Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements

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Abstract

International consensus on education priorities accords an important place to achieving gender justice in the educational sphere. Both the Dakar ‘Education for All’ goals and the Millennium Development goals emphasise two goals, in this regard. These two goals are distinguished as gender parity goals [achieving equal participation of girls and boys in all forms of education based on their proportion in the relevant age-groups in the population] and gender equality goals [ensuring educational equality between boys and girls]. In turn these have been characterised as quantitative/numerical and qualitative goals respectively. In order to consider progress towards both types of goal, both quantitative and qualitative assessments need to be made of the nature of progress towards gender equality. Achieving gender parity is just one step towards gender equality in and through education. An education system with equal numbers of boys and girls participating, who may progress evenly through the system, may not in fact be based on gender equality. Following Wilson (Human Rights: Promoting gender equality in and through education. Background paper for EFA GMR 2003/4, 2003) a consideration of gender equality in education therefore needs to be understood as the right to education [access and participation], as well as rights within education [gender-aware educational environments, processes, and outcomes], and rights through education [meaningful education outcomes that link education equality with wider processes of gender justice].

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1. Introduction

The year 2005 is upon us and the education community internationally is seeking to assess how far progress has been achieved in the areas of gender parity and equality in education. The terms gender parity and gender equality are reflected in one of the six EFA goals elucidated in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) as follows:

● 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.

Elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education is also picked up as a target identified as essential to fulfill Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals [Promote Gender Equality and empower women].

Bearing these new international commitments in mind, it is important to work towards clarity on what is meant by gender parity and gender equality with reference to education, explore the linkages between them, and identify the best mechanisms to measure progress towards these goals. This is necessary to ensure that a clear analytical and operational distinction is maintained between concepts of gender parity and equality—without which there is likely to be considerable slippage in the usage of these terms as well as the measurement of progress towards them as desired outcomes.

This paper is based on a principal argument that measuring gender equality in education is conceptually demanding, and will necessitate focus on a far wider range of indicators than may be suggested by focusing on education alone, or defined in a narrow sense. Furthermore, widening the scope of measuring progress towards gender equality will necessitate some amount of conceptual creativity or openness to explore the range of pathways that may exist in different contexts and explain progress [or the lack of it] towards gender equality in education. Conceptual creativity is not suggested at the expense of rigour—on the contrary, a great deal of analytical rigour will be required to explain the range of interlinked pathways that may help establish or determine cause-effect relationships that in turn will help identify the range of interventions necessary for ensuring progress towards gender equality in education. Thus a prior belief that this paper rests on is that for successful intervention for progress towards gender equality, conceptual and analytical rigour is required, without which claims for progress towards these goals are likely to be unreliable.

2. Gender parity and equality in international development goals

The Dakar Framework for Action represents to-date the most important international political commitment towards promoting Education for All. The framework contains two gender-based goals. In Article 7 [ii] participants commit to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. The second commitment is to achieve gender equality in education by 2015. These goals are fully supported by the Millennium Development Goals, which reiterate the importance of ensuring completion of a full course of good quality primary schooling by 2015 [Goal 2], the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary schooling by 2005, and the achievement of gender equality in all levels of education no later than 2015.

The rights discourse provides a powerful overarching framework for discussing gender equality, particularly as it has been validated through international dialogues on the nature of international co-operation in recent years. In particular, the citation of human rights in education finds its basis in international law, which has provided the legal standards that States commit to when they ratify international treaties. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, amongst others. See Appendix 1 in the EFA GMR 2003–04 for a list of gender equality rights in different conventions and conference declarations.

3See Subrahmanian (2003). This point is also made by Malhotra et al. (2002) with reference to measuring levels of empowerment and tracking changes in these levels, where they note that neither the Bank nor other major development agencies have developed methods, despite promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment as an important policy objective.

4These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, amongst others. See Appendix 1 in the EFA GMR 2003–04 for a list of gender equality rights in different conventions and conference declarations.
right to education and gender equality in and through education (Wilson, 2003). Rights here are thus framed in terms of states’ obligations towards their citizens, obligations for which they can be held accountable.

