

## **GENDER DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION: EXAMING THE ROLE OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND GENDER POLICIES IN ACHIEVING GENDER PARITY.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

International concern for gender equality has been demonstrated by several conferences that have been held to address gender related issues. One such conference is the Beijing Conference of 1995. It came up with a number of resolutions meant to promote gender parity. There are a number of programmes and strategies that have been adopted by different countries to promote gender equality. One such strategy is gender mainstreaming. The paper focuses on gender mainstreaming in education. The paper starts by examining the concept gender mainstreaming. It then proceeds to examine the policy framework that has been used in Zimbabwe to promote gender mainstreaming. The paper looks at the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the African Charter, the Zimbabwe Education Act, National Gender Policy and specific gender policies in education. The legal frameworks are discussed in relation to the extent to which they have supported gender mainstreaming in education. The paper also discusses the role of education in contributing to gender parity. The last part of the paper discusses strategies that have been used to address gender disparities in education. The paper concludes that while the passing of legislation, and the formulation of policies that were meant to promote gender equality demonstrates political commitment to achieve gender parity, this in most cases has not been matched by the provision of budget allocations to support implementation. As such the paper concludes that gender mainstreaming still has many challenges as education as a sector is still characterised by inequalities which are a result of traditions, stereotypes, beliefs and lack of support.

**Key words:** Gender; Gender mainstreaming; Equality; Equity; Parity; Policies; Legislation

## **Introduction**

The paper focuses on gender mainstreaming in education. The paper makes an attempt to explain the concept gender mainstreaming, before examining the different legal instruments and policies that were used in Zimbabwe to promote gender equality. The paper examines the policy framework that has been used in Zimbabwe to promote gender mainstreaming. The paper looks at the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the African Charter, the Zimbabwe Education Act, National Gender Policy and specific gender policies in education. The legal frameworks are discussed in relation to the extent to which they have supported gender mainstreaming in education. In order to appreciate how education as a sector can contribute to successful implementation of programmes such as gender mainstreaming, the paper discusses the role of education in eliminating inequality, poverty, ignorance, and unemployment which are in most cases gender related. The paper further discusses the extent to which gender mainstreaming has worked in education, and its challenges. These policies and legal instruments are discussed in terms of how they have helped in promoting gender mainstreaming. The paper concludes that gender mainstreaming still has many challenges as education as a sector is still characterised by inequalities. The following key terms are defined first: national gender policies, mainstream and gender.

## **Definition of terms**

UNWOMEN (2013) defines mainstreaming as a strategy that involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities in terms of policy development, research, advocacy, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects. Similarly, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (1997) defines gender mainstreaming as the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. From the two definitions it can be noted that mainstreaming focuses on bring in the government in planning and implementing laws and policies that promote the integration of gender issues in all levels of the social and economic spectrum.

Meena (1992) refers to gender as the system of power relations that shape inequality between men and women. The Merriam-Webster dictionary: defines gender as the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex. FAO (1997) views gender as the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material and is

socially constructed. What stands out in the definitions of the term gender is that it refers to the roles that are assigned to women and men in society. These roles differ from society to society, and from community to community. Gender is therefore a social construction.

### **The concept: Gender mainstreaming**

To understand the concept gender mainstreaming, it is important to consider the main issues that contribute to gender inequality. Inequality between men and women is in most cases culture based, as it is the different roles that are assigned to men and women that determine the socially constructed differences between females and males. Such roles are influenced by the particular society's beliefs, norms and practices. The main causes of gender inequality are economic underdevelopment, culture, tradition and poverty. Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango (2009) conducted a study on the persistence of gender inequality in Zimbabwe focussing on factors that impede the advancement of women into leadership positions in primary schools. They observed that the main factors that contributed to female teachers' failure to take up leadership positions were related to the teachers' attitudes, low esteem, lack of support, tradition and stereotype and family roles. On a similar note a situation analysis report of Gender and Equity Responsiveness of Pre-Primary and Secondary School levels, noted that girls continue to be disadvantaged in education (Daily Monitor: <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/Education/-/688336/1306106/-/firw49/-/index.html>). The report notes that girls have been disadvantaged in education in terms of access, participation and performance. Another problem that has hindered the promotion of gender equality in education is limited funding in education. This has been the case despite the political commitment in terms of coming up with relevant policies to promote gender equality and efforts to close the gender gap in education. The major problem has been that most developing countries have not supported the political commitment with funding for education programmes. Expenditure on education based on the percentage of the GDP is still very low in most SADC countries. The major challenge is therefore how gender mainstreaming can remove the barriers to gender equality noted above.

