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Gender, Education and Development: Global Priorities, Local Realities

The World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand was an important occasion for many reasons, and one of them is that it was the first time that a set of universal education priorities was clearly articulated. Following the failure to meet these priorities in the year 2000, another conference was held in Dakar, which resulted in the Dakar Framework for Action with the year 2015 as the new target date to reach. This framework focused EFA on six main goals and out of the six goals, two contained specific references to girls. The second goal stated that by 2015, “... all children, *particularly girls*, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to a complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” The fifth goal focused on “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.” The 2000 Dakar conference was attended by a great number of civil society organizations. All were present to further reaffirm the goals. Also in the year 2000, the Millennium Summit of the UN adopted the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Again there was a specific goal for girls’ education: “To promote gender equality and *empower women* ... through the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education.”

By the end of 2000, therefore, gender and in particular girls’ education was at the heart of development, and for developing nations the achievement of the EFA goals or the MDGs brought international acclaim. The effect, however, of this one size fits all approach to education was, according to Jansen (2005) and Tilak (2005), to narrow many countries face these targets alone, in particular to gender equality or girls’ education and universal primary education. Countries that achieved the targets were presented as success stories to the international community and countries which fell short as failing. However, after the year of 2000, many countries have achieved the EFA gender targets for girls but are now showing a gender disparity for boys. In such cases countries, such as those in Central Asia, are moving into uncharted territory where they do not have the tools or even the language to identify or even discuss the issue. This is

made more difficult upon admittance into special programs such as the Fast Track Initiative, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, where there are even tighter controls and increased monitoring of adherence to the goals. Donors are looking to see results and will not lend for programs that are outside of what they have identified as areas of importance. With all multilateral donors and most other donors signed on for EFA, its goals have come to be a set of global norms (Chabbot 2003, Samoff 2000). The impact of these global norms has not been restricted solely to aid dependant countries however. They have also been elevated to a position whereby they are seen as signifiers of 'modern' education policy even in countries that do not require aid. In the oil rich countries of the Arabian Gulf, these priorities, in particular the focus on girls' education, have entered the policy discourse as symbols of the world of modernity and development. This would not be strange except that many of these nations have achieved gender parity at all levels of education and girls not only attend in greater numbers than boys, but they also outperform them on national and international tests (World Bank, 2008). The international community however has deemed countries which pursue gender (girls) concerns as modern and progressive while countries that do not, especially Muslim countries, are quickly identified as patriarchal and oppressive (ADHR). The World Bank report, *The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (2008, 28), stated that "the MENA region has made remarkable progress in the last 30 years with respect to closing the gender gap in education. Progress has been steady and rapid; covering all levels of education...gender parity for basic education is almost complete." However, even in light of this statement, governments and development agencies throughout the Middle East continue to refer to gender, that is girls, in education policies and discourse. It appears that despite having achieved parity these countries feel compelled, for one reason or another, to talk about policies relating to girls to gain acceptance and legitimacy from the international community.

This paper seeks to examine the politics of the gender, education and development discourse, specifically that of girls' education. It seeks not to turn attention away from girls but to look critically at how rigidities inherent in the aid system and the rise of dominant development discourses have created a narrow definition of gender which, by default, has precluded the pursuing of policies or research relating to boys. It will firstly examine, in brief, the institutionalization of gender in the field of education and international development. Secondly, it will consider how this has played out in Central Asia and the Middle East, regions which have both achieved gender parity for girls but are now showing disparities for boys.

Theoretical foundations

There are three broad schools of thought regarding the dissemination of education policies¹. The first, held by world culture scholars, posit that through globalization ideas about best practice in schooling spread with nations taking on these ideas naturally and voluntarily. As a result they say we can see that school systems around the world are becoming more alike (Baker and LeTendre 2005). The second group of scholars, from the world systems school, agrees that globalization is at work and that school systems are becoming more similar, but they argue that nations do not take on these policies voluntarily. Rather, through unequal power relations inherent in the world system, core or developed nations impose their policies on developing

¹ By policies I mean ones either at the discourse level or at the implementation level.

nations whether they desire them or not (Burbules and Torres 2000). Those who fail to comply suffer penalties such as the withholding of aid or shaming on international league tables. The final school of thought is that of the policy borrowers and lenders who disagree that there is a convergence of education policies happening worldwide; rather they believe that what we see happening are strategic decisions made by countries to borrow policies at a time or place convenient to them and then to discard the policy once its usefulness has ended. In this last scenario, a country itself is neither a passive nor a forced borrower but an active participant in policy selection (Steiner-Khamsi 2004). This paper takes a position somewhere between that of the world systems scholars and those in the school of policy borrowing and lending. It argues that while some countries may have been compelled to take on policies relating to gender in order to secure aid, others have chosen to pursue them for their strategic value on the global stage. The two regions being examined here face the conflict between the statistical reality and national policies with regard to gender, it is highly unlikely that these countries are naturally taking on these policies due to them being of best practice value.