Assessing progress towards gender equality, therefore, requires measuring meaningful progress towards the right to education, in turn assessing both quantitative and qualitative information on a wide range of phenomena that underpin the rights of men and women, to, within and through education. A significant challenge thus relates to the collection of data, and its interpretation. Much in turn depends on how gender ‘parity’ and gender ‘equality’ in education are being defined. Despite this, however, nowhere in the Dakar Framework for Action is the concept of gender equality actually defined. The lack of a universally accepted definition of gender equality in relation to education goals makes measuring progress towards its achievement hard if not impossible to achieve. Without clarity about what gender equality in education means the goal of 2015 will be at best subject to contestation and dispute that is likely to cloud global consensus, and at worst leave this important goal unfulfilled for lack of clarity about what it is that constitutes progress on this front.

3. Defining key terms

Gender equality rests on, but is not the same as, achieving gender parity, or females being represented in equal numbers as males in education, although the latter offers a ‘first stage’ measure of progress towards gender equality in education. Gender parity reflects ‘formal’ equality, in terms of access to, and participation in, education. ‘Formal’ equality can also be understood as equality that is ‘premised on the notion of the ‘sameness’ of men and women, where the male actor is held to be the norm. This is reflected in the way gender parity is used in measuring EFA progress, where the gender parity index computes the ratio of female-to-male value of a given indicator, with the mean value being 1.

However, there are two limitations of ‘gender parity’ indicators. One arises from the understanding that measuring access to, and participation in, education, whilst important, are limited indicators of change in education, as they do not by themselves tell us very much about processes of education. At best, they are first-order outcome indicators. Second, they are ‘static’ measures. A relational understanding of ‘gender’ requires recognition of the dynamic processes by which gender inequalities are constituted across different arenas of human life. Gender inequalities arise from the unequal power relations between women and men, and hence assessments of gender equality need to capture the relational dimensions of gender inequality.

Formal equality measures numerical ‘gaps’ between female and male outcomes. However, for equality to be achieved, we need a definition that recognises that women and men start from different positions of advantage, and are constrained in different ways. Thus achievement of substantive equality requires the recognition of ‘the ways in which women are different from men, in terms of their biological capacities and in terms of the socially constructed disadvantages women face relative to men.’ (Kabeer, 1999, p. 37). This in turn depends on two further processes, indicators of which can tell us how equality of outcome has been achieved. These processes refer to the quality of experience of education, in terms of entering education, participating in it and benefiting from it. For gender equality to be meaningful, mechanisms for ensuring equality of treatment as well as equality of opportunity for men and women are important. These in turn rest on a commitment to non-discrimination, to ensure the erasure of social norms that construct women and men as unequal in value in terms of their contributions and entitlements, and to ensure that all social actors are committed to eliminating stereotypes and attitudes that reinforce and perpetuate inequalities in the distribution of resources between women and men. Assessing gender equality thus requires assessing whether fundamental freedoms and choices are as equally available to women as they are to men. This involves focusing on pathways to equality, extending the concern with treatment and opportunity to also focusing on agency and autonomy.
exercised by women in enjoying their freedoms (Fig. 1).

A move towards substantive gender equality thus requires recognising that discrimination arises from differential valuation of what it is men and women contribute, giving rise therefore to differential [unequal] investments in women and men, differential [unequal] rewards paid to women and men, and differential [unequal] resources allocated to men and women. Such differences in value are as apparent in societies where girls are excluded from education relative to boys because of the devaluation of their socially constructed roles as carers, as they are in societies where the relatively higher academic achievement of girls remains unrecognised and undervalued in the wider economy. Thus even if opportunities are made available to women, and women make the best use of them, women may be prevented from exercising their full rights to these opportunities because of discrimination operating outside the sphere of education.

