

## **GIRLS' EDUCATION: PERSISTENCE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES IN SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract** *Education is an enabling and transformative right. Education of the girl child has been a focus of many national and international initiatives specifically because girls constitute the largest group excluded from education in general and from quality education in particular. Gender inequalities still remain in education systems. This qualitative study set to investigate the obstacles girls face in receiving an equitable education. The study was based on Bandura's social learning theory. The research study adopted a case study design with a purposive sample of 4 school heads, 40 teachers and 24 students Masvingo district secondary schools. Ethical considerations were observed by the researchers. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Collected data was analysed manually through hand-coding and categorising ideas that eventually formed themes to this research study. The study established that the perception that subjects can be categorised into boys' and girls' subjects still prevails. Many teachers either consciously or unconsciously perpetuate this stereotype when advising and interacting with pupils. Another finding is that gender inequalities in education are reinforced by textbooks which are mostly written from a male perspective and trivialising women. Sex distribution of teachers was also found to reinforce gender inequalities. In view of this, the study recommends that girls need to be invited to participate in career days to encourage them to consider careers in Science subjects. Revisions of textbooks need to be done to increase representation of women. There should be more gender sensitive courses in schools that assist both girls and boys to develop new orientations about the capabilities of both girls and boys.*

**Key words:** - Gender, stereotype, gender equality, gender inequality, gender roles, curriculum,

### **1.1 Introduction and Background**

The gender debate in education is not a new one. Locke (1693:5) insisted that his model of education for "a young Gentleman" was not suitable for the "education of Daughters". In both education and wider society, gender equality has progressed significantly since the 17th century. Rogers (2014) asserts that Under the Equality Act schools must provide equal opportunities for all pupils regardless of age, disability, sex, gender identity. However, prevalence of gender stereotyping in school and wider society restricts such equal opportunities. On the same note, the Inter Agency Network for Education in

Emergencies INEE (2010) posits that because of gender some groups experience multiple barriers to access than others, which is not proper because being female or male does not differentiate on ways to get access to education.

Gender inequality is an issue that has wide reaching consequences as countries struggling with gender issues in education are having trouble moving forward socially and economically (Osadan and Burrage, 2014). According to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2009) girls must be given priority in the field of education, as analysis and

reports reveal persistent gender inequality in this sphere.

Education has a critical function in the advancement of social and economic progress. In article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations (UN) declared “everyone has the right to education.” This means everyone has the right to get access to it. Educating girls yields a higher investment return for a country. It has a positive influence in all areas of social activity. It is the best guarantee for reducing poverty in the long term, increasing family incomes, planning birth, and reducing the likelihood of conflict. Ensuring access and providing a high quality education for both girls and boys is crucial if societies are to achieve their development goals United States Agencies for International Development (USAID), 2005). Despite government and non- government initiatives for the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary schools a lot still remains in addressing gender inequalities enshrined in schools ([labevganda.org/resources/gender](http://labevganda.org/resources/gender) Responsive Pedagogy for Primary Schools in Uganda.pdf).

After decades of gender matters in the European Union (UN) across European schools there is much awareness of gender inequality as an educational issue than there was in the past (Lynch and Feeley, 2009). Women have greatly increased their levels of attainment in education, surpassing men in their rates of attainment in public examination in many countries. However, gender inequalities still remain in European education systems in terms of subject preferences, and performances.

The access of girls to primary and secondary education is a source of concern. The findings of Global Campaign (2012) for Education survey of gender in schools show that more than one fifth of girls in secondary schools are unhappy with their gender, and nearly two fifths have been made fun

of at school for being a girl. In -sub-Saharan Africa according to the survey there is a 10% point gap between girls and boys primary completion rates and only 7 of the 54 countries have a greater than 50% chance of going to secondary school. In Nigeria for instance, 69% of the un- enrolled kids are female, while only 31% are males. In Burundi, the disparity of male and female students reaches 20% between the two genders, with girls left behind in accessing quality education (UNESCO, 2009).