Gender in the field of education and international development

Chabbot (2003) states that the great impact of the first EFA conference is evidenced by the fact that as well as the main EFA goals being embedded in the MDGs they are also embedded in over a dozen other world-level declarations, including the UNDP Human Development Reports. Gender and more particularly girls' education was firmly ingrained, by the year 2000, into the set of policy prescriptions given to developing countries for improving education and as such a prerequisite for greater economic development (World Bank 2008). Baker and LeTendre (2005) describe girls' education as a 'universalistic ideology' and state that 'past scholarship has never really considered the possible influence of the spreading ideology of gender equality worldwide as formidable, institutional force' (Baker and LeTendre 2005, 20). The push for greater attention to girls' education was so successful according to Baker and LeTendre (2005) as it appealed to both human capital proponents, who argued that by excluding girls half the productive labor force was excluded (World Bank 2008, AHDR 2006), and to human rights proponents who argued that it was a fundamental human right (Chabbot 2003). In addition Jansen (2005) explains that the EFA priorities, such as girls' education, also spread rapidly as many states agreed to be involved due to the symbolic significance of participation in a cross-national setting of performance standards as "not to be part of the EFA consensus is to appear to be out of line, illogical or even rebellious in the context of what seems to be a very rational and reasonable set of goals." This helps to explain why even countries not in need of aid follow the policy recommendations and goals outlined by EFA.

The discourse of girls' education thus gathered a momentum that other, less morally charged, reforms had not. It became institutionalized into the education and international development discourse and a requirement for countries to attend to when reforming education. This was not problematic in itself but it became an issue when tied into the narrow, prescriptive and rigorously enforced international aid system. Countries, such as several in Central Asia, in which girls' education may not have been the first area of concern were compelled to address it in their education policies whether the need was real or imagined. At the other end of the spectrum countries, such as many of the Arab States which did not require aid, bought into the girls' education discourse in order to signal modernity to the global community.

Gender, education and aid in Central Asia

In post-Soviet Central Asia universal access to primary and secondary education had long been established under the Soviet rule. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of new nation states girls and boys continued to attend school in most countries at comparatively equal numbers. The most recent EFA Global Monitoring Report for 2008 shows that the country with the lowest Gender Parity Index for primary education in Central Asia is Tajikistan, with a GPI for primary school at 0.96, while the majority of other countries are above 1.00 (meaning that there are more girls than boys in school). Tajikistan has been the one exception in Central Asia where in the aftermath of a bloody civil war girls in rural areas have been dropping out in higher numbers than boys. However, Tajikistan aside, other Central Asian countries have not been faced with the same dilemma. In fact Steiner-Khamsi (2006) found that in Mongolia it is more likely for boys to leave school early in order to obtain employment to support their families while girls remain in school. This is supported by the most recent EFA statistics, which show that at both the secondary and tertiary levels Mongolia has the highest gender parity index in the region, with 1.13 for secondary and 1.62 for tertiary. At the secondary level other countries in the region still have solid GPIs with Armenia at 1.03 and Georgia and Kyrgyzstan at 1.01. At the tertiary level Kyrgyzstan has a GPI of 1.25 and Kazakhstan shows 1.42. To make a comparison with Western Europe, Switzerland has a GPI at the tertiary level of 0.84, significantly less than what is required by EFA and the MDGs.

In addition to attending in greater numbers, girls have also been outperforming boys in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan the Centre for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM, 2006) reported that on the Kyrgyz National Test¹, there was a consistent gender gap among both the test takers and the admitted students. In 2006, for example, CEATM reported that of the 33.4 thousand participants of the main test, only 39% were men². It also reports that a similar breakdown was noted among the successful recipients of government scholarship: 64.1% women and 35.9% men. Participation of men was even lower in supplementary subject tests with percentages ranging from approximately 30% on science to 22% in languages.