However, a gender-aware approach to equality needs also to recognise that gender inequalities have been historically legitimised by societies in ways that require careful analysis. The construction of gender inequality has rested on ‘naturalising’ a range of differences between women and men in order to legitimate their differential treatment and inequality of resource distribution. The unequal burdens borne by women and young girls in reproductive activities, including the maintenance of human resources through their unpaid work within the home, provides a powerful example. It is assumed that women perform these roles voluntarily and as a result of their natural instincts, rather than on the recognition that the division of labour is socially determined and based on unequal power relations between women and men, which invisibilises the importance of the role that women play and the important contributions that men need to make towards sharing these burdens. ‘Naturalising’ these differences in turn has depended on their being accepted by all social actors as essential to uphold, and over time has translated into entrenched norms that define appropriate behaviours for men and women. These gender ideologies become the basis of social norms, practices and rules; these processes in turn inform masculine and feminine identities. Masked as ‘culture’, these identities and ideologies become stubbornly defended as traditional and immutable. Further, these gender ideologies are encrypted in institutions that govern daily life, and thus translate into deeper structural inequalities that are not likely to be removed unless there are clear efforts to rethink and rewrite the basic rules that underpin institutional functioning.

Thus a first step towards assessing progress towards substantive gender equality beyond formal equality, entails understanding the social construction of gender identity or what it means to be a woman or a man in a given context, which in turn is underpinned by prevailing ideas about (a) what roles are appropriate for men or women to perform in a given context; and (b) how what is done by women and men is valued, socially and economically.

First, prevailing norms about what women and men do, and how their activities and roles are to be valued determine the opportunities to which they have access. Thus households may discriminate, as they often do, against girls in favour of boys in access to education. These are clearly relative phenomena, as boys are also likely to be excluded from school in contexts of poverty and/or conflict, but where children are sent to school, boys are often advantaged over girls in access to schooling.\(^5\)

\(^5\)Although as data from the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003–04 show, gender disparity is far more likely to occur on account of girls lagging behind boys than the other way around. This point is elaborated later in this paper.
Second, constraints arise out of what women or men do which serve to curtail or restrict their freedom to access opportunities. This means that even if opportunities are presented to women, the nature of their reproductive responsibilities/burdens, which are often time-intensive and home-based, can often prevent women from gaining equal access to opportunities that may in theory be available to them. Thus for instance schools may be available for girls and boys, but constraints arising from the nature of the work that girls do may impede their ability to participate in schooling. Examples abound of girls being unable to participate in school because their work within the home is far more time-intensive than work boys may undertake in wage activities—thus girls’ work is often not compatible with schooling, whereas boys’ work is more likely to be so.

Third, even where women are able to negotiate their burdens in order to participate in different opportunities on offer, gender inequalities are often institutionalised in the norms, processes and structures of interventions and institutions and present barriers to equitable outcomes. Teachers’ attitudes, the nature of the curriculum, harassment, concerns about safety, and the quality of the infrastructure may all serve to push girls out of school.

Finally, the pervasiveness of social norms that curtail freedoms for women and are based on undervaluation or devaluation of what women do, can lead women themselves to internalise negative self-perceptions and doubt their own abilities. Thus women often exclude themselves from opportunities that may be on offer, and active encouragement may be necessary to support women to challenge internalised social norms that may informally be placing barriers on their participation. Thus the importance of focusing on how the content and processes of education enable women to challenge negative evaluations of their contributions and worth, by strengthening their ability to advocate on their own behalf, cannot be excluded from considerations of progress towards gender equality in education. Opportunities outside and beyond education could also play a significant role in shaping aspirations for girls and boys, either through challenging or reinforcing stereotypes about typical feminine and masculine attributes, traits and abilities. Focusing on the aspirations that girls and boys voice could tell us something important about how opportunities and rewards are perceived to be gender-differentiated by young people, with the result that gender inequalities are perpetuated rather than challenged as they leave educational institutions and enter adulthood.

Drawing, therefore, on the importance of viewing gender equality in terms of a ‘relational process’ that plays out through educational systems, and the norms and values institutionalised within them, this paper argues for breaking down ‘gender equality’ into its constituent parts and identifying indicators relevant to each component. For this purpose, we draw here on Duncan Wilson’s (2003) three-fold characterisation of rights in education, mentioned earlier. These are:

- Rights to education
- Rights within education
- Rights through education.

