Girls and women in the educational system: The curricular challenge

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Abstract This Viewpoint argues that, while efforts must continue to achieve universal primary and secondary education at the global level for both boys and girls, the concern with access and thus enrollment and completion parity has blinded many governments from seeing the crucial need to examine what is actually learned in school. Stronger concern with curriculum would bring a stronger focus on the formal knowledge conveyed in schools and on the ways in which this knowledge might (or might not) facilitate a substantial change in the social relations of gender.

Keywords Curriculum · Gender · Inequality · SDG4 · Future of education · Covid-19

Global and national policies continue to emphasize equal access to primary and secondary school for boys and girls. While the problem remains, access at the primary-school level has greatly improved and is seriously limited in only one region of the world: sub-Saharan Africa. Access at the secondary-school level has also improved, but much remains to be done in rural areas and low-income urban areas. *Cycle completion* is still work in progress. Across the world, 9 of 10 girls (89%) complete their primary education, and 3 of 4 girls (70%) complete lower secondary education (World Bank 2018). Boys have completion levels similar to those of girls in primary education, and slightly higher in lower secondary education. Upper secondary school completion is a persistent challenge for low-income countries, as, according to UIS statistics (UNESCO 2017, p. 352), sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia register a gender gap of 22% and 10%, respectively. The issue of cycle completion is important, for it affects students' transition from primary to secondary schooling and from secondary schooling to college.

While efforts must continue to achieve universal primary and secondary education at the global level for both boys and girls, the concern with access and thus enrollment

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and completion parity has blinded many governments from seeing the crucial need to examine what is actually learned in school and how this knowledge might (or might not) facilitate a substantial change in the social relations of gender. An exclusive emphasis on access to schooling implicitly assumes that the knowledge and practices that schools promote are always beneficial, useful, and beyond questioning. In other words, it detracts from coming to terms with problematic aspects of the knowledge currently transmitted and from identifying both the knowledge needed to challenge the gender status quo and the corresponding measures needed to promote gender transformative knowledge.

To begin with, concern with curriculum would bring a welcome shift from focusing only on sex (boys and girls) to a stronger preoccupation with the formal knowledge conveyed in schools. This would broaden the discussion from sex to gender, as it would examine the values, knowledge, and skills currently transmitted to boys and girls. Concern with the curriculum would introduce knowledge that primary and secondary students need to correct inequitable conditions and opportunities between girls and boys to recognize the manifestations of power that characterize exchanges between them, and to enable these young minds to reflect on how gender affects their identity, rights, and responsibilities. Sex education is indispensable but so is knowledge about institutions that reproduce gender norms.

To be sure, curriculum reforms have taken place over the past 20 years. Such efforts have been limited in coverage and weak in content. UNESCO and several other actors recently revisited their guidance on sex education (UNESCO et al. 2018). It is an excellent document; the question is how it will move into implementation of global policies. These policies—expressed in the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 on education and SDG 5 on gender), which are to guide public policies in education until 2030—include a space for the treatment of gender in schools. The indicators that refer to the curriculum (SDG 4.7) identify two subjects: global citizenship, and education for sustainable development. Gender equality, along with human rights, will be treated within these two subjects. Two caveats must be raised: (1) exactly what constitutes an adequate treatment of gender equality is not elaborated in the document, and (2) the financial resources required to realize gender equality in the curriculum (which requires the production of textbooks and education materials as well as teacher training and retraining) are also not determined. We know from research and experience that indicators play a major role in shaping policy implementation at local levels. By being weak or not spelled out, these indicators, and thus the policies linking curriculum and gender, will in the best of cases become aspirational—desirable rather than real.

To make a contribution to improving the condition of women, we need not only to provide them with more education, jobs, and laws but also to reframe our understanding of gender in society. This means not losing sight of the fact that all gender asymmetries are connected through an ideology (with various degrees of intensity across societies) that essentially considers women inferior to men and assigns women almost exclusive responsibilities for care and household management. This ideology is *patriarchy*, a term carefully avoided in government policies. It is imperative that we engage in theorizing the causes and consequences of gender functioning across societies, that we recognize that the detrimental manifestations of patriarchy affect not only poor girls and women but also boys and men. Gender creates conditions that are advantageous for men in terms of political and economic leadership but destructive in quality of life stemming from the messages and practices of violence and force linked to masculinity. Moreover, gender operates across all social classes.

Of course, changes in the curriculum will require sustained training of teachers and administrators. They will also require training of personnel in UN agencies and bilateral development agencies. Altering gender relations will inevitably provoke a strong questioning of the normative order that continues to produce more advantages for men than women. Most governments prefer to avoid such social disruption, which explains their persistence in endorsing access to education while avoiding its content, except in the areas of math and science—disciplines seen as linked to economic productivity, while maintaining the gender status quo.

Many changes in contemporary life are prodding societies into irreversible changes. The presence of women in the labor force is increasing, and in some high-income countries women are the main earners—a condition that is de facto challenging the notion of man as the breadwinner. With greater income, women are growing in assertiveness, with the consequence that domestic violence is much less often accepted by the legal system, communities, and the household. Domestic violence is still the largest threat to women globally; fortunately, laws and supportive practices for victims of violence have expanded in recent decades. More years of schooling bring greater civility and reasoning for both men and women. The issue here is not that society has remained static but, rather, how these changes could be *faster, deeper, and more sustained*.

COVID-19 and the likely long economic recovery from it are worsening the already low budgets confronting many governments in developing nations. Financial actors in developed economies have in recent months removed about \$100 billion of their investments in emerging markets, the largest withdrawal ever registered (IMF 2020). But we should remember that the erosion of the public sector has been going on for four full decades in developing countries. The climate of state austerity and the growing privatization of education have brought new priorities for political leaders and parents, leaving issues of social justice—such as the indispensable transformation of the social relations of gender—to be tackled at only superficial levels.

It will not be impossible to achieve curriculum changes regarding gender. What is needed is for all parties to recognize that the problem is complex, that it involves multi-sectoral work (especially engaging the mass media), and that seriously addressing it will entail risk and money—but that facing the problem head-on will represent a decisive step in the history of humankind.

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