In terms of the representation of women in various fields of study at the tertiary level Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries also have good results. As Table 1 shows, Central Asian countries and Middle Eastern countries have significantly higher enrolments in both the sciences and engineering than the UK and the USA. In actual fact there is no country in all of North America or Western Europe which has the percentage of women in the sciences above 49% (EFA GMR 2008). In the world Georgia has the highest percentage enrolment of women³. However, nowhere in the available literature can praise be found for these achievements or can concern for the low number of male enrolments be found. It appears that the donor community is more intent on finding areas in which women are marginalised rather than areas in which they are succeeding.

¹ The Kyrgyz National Test is a mandatory nationwide university entrance exam, which serves as the main criterion in the allocation of government scholarships. It is administered by a local testing organization, CEATM, since 2002.

² I use the terms “men” and “women” for gender disaggregation at the tertiary level, and “boys” and “girls” for primary and secondary levels.

³ This excludes some Arab States due to the fact that some local men may also be studying in these fields overseas, so the data is not entirely accurate.

Country	Percentage of Women in Science	Percentage of women in Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction
Georgia	69	33
Kyrgyzstan	54	29
Mongolia	47	41
Kuwait	60	50
Lebanon	46	20
Palestinian A. T.	50	31
United Kingdom	36	19
USA	38	16

Table 1: Percentage of women¹ in the science and engineering fields in selected Central Asian, Middle Eastern and Western Countries, data taken from the *EFA Global Monitoring Report*, 2008.

Even with the statistics showing how well girls are faring and by contrast how poorly boys are doing, the donor community continues to reinforce a one-sided focus on girls and women by making additional funding available only for girls' education. Efforts targeting girls in particular include the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Girls' Education Fund within UNICEF not to mention the various women's advocacy organizations. In addition countries which focus on girls are granted positive publicity both from within donor organizations and in the broader international press. An article written by Bahar Salimova and published on the Open Democracy website was titled *Women's Education in Central Asia: A Forgotten Crisis*, but the only country that Salimova (2008) uses to support this claim is Tajikistan. She conveniently ignores many Central Asian countries where girls are thriving. The UNESCO Regional Office for Central Asia in its 2004/05 *Main Lines of Activities* had one activity solely dedicated to advocacy for girls education under the guise of gender parity, again interesting given that gender parity is largely a problem only in Tajikistan (EFA GMR 2008) and perhaps Uzbekistan, which receives limited aid.

In Central Asia there are real concerns with boys being out of school, put to work early and choosing to forgo higher education, but as yet these countries lack the language and the tools to identify this as a problem. However it is not only aid dependant regions in which the girls' education discourse has been adopted, similar discourses are also found in the wealthy, aid free states of the Arabian Gulf, who also face a rising disparity in the enrolment and achievement of boys (World Bank 2008) but wish to appear modern to the world.

Gender, education and modernity in the Middle East

There is still a wide-spread belief that if countries pursue a certain policy then it must be because they are rectifying a legitimate problem. Mary Ann Maslak (2005) in an examination of the regional EFA frameworks for the past 10 years found that Africa and the Arab States mention gender related terms twice as often as the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe and North America. Maslak stated that this must be the case as "gender-related issues regarding female education are more pertinent to these countries." Yet this contradicts the statistics for many

¹ Percentage out of total enrollment in these courses

Arab states showing figures to the contrary with regard to both enrolment and achievement, but it is a reflection of a belief that many hold about gender and the Middle East.

Despite Maslak's assertion, the World Bank report (2008, 29) states that in the whole Middle East gender parity for basic education is almost complete. In secondary education the report states that "almost all [countries in MENA] have attained gender parity." In terms of school achievement the EFA 2008 Global Monitoring Report finds that in Bahrain, Jordan, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories and Saudi Arabia girls are outperforming boys in mathematics and science. This is supported in the AHDR (2006) which also states that girls are the better learners in the region. At the tertiary level the World Bank (2008) report goes on to say that "gender parity rates for higher education are even higher than they are for secondary education." The GPI at the tertiary level shows that in some countries such as the United Arab Emirates over three times as many women are enrolled in universities. It also reveals that in 13 out of the 20 MENA countries women outnumber men at the tertiary level. In addition, as can be seen in Table 1, they are well represented in the sciences and engineering at percentages higher than those in Western Europe.