In this paper we see the operation of rights as circular, with rights in each of these aspects linking positively to other rights. These rights are indivisible, and hence translate into a substantive programme of action that would promote both gender parity and gender equality.

4. Indicators: Definitions and interpretations from a gender perspective

The project of translating a conceptual framework on gender parity and equality into indicators offers its own specific challenges. In this section we explore the challenges of defining indicators, and also the further challenges of measuring these indicators and interpreting them. These challenges pertain equally to parity indicators as they will to equality indicators.

A major consideration to highlight at this stage is, of course, the quality of existing data, and data collection systems. Discussions of appropriate indicators are of course rendered somewhat
irrelevant in the absence of quality data collection and management systems. Some of these concerns are discussed in Lievesley (2003), and the following problems with data are listed: the inability of some countries to provide any data at all, incomplete data over time, incomplete data within a country, inconsistencies of data within a country, inadequate implementation of international standards and classifications which hamper comparability across countries, changes in the use of international classifications which lead to inconsistent data over time, poor or incomplete metadata and the absence of information on quality of data, an over-reliance on data from administrative sources and lack of data from alternative sources with which to validate information, and long time lags before data are processed and made available. Colclough (2003) points to the difficulty of getting reliable Net Enrolment Ratio data for some Sub-Saharan African countries, and the subsequent continued reliance on the less accurate Gross Enrolment Ratio data to measure progress towards targets and goals. The quality of data thus has started occupying more attention in an era of greater international cooperation—particularly as the measurement of progress towards international goals such as the Millennium Development Goals will require reliable and valid data (see for instance, UNDP, 2003).

4.1. Gender parity

As a quantitative or numerical concept, gender parity in education is easier to define, referring as it does to the equal participation of boys and girls in different aspects of education. Gender parity indicators are static, measuring the numbers of girls and boys with access to, and participating in education, at a particular moment of time; however, if viewed over different points in time, they can serve as dynamic indicators of change.

Indicators of gender parity in education include (see, for example, UNESCO, 2002):

- the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in education at each of the different levels of the education system, and at intake in grade 1 [particularly net enrolment and net intake, which measures the numbers of girls and boys enrolled as a proportion of the school-age population relevant for the level of schooling concerned, and grade 1 respectively],
- the numbers of boys and girls who survive up to grade 5 [and thus the numbers that drop out],
- regularity of attendance of boys and girls [net attendance rate],
- the numbers of girls and boys who repeat years of schooling,
- the average years of schooling attained for boys and girls,
- the transitions of boys and girls between levels of education [ECCE-primary; primary-secondary; secondary-tertiary/vocational],
- the number of female and male teachers, which represents a concern with gender parity in the teaching profession, an indicator which reflects a direct concern with parity in the supply of teaching and
- literacy levels of boys and girls, men and women.

Indicators of gender parity tell us about the 'peopling' of institutions of education by gender, and indicate whether men and women, boys and girls are represented in equal numbers. Thus the right 'to' education is measured in terms of access, survival, attendance, retention, and to some extent transition between levels of education.

Thus while gender parity can be seen to constitute one aspect of equality in relation to education, it does not conform to a satisfactory or substantive definition of equality. It is not holistic in the sense of rights that we discussed earlier—while it captures a descriptive sense of the right to education, it only partially illuminates whether this is taking place on the basis of rights within education and provides no indicators of rights through education, which as we have argued earlier

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6Parity data on its own however can also be misleading, and should be read in the context of overall enrolment rates. For example in Ethiopia, transition to secondary schooling is relatively high (95 percent of boys and 86 percent of girls who complete primary school continue to the secondary level) (Rose, 2003). However, this can be misleading, since only a small proportion of children complete the primary cycle in the first place.
is an important measure of substantive gender equality. While it tells us what is happening to girls and boys as separate categories, it provides little information about the nature of gender relations between boys and girls as social groupings within the education system. This may lead to the erroneous assumption [often made] that gender parity = gender equality, when often the very opposite may be the case.\(^7\) This point is important, given that the socially constructed inequalities between boys and girls are often reproduced through social institutions, including educational institutions, in ways that do not challenge prevailing discriminatory norms and practices. Focusing on rights within education can help capture the dynamics of gender equality as they operate within the education system.