Gender inclusivity in the Zimbabwean context has been a fairly recent discussion. Gudhlanga (2011) asserts that the liberation struggle ushered in new platforms for women to participate equally with men on both private and domestic spheres including the education sector, an opportunity women had lost during colonisation. In 1999 the Nziramasanga Commission on education after noting gender disparities at all levels of education recommended that a Gender Equity Council be set up to monitor and advice on gender equity practices in both private and public sector activities and programs including schools. Following this, another development that provided for the impetus for gender inclusivity was the launch of the Zimbabwe National Gender policy in 2004. The policy was aimed at eliminating all practices that impede equality in education. It noted that enrolments at secondary school level and universities are lower for females than males (Zimbabwe National Gender Policy, 2004).

In a bid to eradicate gender inequalities in Zimbabwe the government became a signatory to several international gender declarations and conventions. Some of these conventions include the United Nations Conventions on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), Beijing Platform for Action (1999) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000. The MDG number 3 focused on

elimination of Gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015 (Mapuranga and Chikombi, 2015).

Gender inequalities, in educational institutions persist despite vigorous pursuit of policies and programmes to reduce it (Mapuranga and Chikombi, 2015; Gudhlanga, 2011; Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango 2009). Schools as echoed by Rarieya, Sanger and Moduman, (2014); Levtov (2014); Connell (2010) and Lynch and Feeley (2009) are a dominant sources of gender bias and inequality. Teachers and students carry into the school the cultural values that are dominant outside of school thereby replicating the gendered assumptions of parents and society at large (Bedard and Cho, 2007). According to South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework, 2009 cited in Wight (2010), everyday attitudes and beliefs about gender are brought to the classroom and influence what is taught and how it is taught. Teachers take part, with students, in constructing gender in daily interactions and relationships. This study is set to explore how the school environment plays a role in producing and reproducing critical disadvantages for girls.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Zimbabwe has committed itself to the achievement of equality education of both girls and boys. Despite this, girls do not have same educational opportunities compared to boys. There are a variety of gender issues and differences that influence classroom environment. This study thus seeks to investigate the ways gender inequalities are reinforced in schools.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

- i) What are the factors impeding on girls' equal opportunity to education?
- ii) How can the opportunities for girls' education be raised?

## **1.4 Significance of Study**

The importance of this research is that it serves several purposes. It provides an opportunity for teachers in understanding how to work towards a gender inclusive classroom that will support all students in learning. They will gain insight into teaching practices and possibilities for an inclusive approach that will effectively address gender issues.

Policy makers will understand and ensure that gender is an issue that can be acknowledged, prioritised and integrated into the school curriculum and into teaching philosophies. They will ensure that teaching practices in how to approach gender within classrooms are refined. Policy makers will go beyond the rhetoric of gender equality by constantly monitoring the implementation of policy and elevating it. Writers and publishers will have a major role to play in the elimination of gender stereotypes. The content of textbooks will reflect a gender bias so as to promote gender balance.

## **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

This study employed Bandura's social learning theory to get a better perspective and deeper understanding of how gender inequalities are reproduced. Social learning theory developed in Psychology from the legacy of behavioural psychology which stresses observable behaviour rather than internal feelings which cannot be observed

([www.pearsonhighered.com/samplechapter/0205521452.pdf](http://www.pearsonhighered.com/samplechapter/0205521452.pdf)).

In social learning theory Bandura (1963) states that behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning. Children are aware of gender role stereotypes from a young age. Given that society constructs and perpetuates gender stereotypes, children interpret these from an early age (McLead, 2011). Children are surrounded by many influential

models such as teachers, parents and peers. These models provide examples of behaviour to imitate for example, masculine and feminine. Social learning theorists argue that children are more likely to model themselves on same sex individuals by paying more attention to same sex peers and forming a stronger bond with same sex parents. This bond with same sex parent depends on a process called identification where child copies whole patterns of behaviour without necessarily being trained (Siann, 1994). Rogers (2014) argues that social learning theorists believe that children interpret the gender identities they experience and apply them to themselves.