Gender mainstreaming is therefore expected to address all these challenges that impede on the advancement of the disadvantaged and discriminated groups in society. It has to deal with changing attitudes and beliefs, tradition and stereotypes, and direct discrimination. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (1997) gender mainstreaming as a concept involves coming up with legislation, policies and programmes that aim at addressing

gender inequalities in all areas and levels of development in order to achieve gender equality. Gender mainstreaming aims at addressing the concerns of both men and women equitably. As such, gender mainstreaming is expected to create gender parity within organisations and society as a whole. It is therefore a strategy for achieving equality and equity between men and women. Gender mainstreaming as a strategy is based on a number of principles. Such principles have to guide its implementation as a strategy. It is based on the need to transform society, the need to diagnose disparities between genders, providing supportive activities that promote gender equality, analysis of situations in order to make recommendations, and the need for gender sensitivity in everything we do within organisations and society. In addition to these basic requirements, there has to be support and cohesion within the implementing agencies.

### **Gender Policies in Zimbabwe**

The national gender policy aims at eradicating all forms of gender inequality in society. The latest National Gender Policy in Zimbabwe came into existence in 2013 replacing the 2004 National Gender Policy. This was seen as a way of implementing the different international treaties and conventions that are meant to promote equality in society. The 2004 National Gender Policy aimed at engendering all sectoral policies, programmes and activities in different sectors in the country. Such sectors include education. As such the National Gender Policy of 2004 came up with at least five priority areas which are: Women in politics and decision making; Education and training of women; Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women; Women and the economy; and Women and health (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). The National Gender Policy of 2013 was meant to be an improvement of the 2004 Gender National Policy. According to the UNDP (2013) the new gender policy has the goal to eradicate gender discrimination and inequalities in all spheres of life and development. There is not much difference in terms of goals between the two Gender National Policies. The major concern is how these have contributed to addressing gender issues in education. Apart from the Gender National Policies, there have been other legislations to promote gender equality. In that respect Zimbabwe has done well to come up with legislation since independence in 1980 to empower women and promote gender equality in all sectors including education.

UNFPA ZIMBABWE (2011) notes that Zimbabwe has been a signatory to a number of regional and international conventions, for example Elimination of All forms of Violence

Against Women (1991), the Global Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration (1995) and the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development. This in a way has demonstrated the government's concern to address issues of gender discrimination and inequality. It demonstrates commitment through putting gender issues on the national agenda. There are many examples of laws that have been put in place to promote gender equality. In support of the legislation gender focal points have been established in all ministries and parastatals to spearhead gender mainstreaming (UNFPA ZIMBABWE, 2011). At the same time the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development can be seen in the same light.

In addition to that Millenium Development Goal 3 aimed at promoting gender equality and empower women. This can be viewed as an international approach to gender mainstreaming. Within the context of education, the development goal had the aim of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and in all levels of education by 2015. To achieve this goal there had to be an increase of the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Millenium Development Goal 2 aimed at achieving universal primary education by ensuring that children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

What stands out though is that the sound legal framework that is meant to address gender inequality and discrimination at school and in society has encountered a number of problems. Some of the challenges have to do with the implementation of laws and policies that promote children's rights. Examples of the factors that negatively impact on addressing gender inequity and inequality in education include gender stereotyping, socialisation in the home, child abuse, early marriages, economic factors and the impact of HIV/AIDS. At times economic hardship force parents to make a choice as to whom to send to school between the boy child and the girl child. As a result of the socialisation and gender stereotype in society the girl child is therefore at times withdrawn from school. In addition to that child labour and child marriages are still a common phenomenon.

UNWOMEN (2013) notes that the new constitution is aligned to key international and regional gender equality conventions and treaties, such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the SADC Gender and Development Protocol. UNWOMEN (2013) further notes the Zimbabwean constitution recognises respect for gender equality as one of the country's founding values; as such a

Gender Commission has to be established. The role of the Commission is to promote gender equality in the country and in all aspects of life.