Further, what ‘parity’ indicators cannot tell us is why changes are happening and what factors explain these changes; and whether these changes represent changes in the sphere of education, or more generally in wider society. Education represents an important life opportunity for women and men, and a vital social and economic resource for societies. Gender inequality in education constructs, and in turn, is constructed by inequalities between women and men in other spheres that intersect with education. Changes in any of the dimensions of gender inequality, for better or for worse, are likely to have knock-on or ripple effects in other dimensions. Given that gender inequality is constructed both through formal social norms and rules [for instance, laws and statutes] as well as through ‘unwritten norms and shared understandings’, (Kabeer, 2003, p. 2), it is also important to ensure that progress towards equality encompasses both changes in formal laws and institutional practices, as well as the informal, shared understandings within societies of the value, opportunities and life chances to be enjoyed by men and women.

Thus an important dimension of educational equality requires focusing on rights through education, recognising that gender equality within education is shaped by, and in turn shapes rights and gender equality in other dimensions of life. This involves asking to what extent education strengthens gender equality outside the sphere of education.

However, while we cannot rely exclusively on gender parity indicators for explanations of the processes of change that underlie formal equality, they provide an important starting-point for asking the kinds of questions that are likely to provide the insight required for more detailed policy analysis and response. In particular, they can sound signals for change In this regard, the gender parity index [GPI] is a useful indicator of the relationship between males and females in educational access and participation at a given moment in time [static]. Further, analysis of trends in gender parity over time can serve as an important signal of the probability that wider changes have taken place [dynamic]. However, given that GPI does not necessarily tell us about UPE/UEE [though UPE/UEE can tell us about GPI], there are caveats in the interpretation of GPI that need to be borne in mind, which can only be addressed through closer interrogation of national and sub-national data. In particular, attention needs to be paid to what movement of the GPI towards parity may tell us about the relationship between males and females in that country in terms of educational access and participation. For example, for a country where there is movement of the GPI towards parity in a context of disparity in favour of boys, alternative possible explanations emerge:

1. Movement of GPI towards 1 could reflect rapidly increasing enrolment of girls, thus catching up with boys, whose enrolment rates are either staying the same, increasing slowly or declining [positive or mixed scenario].
2. Movement of GPI towards 1 could reflect declining enrolments, with boys’ enrolment declining much more rapidly than girls’ enrolment [negative scenario].

The negative scenario outlined in point 2 above, is illustrated by data from Sub-Saharan Africa.

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\(^7\)For example, the content of education may socialise girls into accepting a subordinate social status, and boys into thinking that men legitimately bear greater rights than women in society.
Colclough et al. (2003). Data over the period 1980-1997 showed that the gender balance of enrolments in SSA improved despite an overall dismal performance in total enrolments. Closer study of the data showed that this was on account of a decline in male enrolment and the maintenance of female enrolment rates. It must be noted here, however, that gender disparities in primary enrolment are ‘overwhelmingly to the disadvantage of girls’ (UNESCO, 2003, p. 53), and male disadvantage relative to females is largely evident only at secondary levels or, where it remains by 2015, will be only at secondary level (ibid, p. 110).

Assessments of the meaning of gender parity thus need to be interpreted in the context of overall levels of achievement in UPE or overall enrolment, and unpacked to assess what the precise nature of the relationship is between boys and girls in relation to access and participation. For instance, in scenario 1, progress towards gender parity signals that changes have taken place that are diminishing the power of the social, economic and political forces that have hitherto prevented girls’ equal access to and participation in education. These changes thus reflect ongoing social processes that result in greater opportunity and freedom for girls. These changes may also reflect changes in conditions at the level of individual households. More often that not, they represent changes in the environments and circumstances within which individuals function, particularly factors in the external environment. However, in scenario 2, we may need to consider that under some rare circumstances, changes may reflect unintended benefits to one gender as a result of constraints experienced by another. Circumstances such as conflict may offer examples of this—though interpretation would require paying attention to the overall GER, which may be already very high.