In the school situation learners imitate the same sex characteristics of teachers, other learners, other adults, and characters seen in media like textbooks and magazines. Thus, a child is more likely to attend to and imitate people it perceives as similar to itself. In general, children seem to imitate adults who are nurturing, powerful or both such as teachers.

Learning according to the behaviourists does not only occur through modelling (imitation) but also through reinforcement (McLead, 2011). A child will behave in a way which it believes will earn approval because it deserves approval. A child is more apt to repeat acts regularly followed by rewards. In social learning theory rewards and punishment are used to reinforce behaviour- desirable behaviour is rewarded and undesirable behaviour is punished (Bandura, 1963). As an example, girls are encouraged to play with dolls and boys to defend themselves through fistfights.

Bandura (1963) asserts that children learn through vicarious reinforcement. In vicarious reinforcement a child observes someone else being rewarded or punished for a particular behaviour. The child will take into account of what happens to other people when deciding whether or not to copy someone's actions. Students are exposed to their teachers' and peers' performances

of gender through learning and organisation of classroom practices.

## **1.6 Methodology**

This section discusses and justifies the methodology that was adopted for this study. To investigate the research questions, the study adopted the qualitative approach. Qualitative research is naturalistic, and attempts to study the everyday life of different groups of people and communities in their natural setting. It is particularly useful to study educational settings and processes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). This study was about gender inequalities in schools. The essential process in this study was investigating and documenting in detail, ways in which schools perpetuate gender inequalities.

Within the qualitative approach the case study design was utilised. Yin (2003) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. It makes use of multiple methods of data collection such as interviews, documents reviews, observations, and questionnaires. The study was a case of Masvingo district and the aim of the study was to generalise the results to other districts.

The participants in the study were teachers and students. Purposeful sampling, a non-random method of sampling was chosen because it seeks cases rich in information which can be studied in great purpose about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research ([vir.unisa.ac.za/bitsream/handle/10500/4245/05/chap4-Resarch methodology and design.pdf](http://vir.unisa.ac.za/bitsream/handle/10500/4245/05/chap4-Research%20methodology%20and%20design.pdf)). From each school 10 teachers, 6 students and one school head were included in the sample. The total sample was 68 participants comprising 40 teachers, 24 students and 4 school heads.

The main data collection tools used in this research study included interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. Interviews need few

participants to gather rich data (Chiromo, 2006). School heads were interviewed. Focus group interviews were used with students because as echoed by Shneiderman and Plaisant (cited in Thomas, 2010) rich data can emerge through interaction within a group. Questionnaires were used mainly because of their advantages of being taken to a wider audience compared to interviews (Magwa and Magwa, 2015). Teachers completed the questionnaires. The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Responses from questionnaires were analysed. Data was categorised in search of themes that emerged.

Creswell (2003); Magwa and Magwa, (2015) state that in carrying out research, the researcher has an obligation to respect rights, needs, values and desires of the informants. In view of the foregoing, the researchers informed the participants of the purpose, data collection methods prior to commencement. Participants were guaranteed that there was no harm as a result of the participation. They were informed that information shared will not reveal their identity in any way and that participation was voluntary.

### **1.7 Findings and Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the results of the study. The study established that gender inequalities filter in schools in multiple and interrelated ways. The school was found to create and reproduce critical disadvantages for girls. From the structure and content of the curriculum the study established that the following reinforce gender inequalities in the school system:

- The textbooks –teaching and learning materials
- Teachers' attitudes and behaviours
- Sex distribution of teachers

The findings will be discussed based on each of the above categories.