In light of such overwhelming statistical evidence about the performance and enrolment of girls in the Middle East, it is surprising that the international community and local governments continue to focus upon girls' education without considering the education of boys. The World Bank report on the Middle East (2008) only speaks about gender in order to highlight where gender parity has been reached and in which countries it still needs to be reached, these countries still have fewer girls than boys in school. Countries where disparity for boys are not considered to have a problem and there are no exhortations to rectify the situation. In the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (2008, 183), despite saying in one section that the Arab States are on target to reach gender parity and despite the statistics showing that parity has largely been achieved the highlighted statement for the gender section states "Access and participation of girls remain challenges in the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa." Again this reinforces the idea, albeit a false one, that girls are under-represented in schools throughout the region. The *Arab Human Development Report* (2006) states that despite an increase in tertiary female enrolment the numbers of females in engineering and the sciences are too low. This statement is very interesting given that the numbers are markedly higher than any country in Western Europe or North America (EFA GMR 2008).

In Middle Eastern governments too there is frequent talk by ministers of the need to improve girls' education. Two years ago at a talk at Columbia University for Women Leaders, the Minister of Economy for the UAE stated that the one thing she would pay greater attention to would be girls' education. This was an odd comment to make given that in the UAE in particular girls' enrolment and performance exceeds that of boys at every level. The annual *UAE Yearbook* also dedicates an entire section to the successes of women, often portrayed in terms of the losses to men, without considering the ramifications of this for the country as a whole. Despite not requiring aid, it appears that the UAE and other Gulf States, such as Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait want to be considered modern and the signifier of modern, especially with regards to education, has come to be an education policy discourse which focuses on girls' education.

Future directions

The push for greater attention to girls' education came at a time in history in which girls and women had been neglected by the development industry. As such it was a much needed

intervention and one that has benefited millions. However as global agreements and targets were developed, such as EFA and the MDGs, the education policy options offered to developing countries became restricted to few narrow goals. Once these goals were achieved, for example the gender goals, countries such as those in Central Asia considered the gender issue 'fixed'. But by focusing only on girls, boys are left out of the equation and off the policy menu. In addition, these international declarations have also been reinforced and reiterated so often throughout the West that they have now come to represent 'modernity' in education. This is even though many countries in the West itself are failing to live up to the same targets and even though many Western countries have become more concerned about boys (Gurian and Stevens 2005). The notion of modernity has become so pervasive that even the oil rich countries of the Arabian Gulf, which seek recognition and affirmation from the West, have also begun to speak the policy language of gender that they know the West wishes to hear. As a result these countries have become distracted or blinded to legitimate but different concerns regarding the poor performance and attendance of boys. Instead, they have focused on highlighting their successes in girls' education and on having fulfilled all the EFA gender targets.

Bannon and Correia (2006, xviii) write in the introduction to *The Other Half of Gender*, that "among developing country governments, development agencies and civil society organizations alike, when we talk of gender we mean women." With gender being so narrowly defined, it is no wonder that boys or men scarcely receive a mention in development discussions. The outrage that we feel when we read about a poor girl being forced to work and leave school should be the same outrage we feel when we read about a poor boy in the same situation. But too often it is not. We have become conditioned by years of a continuous presentation of women and girls as victims and men and boys as perpetrators (Bannon and Correia 2006) and it is now difficult to change the picture. Development organizations, academia and governments need to look beyond girls. They need to consider the situation for boys as well and to view them as children rather than future oppressors. In fact as Bannon and Correia (2006) point out it is precisely the neglect and marginalization of men and boys in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that is leading to an increase in violence and unsafe sexual practices among men and between men and women. They write that gender is relational, it concerns relationships and neither men nor women live in isolation from each other, what effects one will ultimately affect the other. It is no good therefore only educating women if men are left illiterate, both from a human capital and a human rights perspective it is a loss for the country. Future research needs to lead the way in a transformation of the discussion on gender, education and international development. Research needs to open a space in which boys are considered in their own right and their needs are recognized and documented in order to better inform future policy directions for development organizations and nation states.

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Presenting and Mastering Idioms in Cultural Context

"John bit the nail right on the head!" "He got under Anna's skin." "These guys painted the town red last weekend." "They had a blast yesterday." Have these phrases been taken from a horror movie? Are they all associated with blood shedding? No, far from that. *"Rose often puts her foot in her mouth."* *"She is jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."* *"Her bark is worse than her bite".* Would you like your son to date a girl with such manners? Of course, why not. You understand