It is also likely that combinations of factors may shift to enable greater gender parity, as Section 1 above noted, including changes in social norms and values, greater economic incentives and opportunities, and more adequate and appropriate provision of educational facilities. Changes may occur simultaneously in one or more of these dimensions—they may even affect and shape each other. Social change processes thus are dynamically constituted and evolving over time, making multi-dimensional analysis an important component of efforts to evaluate what they mean and the direction in which they are heading.

An exclusive focus on numbers in measuring realisation of the right to education can therefore present apparent progress and at the same time, hide real patterns of discrimination and disadvantage. Interpretation is a key aspect of determining what progress towards parity represents in respect of the qualitative experience of schooling for boys and girls. Statistical measures of parity may not paint an adequate or accurate picture of the gender dynamics in operation in education. Individual indicators by themselves cannot tell us very much—for instance, enrolment data does not tell us anything about the quality of schooling; equal numbers of women and men teachers does not tell us whether the processes of teaching are gender-aware.

4.2. Equality indicators: rights within education

As noted above, gender parity indicators can signal whether social forces may be shifting to allow greater access of girls to schooling, enabling them to catch up with boys in an important dimension of life opportunity. From a gender perspective, educational indicators reflect the probability that wider changes are enabling households to view investment in girls’ and boys’ education in different ways than they did previously. Yet, educational indicators do not tell us about processes of change/reproduction in everyday life. Further, educational indicators do not bring into focus the actual experience of schooling. As argued earlier, indicators that focus on inputs and output models [access and outcomes], and that too purely through focusing on learners, miss out the crucial variables that link to the process of learning, particularly in terms of crucial equality indicators related to treatment and opportunity.

Gender parity in the dimensions outlined above can easily mask great inequalities in what boys and girls gain from the schooling process. As noted earlier in Section 1, schools and other educational institutions often reflect prevailing social norms
although they can also offer spaces in which social norms are challenged and reshaped. Over time, however, schooling institutions and the content of education have come to reflect the experiences of the socially dominant ‘male’ actor, privileging male experiences of the social organisation of life and work. Textbooks and the attitudes of teachers may reinforce social norms that deem it appropriate for girls to stay home and take primary responsibility for household chores, and boys to play more dominant roles in the world of work and in public decision-making. Thus the definition of gender equality in education needs to start by recognising that formal equality, or equal numbers of boys and girls in school, is merely a starting-point for assessing gender equality as an educational goal. To understand rights from a gender perspective as they play out within the educational process, the focus needs to shift to elements of that process, key markers of which include:

- learning content
- teaching method and process
- subject choice
- assessment modes
- management of peer relationships
- learning outcomes.

Gender equality or rights within education thus refers to the right of men and women to non-discrimination in educational opportunities in each of the aspects outlined above. This further suggests that educational institutions should function in ways that do not impose or perpetuate gender stereotypes that exert psychological influence and/or promote institutional barriers to the range of possibilities that boys and girls, men and women, can enjoy in relation to the education on offer. This therefore relates to equality of treatment, which in turn is reflected in equality of outcome. Thus both process and outcome indicators can add up to provide a useful picture of gender equality within education.

There are several measures of gender inequalities or gender-based rights deprivations within education. Some of these are easier to measure than others, and are fast joining indicators of parity outlined above. These include:

- performance in examinations
- subject choice.

The former allows us to measure the extent to which girls and boys can convert educational access into educational capital. While this focuses on only one aspect of what education offers—in relation to competitive credentials—it does provide a relative sense of how boys and girls function within the education system and hence can signal whether there are inequalities that are not being addressed, or indeed being created, within schooling processes. The latter indicator, subject choice, alerts us to whether boys and girls are being streamed into specific subjects and whether there is any equality in the representation of boys and girls across different subjects as they specialise within education systems.

As indicators of gender equality within education, they take us further than the indicators conventionally used to measure gender parity in education. However, interpretation of these data also requires contextualisation and careful unpacking, to understand what the relative differences mean. Conflicts over interpretation rest in the extent to which subject specialisation can be attributed to choice, and the extent to which it can seen to be determined explicitly or implicitly by social or institutional structures. Contextual information can help to put some of the interpretation of ‘choice’ to rest, by clarifying whether the ‘choices’ on offer are being imposed through the way in which they are offered.

