting, returning home entails economic hardship and stigmatisation in their communities¹⁶.

Violence against girls in school

Awareness about violence against girls and women is another area of progress since Beijing, but again there are considerable gaps in our knowledge. The widely recognised inaccuracy of crime statistics and underreporting of violence, and especially of those forms like violence in the home and sexual violence often deemed private or hidden, mean that we still have little accurate information on the scope, prevalence or incidence of violence against girls. Without accurate data, policy may be made on the basis of anecdotes or the extreme acts that make the media headlines.

There is however increasing evidence, stemming from research into HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, of rape and sexual violence against school girls: more worryingly, there are reports of girls coerced into sex by boys and older men, including teachers¹⁷. Girls are beginning to break taboos of silence about sexual violence. However, they still risk hostility and are at risk of harmful retaliation; even when they do tell others, their reports are frequently ignored and no actions are taken to provide them with psychosocial support or protection.

While extreme acts may more likely be reported, we know very little about the "everyday violences" in girls' lives, about for example the sexual harassment they experience through abusive comments and unwanted touching, as well as their experiences of bullying and corporal

¹⁶ See for example Swaine, A. and Feeny, T. A neglected perspective: Adolescent girls' experiences of the Kosovo Conflict of 1999 In J. Boyden and J. de Berry (eds) *Children and Youth on the Front Line*. Berghahn Books: New York pp 63-84; Betancourt, T. S. et al (2008) High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 52, no. 4 and J. Kirk and R. Winthrop, 2007, Promoting Quality Education in Refugee Contexts: Supporting Teacher Development in Northern Ethiopia *International review of education*, 53, 5-6, 715-723

¹⁷ See for example Koenig, MA; Zablotska, I; Lutalo, T; Nalugoda, F; Wagman, J; Gray, R. (2004) Coerced first intercourse and reproductive health among adolescent women in Rakai, Uganda *International Family Planning Perspectives* 30(4):156-64; Morrell, R., Epstein, D., Unterhalter, E., Bhana, D. and Moletsane R. (2009) *Towards Gender Equality: South African Schools During the HIV and AIDS Epidemic* University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, Scottsville and Human Rights Watch (2001) *Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

punishment. Information about boys' experiences of sexual violence is also beginning to trickle in, but this too is an area replete with taboos and silences.¹⁸

In many countries, girls are insufficiently protected by legislation, and existing laws and policies to protect girls and women from violence are not known about or enforced at local level. Detailed work in primary and secondary schools in Durban, South Africa over six years indicated how difficult it was for learners and teachers to put into practice regulations and guidance that supported gender equality and tried to address gender based violence in school.¹⁹

Gendered classroom processes

These studies challenge the assumption of schooling as a solution to problems of gender inequality, with schools sometimes instead sites where gendered inequality, discrimination and violence are enacted and perpetuated. Classrooms may be places where the ways in which teachers treat girls and boys and gender-biased textbooks reinforce negative rather than combat stereotypes. We do not know enough about these classroom processes. Nor do we know enough about those schools and classrooms, which support and encourage girls' safety and success.

However, we do know that gendered inequalities are reproduced in many everyday relationships, including the play of younger children and the social networks of older young people. A study in Botswana for example found that harassing girls was a way for boys to "prove" their manhood.²⁰ These studies show some of the complex ways young people struggle over what it means to be a woman or man and how, in trying to live up to dominant images of masculinity and femininity, they may reject and exclude other children, particularly those already on the margins.

The high level of stigma associated with HIV infection, for example, exacerbates inequalities; children with HIV/AIDS are frequently marginalized and excluded by their peers. AIDS orphans, already facing bereavement and economic hardship, are stigmatized in schools and communities. The crisis of HIV/AIDS has forced girls in Zimbabwe to prove their "purity" by undertaking virginity testing, since girls who refuse face taunts as prostitutes²¹.