The Education Act Revised Edition (1996) states the children's fundamental right to education in Zimbabwe. The Act states the following key objectives of education in Zimbabwe: that every child shall have a right to school education; that no child in Zimbabwe shall be refused admission to any school on the grounds of race, sex, tribe, colour, religion, creed, place of origin, political opinion or the social status of his/her parents; and that primary education for every child of school going age shall be compulsory (Education Act, 1996). The objectives stated above were aimed at creating equal opportunities for all children regardless of gender. The limiting factors are that education cannot be said to be compulsory if parents are supposed to pay. For education to be made compulsory at primary school the state has to take full responsibility for education at that level, otherwise the girl child remains disadvantaged if parents are to make choices based on their economic status and stereotypes.

Another issue is on promotion of women in education. Advertisements for promotion in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education advise school heads to invite and encourage female teachers who have the relevant qualifications to submit applications for promotion. Despite this arrangement, it can be observed that the number of women in promotion posts in education is still very low. For example, in tertiary education, out of the fifteen universities in Zimbabwe, there are only two female vice-chancellors.

Despite the efforts indicated above, gender stereotypes continue to exist in education and society as a whole. These have their origins in culture and childhood influences. According to Gandari et al (1997) these stereotypes have the capacity to block women's advancement at work and in life in general, as they enhance certain roles that are expected of a woman and a man. Such stereotypes have a negative impact on children. There is therefore need to change people's attitudes if gender mainstreaming is to work as a strategy to promote gender equality. UNICEF (2000) observed that some of the textbooks used in schools promote the gender stereotyping and gender biases. UNICEF (2000) further notes that teachers tend to play a significant role in thwarting the development of the girl child as a result of the discriminatory treatment they are exposed to and the language books and Mathematics textbooks demonstrate gender biases in abilities and aptitudes.

### **The role of Education in Gender mainstreaming**

Education as a sector appears to be tasked with a wide range of roles and responsibilities. Such roles include education as an agent of economic development, the responsibility to promote gender equality and equity, the responsibility to bring about social development. In addition to the above, education is tasked with the responsibility to bring about change in people's behaviour and attitudes, at the same time contributing to human capital development. Education also plays the role of promoting the implementation of new policies. The role of education in gender mainstreaming can therefore be viewed in at least two ways. First it can be observed that education can be used as a tool to help other departments accept the importance of gender mainstreaming. Secondly, education departments and ministries have to lead by example through the promotion of gender mainstreaming within their departments and ministries. If education is to be an agent of social transformation and economic development it has to contribute to the elimination of the manifestations of underdevelopment. Such manifestations include poverty, inequality, ignorance, disease, discrimination and unemployment. If such indicators of underdevelopment are eliminated the standard of living is expected to improve for both men and women.

In order to address the issues of poverty, inequality, discrimination, ignorance and unemployment as noted above there is need to examine how these factors are gender related. Policies have to be examined with regards to how they address gender issues. These can be addressed by putting issues of gender empowerment, gender and development, and gender mainstreaming on the international agenda. Such global concern has contributed to governments coming up with policies that are expected to promote gender equality.

### **Strategies to address gender differences in Education**

In order to address gender inequalities, it is important that we examine the root cause of gender imbalances. Some of the causes of inequality in Zimbabwe are found in the economic arrangements in the country. Others are based on the colonial past, which provided for menial jobs for men in industry with no places for African women. The other basis for gender inequalities were found in how the African society allocated responsibilities between male and female. This was as a result of the nature of the African society which was predominantly patriarchal. This resulted in males controlling women and the resources.

The major strategy of addressing gender differences is through the Millenium Development Goals. The Millenium Development Goals as noted by Abu-Ghaida and Klasen (2002) included the need to promote gender equality. According to Abu-Ghaida and Klasen (2002)

the target was to achieve gender equity at primary and secondary education by 2005. In Zimbabwe, following the recommendations of the Nziramasanga Commission into Education and Training of 1999, ECD became compulsory and was made part of the primary school. Within the context of the Millennium Development Goals, development and gender equality are not separable. They are part of human rights, and human rights and gender equality are therefore tools and processes to achieve development (Painter, 2005). For any education programme to bring the desired results it should reflect at least these two components.

