PROMOTING SUBSTANTIVE GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: YOUTH CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract:

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda requires that education tackle deeply held values that constrain women's civic engagement in both economic and political spheres. The World Bank proposes a notion of youth citizenship with its five transitions into adulthood – transitions in learning, parenthood, civic participation, employment, and health (World Bank 2007). This policy brief suggests that the concept of youth citizenship is valuable as a precondition for the promotion of substantive not just formal gender equality (Sinha 2003).

The context:

The review of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2010) reports considerable success in improving access to formal schooling. However in some regions 'education remains elusive', families face poverty, and women have difficulty in achieving decent, secure and formal paid employment. In Southern Asia, Northern Africa and Western Asia, only 20 per cent of those employed outside agriculture are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, 'only one in three paid jobs outside of agriculture are occupied by women'. (UN, 2010: 22). Most women are employed in 'subsistence farming, as unpaid family workers or as own-account workers—with no or little financial security or social benefits' (ibid). Outside the agricultural sector, senior officials and managers are dominated by men. In Western Asia, Southern Asia and Northern Africa, less than 10 per cent of top-level positions are held by women' (ibid.24).

Gender inequalities prevail in the political sphere with the 'global share' of women in parliaments only reaching 19%, much short of the target of 30%. In 2010, in 58 countries, parliaments included 10% or fewer representatives. In 16 countries, there were no female ministers.

These gender patterns of inequality are linked to schooling in different ways. The poor are often offered poor quality schooling that do little to address gender patterns in society. The forms of gender socialisation in schools can add to female disadvantage in adult life if young women lack confidence in the public sphere and are suppressed in their employment ambitions by traditional male and female roles. Schools reinforce male superiority through greater investment in male schooling, boys' elevated status within schools and failures to act against male harassment of girls (UNGEI 2010).

The international context: 'the demographic window of opportunity'

Young people (particularly the poor and marginalised) tend to be characterised as 'the problem' rather than as potential contributors to the solution to the problem of gender inequality and social instability. But young people have the least access to the political, economic and social rights of citizenship. They tend to have the highest unemployment rates, experience high rates of violence and abuse, have to contend without much support in raising young families, confront major health issues such as HIV/AIDS, and have little chance to represent themselves within political structures.

The World Bank Report (2007) *Development and the Next Generation* describes a 'demographic window of opportunity' in which it is possible to make a difference to the education and inclusion of young people. There are 1.3 billion youth between 12 and 24 in the world, with around 60% of the South Asian and Sub-Saharan African population. Some 130 million cannot read or write. There is a vital need to improve youth civic engagement. Young citizens as stakeholders can improve market performance: youth as stakeholders can protest against officials who are not accountable or challenge a service that is inefficient (WB   2007). Young adults represent important carriers of the flag of economic development, good governance, and democratic process.

However schooling cannot create the conditions for full female citizenship and stakeholder status. In those countries where

most girls perform better than the average boy at school or where girls flood universities as undergraduates, the conditions of female economic emancipation are not necessarily in place. Young women using the language of autonomy and mobility are said to have precisely the communication skills, and flexibility required by global economies. They have learnt the discourses of individualised citizenship (Arnot 2009) but they may not become fully participatory and equal economic and political young citizens.

Substantive gender equality: tackling the relational world

The concept of gender equality needs to be more than a given constitutional right if **substantive not just *formal* equality is the goal** (Sinha, 2003). Substantive equality implies that gender relations will need to be addressed. If MDG3 is to be achieved then the gendered definitions of citizenship, gender relations in the world of work, and in societal norms, traditions and religions need to be transformed. Any reassessment of schooling therefore needs to take on board the fact that female education is part and parcel of what Carol Gilligan (1982) called 'the relational world' of gender.

> - **The democratising of gender relations in society does not mean extracting women from gender relations, but rather transforming them in ways that promote gender equality – to achieve substantive not just formal equality.**

Reshaping gender relations can take many forms. Schools as key institutions will need to become socially transformative with respect to gender relations. The shift is from knowing not why but *how* to address gender difference in schools.

Educating for gender difference

The private domain is increasingly seen as relevant to democratic citizenship. The State depends on families to transmit core social values which ensure the regulation of their children; it relies on domestic pedagogic work alongside children's cognitive and affective development. The caring 'love-labour' by family members in maintaining infants, aged, disabled or ill is central to social wellbeing (Lynch et al., 2009).

Diverse gender identities also create policy dilemmas for those concerned about social justice. Rarely are teachers trained to challenge the cultural models of gender that are found in communities. Often '[W]hen men and women are treated differently, the man remains the norm against which the woman is peculiar, lacking, different' (Phillips 1993:45 quoted in Lister,1997:96). Equal citizenship involves recognition of female virtues, values, identities and worlds - it involves exploring the value of women's own relational worlds, their strength in caring citizenship (Lynch et al., 2009), and contributions to the community - the 'third space' between public and private spheres).

> - **Making equal citizenship substantive implies recognising the differences *between* men and woman and *between* women as a result of the range of social cleavages such as those of social class, caste, ethnicity, religion and sexuality.**

Countries with the strongest patriarchal traditions are often those with the largest gap between male and female literacy. The range of ethnic/cultural and religious practices found in pluralist contemporary society and the diversities of sexual expression are a challenge for teachers committed to gender equality. A democratic redistributive strategy could encourage girls through education to transition *out* of their cultures of origin. This sort of multiculturalism suggests women should be offered what Okin (1999) calls **'realistic rights to exit'** so as to become 'mistresses of their destiny'. There are dangers however with this position since it judges the claims of different cultural groups against pre-ordained notions of universal rights, or monolithic notions of male dominant cultures (Phillips, 2002). An alternative is to employ generic yardsticks such as *protection from harm, equality* and *choice* to distinguish between the gender impacts of different group practices and cultures. The concept of *female capability* offers the opportunity for young women the means to achieve their potential, and any realistic level of autonomy, empowerment and personal agency, social solidarity and belonging.