### **Theme 1: Gendering learners through textbooks**

The study established that one of the major contributions of gender inequalities in the school system are the textbooks. School heads, teachers and students mentioned that textbooks reinforce attitudes and beliefs that men are superior to women by portraying men in leading and prestigious roles and women occupying subordinate positions. Textbooks were said to portray negative images of women. It was noted that when children are exposed to such textbooks it is most likely that they will absorb stereotyped roles about gender. The words of one school head portray the sentiments of the majority of the participants:

In most textbooks there is a common trend where women occupy less authoritative roles as compared to men. Just as an example, in History textbooks the majority of the important social and historical persons are males. Most secondary school textbooks highlight men's achievement and ignore women.

From the focus group discussions one participant also had this to say:

From my primary education I recall textbooks such as **New Zimbabwe Primary English**, and **Ventures Living and Working Together** depicting doctors, pilots and engineers as men and nursing aids, typists as women. Women are mainly shown in jobs that do not require high qualifications

Similarly, in a famous study in Lobban in 1975 it was revealed that many books used to teach children to read in Great Britain contained images of men and women leading separate lives, with women at home caring for children while men were generally shown as more dominant characters engaged with a wide range of activities (Wight, 2010). Bhusumane (1993) in his analysis of school textbooks in Botswana stressed that

reading through most textbooks creates a feeling that men are creatures and rulers of the world.

In Zimbabwe, Chawafambira, (2010) carried out a study on Gender stereotypes in Primary textbooks and found out that most textbooks in use tend to stereotype professions, careers, with women and girls being ascribed to the role of caregiving. An illustration was given in the textbook **Ventures Living Together Social Studies Book 1 Grade 1 1997:5** where the man is pictured going to work leaving behind the wife at home. On page 6 of the same book a woman is pictured doing laundry. Such illustrations imply that a woman's place is in the home taking care of family while the man goes to work. Gaidzanwa(1985) also carried out a study on images of women in Zimbabwean literature and established that most Zimbabwean school textbooks were dominated by male characters with women featuring mainly in the domestic sphere.

Literature ascertains that gender inequality in education is reinforced by textbooks (Levtov 2014; Plan 2013; Gudhlanga, Chirimuhuta and Bhukuvani, 2012). According to these authors there is dominance of males in many school textbooks highlighting men's achievements and ignoring women's achievement. It can be said that gender bias in textbooks perpetuates gender inequalities. Content in textbooks play a role in socialising learners into traditional gender stereotypes that are inimical to achieving gender equality.

## **Theme 2: Teachers attitudes and behaviour**

The findings of the study revealed that despite high performances, girls do not identify with science subjects since some subjects are viewed as masculine and others as feminine. Gender biases are expressed through language that reveals the belief that girls cannot perform as well as boys. Teachers express that sciences are for boys. The study revealed that some teachers discourage girls

from pursuing Science subjects and have them concentrate on subjects like Food and Nutrition, Fashion and Fabrics. The imbalance in favour of males among Science subjects was said to be pronounced especially at Advanced level. The following statement captured from one student in the focus group discussions evidences this view:

After passing my O level very well, I wanted to pursue Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry. However, my O level teacher strongly discouraged me saying I will not make it since there were very few girls doing Sciences.

The view was also expressed by one school head who narrated that:

In most schools subjects such as Home Economics, and Fashion and Fabrics are obligatory subjects for girls but not for boys. Some teachers perceive boys as having natural talent in Sciences.

In a study by Mutekwe and Modiba (2012) which sought to unmask factors in the Zimbabwean school curriculum that orient girls into pursuing different subjects at school and also following careers in fields traditionally stereotyped as feminine a girl was quoted saying:

As a girl I think subjects like Fashion and Fabrics, Home Economics and Biology are good for me because through them I am able to study things related to my duties as a woman.

Literature also reiterates that gender persists in terms of subject preferences (Chabaya et al., 2009; World Bank, 2012). Levtov (2014) asserts that teachers assign competency in certain subjects to specific sex. There is gender stereotyping of aptitudes for different subjects where girls are generally seen as better at 'soft' subjects like Languages, History, Art and boys better at more logical subjects like Mathematics, Computing (Chabaya et al., 2009). Teachers tend to categorise academic subjects as either feminine or masculine,

a practice described by Gordon (2004) as gender typing.