Gay and lesbian young women and men also face hostility and discrimination in schools and communities. Indeed, in some countries there appears to be increasing hostility at the policy level towards homosexuality, as exemplified in the current Anti-Homosexuality Bill being debated in Uganda. Where some attempts have been made to address teaching and learning in this area in schools, these have raised debates about the appropriateness of raising these issues with young children and in school settings.²²

Listening to and engaging with children's voices

The increasing attention since Beijing to listening to girls' voices signals a further breaking of the silences, and has led to the revelations about gendered subordination, discrimination and

¹⁸ See for example Burton, P. (2008) *Merchants, Skollies and Stone: Experiences of School Violence in South Africa*. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention Monograph Series No. 4, Cape Town and Leach F. and C. Mitchell (eds) *Combating Gender Violence in and around Schools*. Trentham, Stoke-on-Trent

¹⁹ See for example Global AIDS Alliance (2007). *Violence-free Zone: End School Related Violence Prevent HIV/AIDS*. Washington, Global AIDS Alliance or Morrell, R., Epstein, D., Unterhalter, E., Bhana, D., & Moletsane, R. (2009). *Towards Gender Equality: South African schools during the HIV and AIDS epidemic*. KwaZulu-Natal: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

²⁰ Humphreys, S., 2008, Multiple masculinities in the Botswana classroom. In M. Dunne (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality and Development: Education and Society in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

²¹ Makoni, H. (2006) 'Victims for being girls' – forced virginity testing in Zimbabwe. *Equals* 18: 4

²² De Palma, R. and Atkinson, E. (eds) (2009) *Interrogating heteronormativity in primary schools : the work of the No Outsiders project*. Trentham, Stoke-on-Trent

violence. But while researchers, policy makers and activists are increasingly likely to elicit perspectives of children, we still need to improve the ways we engage with children, especially the most marginalized, in dialogue and debate.

III. Crises

The difficulties associated with the boundaries, disconnects and silences regarding women and girls' education and training have been amplified in the last three years by a range of intersecting global crises in education and the economy. Threats to livelihoods and wellbeing associated with climate change, and conflict make realising aspirations for education and training particularly challenging, while simultaneously highlighting their enormous significance.

A crisis of provision

The large numbers of children, a majority of whom are girls, who are out of school, and the high numbers of adults who are not literate, indicates a number of shortcomings in national and international social policy aiming to address the social inequalities and injustices that perpetuate this. Nearly a billion people around the world remain with little or no education: gender inequality is deeply implicated in this injustice. In every region of the world women comprise a majority of those without literacy. In central and eastern Europe they make up 80% of this group, while, at best in Latin America and the Caribbean they are 55% of those who are not literate. Girls are the largest proportion of children out of school in Arab states (61%) and South and West Asia (59%).²³

This crisis of education is exacerbated by the limited resources available to address this. UNESCO has estimated that 10.3 million new primary school teachers were needed from 2006 to achieve universal primary education by 2015, and 14-25 million additional teachers are required if the more expansive Education for All targets are to be achieved by 2015.²⁴ Resources are very limited to adequately support teachers currently at work in very many countries. In countries such as Mali, India and Malawi the dramatic expansion in children's enrolment in school has been secured through the employment of inadequately trained teachers, many of whom are women on very low pay with insecure contracts²⁵.

The crisis of provision has been exacerbated by additional crises since 2007.

Food

Food crises are implicated in the education crisis. The absence of adequate policy to address hunger and problems with the distribution of food have an impact on women and girls' access to and ability to progress in education. Seventy percent of economically active women in low-income, food-deficit counties are employed in agriculture and play a pivotal role in growing,

²³ UNESCO (2008) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009* Available at <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport/reports/2009-governance/>

²⁴ UNESCO, 2006, *Projecting the global demand for teachers*. Montreal: UIS on line at http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/EducGeneral/Infosheet_No3_Teachers_EN.pdf (consulted January 2010); Moon, Bob (2007). *Research analysis: attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers: a global overview of current policies and practices*. UNESCO, Paris, France. Available online at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001516/151685E.p>

²⁵ Unterhalter (2009) *Education policy in hard times: the politics of gender, justice and hope* Keynote presentation to the 10th UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development. Oxford 15th-19th September 2009

processing, and preparing food.²⁶ Women as agricultural producers face specific challenges and constraints, including lack of access to agricultural inputs and secure titles to land. Often this impacts on their capacity to keep children in schools. Increases in food and fuel prices last year literally took food out of poor women's mouths, and by extension, days in school away from children. The crisis of already inadequate education provision in many parts of the world is amplified by the effects of food crises and inadequate school feeding schemes. Not only may children attend school less frequently because of pressures of survival, when they do they may be too poorly nourished to learn well. Furthermore, inadequate attention to the nutritional requirements of girls at adolescence translates into many health risks in adulthood including difficult pregnancies and health risks for their children.