Transforming masculinity

Masculinity and male culture play a major part in the shaping of women's lives. Male students' macho displays can represent forms of counter cultural resistance to hierarchical models of schooling and a celebration of something that young men value when disadvantaged or when they fail at school. However such aggressive masculine forms oppress and/or bully young women. Achieving gender equality involves *transforming notions of masculinity* as much as it does modernising femininity.

The United Nations set up an expert group to try and find ways of involving men in the promotion of gender equality and

female citizenship (Breines et al., 2000): it found that gender equality required men to reconsider masculinity, that boys need to be encouraged to disassociate themselves from the negative violent aspects of their gender, finding ways of 'disconnecting courage from violence, steadfastness from prejudice, and ambition from exploitation' (Connell, 2000:30). Asking boys to investigate the history of masculinity, the association of masculinity with nationhood, war, male anxieties associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity are found to be productive.

> • **Addressing traditional forms of masculinity in development contexts is important for boys' achievement, for women, and essential for the promotion of gender equality. Gender equality through education is about empowering men to challenge gender constructions.**

Globalisation and individualisation: a new generation?

A challenge for school systems today is to encourage gender equality within the fast changing cultural and economic context. The new generation of youth are encouraged not to think about 'being male' or 'being female'. These identities are less relevant in a world with increasing fluidity, movement and fragmentation. In the 21st century, young people are encouraged to uncouple themselves from local, regional, class, caste, race, gender and sexual identifications in order to make new alliances, to take up opportunities when and where they occur. Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002), called contemporary Western European youth 'Freedom's children' since they are likely to be mobile, flexible in ambition and have internalised the concept of free choice in their personal lives (see Lukose's study of girls in Kerala, India 2005) .

Aggressive assertion of traditional gender identities like religious based masculinities may represent the only means of coping with such rapid social change. Young men struggle to define their place in a context where their traditional models of power are being challenged. They may perceive the 'modernisation of gender' as something that is personally threatening. Reasserting traditional masculinity can however hold back these boys who, in many countries, are found to be 'underachieving' at school.

Schools have a duty to *prepare* young people for social change, not just for social order. This goal represents more than gender equality. It involves including marginal young women and men in appropriate ways, within the social fabric of society at a time when their security in traditional livelihoods, in traditional family structures and in rural communities is threatened. Mass urbanisation, growing inequalities between rich and poor, and political pressures that could 'find expression in identity politics and divide society along caste and religious lines' (Kamat, 2007: 94) make gender identities part and parcel of the inequalities of social change. Gender equality as a political goal needs to work constructively with male and female culturally-shaped gender identities (not all of which are the responsibility of the colonial heritage (Sinha, 2003)) and as such it is an important and arguably an essential educational strategy for coping with change (Mukhopadyay 2003; Sinha, 2003).

Promoting substantive gender equality through education

Promoting substantive, and not just formal gender quality, involves the reframing of gender relations in the sense of transforming masculinities and empowering women. Empowering women is a necessary goal, but it is not sufficient for realising gender equality. Gender equality is about engaging with gender relations and male power. Dominant forms of masculinity and femininity and aggressive counter-cultural masculinities and femininities can constrain young people's ability to respond positively to the opportunities presented by their schooling and social change. Gender identities lie at the core of social progress and social justice.

The gaps between the rich and poor, between dual income families and those with no income, between those who are schooled and those not, make this time in which gender educational reform is not a luxury but essential. Youth citizenship is about creating aware and active young civic stakeholders who have an investment in the future and a strong identification with collective values and communities.

New transformative (rather than integrative) strategies are required to encourage women as citizens to engage with 'good governance' in order to improve their position in society – strategies that go as far as advocating changing in inheritance practices and land ownership (Mukhopadhyay, 2003).

The first step for young women and for those living in poverty is to become aware that they have 'a right to have rights' (Beck 2000). The second step is to recognise the factors that create their exclusion. In this case, there is every reason to develop policies and successful practices that can address patriarchal, gerontocratic, ethnic, caste and social class hierarchies and subordination (Longwe, 1998) and

cultural/religious discriminatory practices that breach the convention of human rights (Sinha, 2003).

The goal of female political and economic power within a model of consumer citizenship relies heavily on improvements in the education of girls globally. Educational institutions need to enhance female capabilities over and above the horizontal and vertical segregations of the labour market. They need stronger interventions to address gender inequities in the labour market – with more effective engagements with industry to promote gender equality amongst young workers, and to equalise more effectively female chances of achieving economic independence.

Addressing such hierarchies allows for the constitutional claims of equal citizenship in modern societies to be achieved. Teachers have a critical but not exclusive role to play in this process of cultural transformation. Their position is often deeply compromised by centralised state control and by their low social status. However, teachers' status can be raised by encouraging them to become 'insider reformers' of schooling and catalysts for community engagement in gender equality.

Young people themselves need to play their part in creating democratic educational systems. They are more likely to understand global change through their access to global media cultures and the world-wide web. Their voices are a vital element in the framing of a critical, participatory model of youth citizenship which in the long run can work through the cultural relations of power that underlie their particular forms of exclusion.

> - **The challenge of the 21st century is to find a way of educating both young women and young men to find their own voice, agency, choice and empowerment. The MDG3 target implies the modernising of gender relations. Shifting the social and the sexual contract between men and women is essential to any notion of *democratic, inclusive and equal citizenship.***

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