These gender differences have significant consequences for future employment and earnings.

The results also revealed that teachers assign tasks in class based on gender stereotypes. The teachers reinforce existing gender roles regarding the domestic and physical labour of girls and boys. It was pointed out that although teachers give male and female students equal opportunity to participate in class activities, stereotypical attitudes are adopted where for example, girls sweep the classroom while boys tackle physical jobs. Still under discriminatory attitudes and behaviours displayed by teachers, participants further expressed that these were also displayed during extra- mural activities. The following statement from a student attests to this:

Discriminatory practices are noted in sporting activities where for instance, girls are encouraged to participate in netball and hockey while boys participate in cricket and rugby, viewed as activities for males.

Research demonstrates that teachers hold stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes about boys' and girls' roles (Plan, 2013). These gendered norms regarding the domestic roles for example, keeping the classroom clean are a central characteristic of exclusionary practises that result in girls underachieving as well as leaving school (Chibaya et al., 2009). Teachers assign roles and tasks based on gender stereotypes for example, monitoring class to boys and sweeping to girls.

### **Theme 3: Sex distribution of teachers across grades and subjects**

According to Connell (1996) the sex distribution of personnel in the education system transmits a reinforced message about gendered patterns of

power and authority. This assertion was also revealed by this study. Participants remarked that distribution of teachers across grades, types of subjects and administrative positions is patterned by sex. From questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions it was observed that at primary level the number of female teachers is higher as compared to male teachers and the reverse is true in secondary schools. The words of school head represent the sentiments of the other participants.

In schools, especially primary schools, female teachers are mostly over-represented in positions of lower status where they are believed to do the role of caring. As an example, at infant, learners in Early Childhood Development settings are assigned to females while male teachers will be assigned to upper grades viewed as higher status. At secondary level Science subjects are mainly taught by males while women teach subjects like Arts and Languages.

Similar results that foster the mind-set that men are naturally endowed to control and that women are particularly well suited for caring and nurturing young children were also noted by other studies. According to Eurostat (2008) in all educational sectors, women are underrepresented in management positions. As a general principle, the more prestigious and well paid post, the less likely women are to inhabit it. Mutekwe and Modiba (2012) in their study of four schools, three of the principals in the schools studied were male while only one was headed by a female. The ratio of female to male teachers in leadership positions as concluded by these researchers does not offer girls enough role models. The trend where women teachers generally hold less prestigious positions reflects and strengthens a gender and a care scenario that is profoundly unequal. Lynch and Feely (2009) aver that this trend is a potent conduit for messages about gender, care and power that communicate across the educating system.

## **1.8 Conclusion and Recommendations**

Education systems are embedded in the broader social context thereby reflecting the inequalities that exist in society. Gender inequalities filter into the classroom in multiple and interrelated ways. It is worth sharing Chinyani's (2010) view that the school system has unconsciously become a legitimate purveyor of gender inequalities. Girls continue to encounter many obstacles in their journey through education systems, despite having access to education. Gender inequalities remain in schools in terms structure and content of the schooling. Schools have major roles to play in producing and reproducing critical disadvantages for girls.

In light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- There is need for pre-service and in-service training to equip teachers with tools to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Teachers and other school personnel involved in the education of children should have training to ensure that the principle of gender equality is promoted and sustained in educational institutes.
  - School curricula need to be examined and revised accordingly to ensure that they become more inclusive of experiences of women. They need to be reviewed in order to deconstruct gender role stereotypes, ideologies and values embedded in them.
  - Teachers should use textbooks and materials that include both males and females in various occupations or conducting activities that are not necessarily gender-appropriate. The materials should provide children with a sense that they are both included.
- The overarching message is that equality does not happen by accident. Education policy makers should ensure that gender equality is a real rather than a rhetorical priority and that change is substantively resourced in teacher education and in school practices
  - Policies and incentives should be put in place to encourage girls to study Science subjects.

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