Climate

The crisis of climate change also has severe effects on gender equality in education. Drying rivers and longer seasons of drought have particular effects with regard to women's work on the land and care work within households. As women walk further for water and fuel, their opportunities to engage in learning decrease. This has consequences both for themselves, their families and communities. Dying herds in East Africa have been associated with 'famine brides' and girls taken out of school to be married early, as brideprice can contribute to restocking a herd²⁷. The forced migrations associated with natural disasters, such as floods or hurricanes are often linked with severe disruptions of education, and girls often finding it particularly hard to access schooling under emergency conditions. Lack of informal education for women and girls in how to swim has been identified as one of the reasons disproportionate numbers of women, compared to men died in the Tsunami of 2004.²⁸

Conflict

Since 1995 devastating wars have affected some regions of Africa, and long-standing conflicts in a number of regions, notably the Middle East and Afghanistan, continue. Gender inequalities are often amplified under conditions of war and in the complex situations of different forms of post-conflict societies. While sometimes conflicts have been seen as disrupting social relations in ways which may create opportunities for women to find new spaces and opportunities for education, leadership or work, post-conflict settings have also been characterized by backlashes against women and an assertion that women need to be confined to the space of their homes and families. Women who have served in or with armed forces are often discriminated against and denied educational opportunities, which may be provided for men who are demobilized from armies. An increase in gender violence and a return to entrenched gender norms have been noted in post-conflict societies, like South Africa and Iraq; these are evident both in schools and higher education as well as in non-formal education settings

Policy for humanitarian assistance during conflict and reconstruction post-conflict has generally not given enough prominence to the significance of gender divisions and the opportunities education and training offer.

Conclusion: What kind of education?

²⁶ Unterhalter (2009) *Education policy in hard times: the politics of gender, justice and hope* Keynote presentation to the 10th UKFIET International Conference on Education and Development. Oxford 15th-19th September 2009

²⁷ North and Unterhalter (2010 Forthcoming) Drought, drop out and early marriage: Feeling the effects of climate change in East Africa. *Equals*

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²⁸ Oxfam International (2005) *The tsunami's impact on women*. Available online at http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/bn_tsunami_women.pdf

In these conditions how much space is there for hope that the vision of more equal education and training developed in Beijing may be realised? To what extent do the boundaries and disconnections, ongoing silences, and intersecting crises put a ceiling on these aspirations?

Achievements towards gender equality in education across the world since 1995 have been considerable, but boundaries, disconnects, silences and crises continue to disrupt possibilities for change. There have been significant increases in the numbers of girls enrolled in schools. But at the same time the emphasis on universal primary education in the MDGs has meant less policy attention and fewer resources for women and girls in other education sectors and much less attention to the quality of what is taught. Formal and nonformal education have been inadequately used as important places to learn about equality. Although many women have benefited from expanded access to education, many cannot realize their full aspirations within or beyond education.

Thus, despite the expansion of access to education for girls and women outlined above, there has been much less progress in securing women's access to decent work. Worldwide a majority remain in underpaid jobs with poor working conditions even though their levels of education have increased. Barriers to equal representation in decision-making bodies, be these parliaments, local councils, corporations, faith or civil society organizations or NGOs, remain widespread despite better education and training. Unequal relationships within families often mean that work within households is not shared. In many societies, cultural and social processes reproduce inequalities. In other words, *more* gender equality in terms of participation in education has not resulted in *more* gender equality in other areas of political economy or socio-cultural relationships.

Nonetheless despite boundaries and disconnects, troubling silences and intersecting crises do the vision of Beijing is not so hemmed in that there is no place for action. There are areas of hope in the existing expansion of provision, the extensive Constitutional commitments, the arguments being made for more equality and more access in almost all corners of the world. Although discrimination remains, much of it reflecting existing taken-for-granted relationships, it is much more questioned and much less tolerated. The strategic objectives laid out at Beijing continue to provide an important stepping off point for work on education policy, practice and research. The Beijing Platform for Action affirmed

Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men. Equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change.²⁹

These hopes embedded in the Platform for Action continue to resonate with the work of governments, teachers, and activists within education and women's movements. They echo what girls very often say they want most.

However, there is much more work to be done. Many initiatives for women and girls' education and gender equality remain inadequately resourced, both financially and in terms of capacity, ideas, and time. Much more research and development of practice is needed to address the disconnects, silences and crises we have noted. Stronger alliances and partnerships are needed between women's organizations and the education community in order to sustain the Beijing vision and support work towards education that is safe, a site for all girls to fulfil their potential and for the aspirations of equality to be nurtured and enriched.

²⁹ <http://www.un-documents.net/bpa-4-b.htm>