The Zimbabwe government designed a curriculum that is gender sensitive. The books that are used at ECD level by the teachers have moved away from the gender stereotype. Such stereotype showed itself in books that were read to children and the roles that girls played in stories told. It was important to come up with literature that was relevant and gender sensitive. This has seen words that are gender biased being replaced in the curriculum.

In addition to the change in textbooks, the Zimbabwe government embarked on training of ECD teachers at various teachers colleges. A number of universities have also embarked on teacher development programmes in early childhood at degree level. This has an empowering effect on the teachers as they will have relevant skills. Most of those who are developing themselves in the area of early childhood development are female teachers. Such training and development of ECD teachers enables them to modify resources to suit the needs of the children. The Zimbabwe government through the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture has worked with UNICEF to train ECD teachers and to produce resource books that are gender sensitive.

In addition to the above, the ECD programmes have benefited from policies and laws on gender equality. Zimbabwe is a signatory to a number of international conventions and treaties. Such conventions and treaties seek to promote gender equality and equity. Some of the conventions include regional and international legal documents on gender and development. Examples include: Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004); SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008); The Convention on the Rights of the Child; Universal declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Millennium Development Goals, MDG 3 of 2000. It should be noted that there are at least eight millennium development goals. Goal 3 is stated as: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. One of the ways women are being empowered in Zimbabwe is through education.



On the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the main focus is on the best interests of the child. Such interests had to be provided for in the form of a curriculum that caters for the psychological, physical and emotional growth of the child. The ECD curriculum is based on the need to address the child's needs. It is designed in such a way that the activities that children do take care of their physical and social development. It places emphasis on these areas of development rather than reading and writing skills which are to be taken care of at grade one level and above. The Convention also recognises the right to life of the child, survival, development and the right to have their views respected. The Zimbabwe government should therefore be commended for being signatory to the Convention and coming up with a curriculum that makes an attempt to address the needs of children at ECD level.

Laws that have been passed have contributed to the deconstruction of culturally based prejudice in education. When the girl child sees that the school that she is attending is headed by a female school head, she grows up with the positive attitude that she has a chance in like anyone else to lead organisations. This is as a result of equal promotion opportunities that were created by the Zimbabwe government. In some cases there was need for affirmative action to correct the imbalances.

By declaring education a human right, the Zimbabwe government created equality in education in terms of access. Children can now access education regardless of whether one is a boy or girl. There is also equality in curricula and teaching. ECD teachers are trained in government teachers' colleges. Children have access to skills from the different teachers who share a common background because of training regardless of their class or gender.

With the effort from some non-governmental organisations such as Justice for Children Trust, Child-line and others, children have been made aware of their rights. These have helped children to be aware of their rights at an early age. This has created child friendly schools, where children know they have a contribution to make at home and at school. This shows that whilst the government has a major role in addressing gender differences in education, such a task cannot be left to the government alone. Different organisations have to come in to assist government implement policies.

The creation of the EDC and Infant department has assisted in decentralizing power at school level. There is the teacher-in-charge (TIC) of this department. Decentralization of decisions allows decisions to be made on time as the department is headed by someone who specialised

in the area. A specialist in the area is aware of the requirements of the department and will be able to make recommendations that pertain to her/his area. The TIC has to convince the school head the need to allocate resources to ECD equitably.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has looked at the legal framework that was meant to promote gender mainstreaming in Zimbabwe. The paper explained the concept gender mainstreaming. It further discussed different gender policies and legislation. The areas discussed include the National Gender Policy of 2004, the National Gender Policy of 2013, the Education Act of 1996, and the Constitution of Zimbabwe. These were discussed in relation to the extent to which the National Gender Policies mainstream gender in education. It was noted that gender mainstreaming has helped in the area of advocacy. This has helped in ensuring that children's rights are respected and promoted. There has also been an increase in awareness of issues affecting children and women in particular as gender issues have remained on the agenda. It can be concluded that while gender mainstreaming has helped to improve the level of awareness in promoting gender equity and equality in education, gender stereotyping continues to impact negatively on the efforts. The paper also considered the role of education in the implementation of programmes such as gender mainstreaming. The role of education was discussed in terms of how it can contribute to the elimination of inequality, poverty, ignorance and unemployment which are in most cases gender related. However, the paper also observed that while education has been tasked with the responsibility of eliminating inequality, it is a sector that remains characterised by inequality and gender bias skewed in favour of men.

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