Further, it can be argued that current indicators are largely student-centred in their assessments of progress, thereby seeming to impose the burden of progress on children and their families. Indicators that measure the efficiency of schooling systems, in terms of their quality, the level of teacher training, the teacher-learner ratio, the male:female ratio within the class room, may all provide important pointers to the in school factors that constrain the possibilities for ‘rights within’ education. These indicators are far harder to establish given the range of contextual variables that explain their effects, and the analytical difficulty of attribution—for instance, the issue of the appropriate teacher-learner ratio has not achieved consensus.
and varies between systems. The need for ‘supply’
related indicators to enhance our measurement of
‘rights within’ is complemented by the need to
ensure that these ‘system’ indicators are developed
for use at local levels, where they can be expanded
upon to arrive at more rich pictures of the
schooling process.

A way of overcoming the ‘supply demand’
separation of analytical variables can be arrived
at through rethinking the concept of ‘learning’
and ‘performance’. A further set of indicators that
can help to monitor ‘rights within’ involve an
expanded understanding of the range of factors
that influence ‘learning’ within the school. These
variables can include both family and social8
factors as well as those relating to the learning
environment which includes teacher behaviour as
well as the influence of home variables [such as
hours of work after school]. Table 1 illustrates
with examples.

A further issue links to the location of monitor-
ing systems in terms of their use of indicators.
Ideally, indicators should feed not just at a central
‘macro’ policy level, where they are pored over by
donors and governments and form the basis for
informing policy choice or measuring progress in
terms of policy goals. Indicators should ideally be
developed for use by educators at local level, as
ways of helping them identify and monitor the
quality of the learning experience for all children.
This would entail an expanded sensitivity to
the learner and her environment as well as the
learning process, and the ways in which learners
interact with the learning process. The complex-
ities of education and learning processes are
well-known—as noted earlier, the range of vari-
ables that intersect to shape the learner and her
learning outcomes include family context and
social factors as well as the curriculum content,
its transaction and the learning environment.

### Table 1
Measurable indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equal access to</th>
<th>Equality within</th>
<th>Equality through</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment</td>
<td>Subject choice</td>
<td>Male/female employment across different levels of education by gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Learning Outcomes [performance in examinations]</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Regularity of attendance</td>
<td>Teacher-learner ratio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repetition</td>
<td>Gender balance within the classroom</td>
<td>Gender differentials in wages across different levels of employment/education</td>
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<tr>
<td>The average years of schooling attained</td>
<td></td>
<td>Political participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>The transitions of boys and girls between levels of education</td>
<td>Qualifications of teachers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The number of female and male teachers</td>
<td>Level of training of teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors shaping performance including:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Health of students</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nutritional status</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child’s involvement in family work</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social discrimination within the classroom/society [context-specific indicators would be necessary]</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

8Italicised indicators refer to those that are measurable, but not treated as conventional indicators. The category ‘Factors shaping performance’ are those indicators that could be best developed at local-level for educators to manage their own schools. This is by no means an exhaustive list, just an indicative one.

A focus on social discrimination would be important to
highlight other axes of inequality across which gender
differences are played out. For example, inequalities of race,
caste, class, ethnicity are all likely to deepen gendered difference
between students, and give rise to varied experiences of the
learning process for boys and girls of different social groups.
Locating the learner within this environment requires indicators that are sensitive to these diverse variables, and at best should be developed with a view to helping educators review their own performance as well as enabling more distant policy makers to remain satisfied that progress towards educational goals is taking place in a meaningful way. Given the present concerns about low-quality education in much of the developing world, this does seem a remote prospect.

4.3. Rights through education

Indicators of ‘rights within education’ thus tell us the important story of equality of treatment and opportunity within education, which should be an important area of concern for educators and education systems. However, learning is not merely a technical function of education systems, but is also shaped by social norms and values as we have consistently argued. Thus, ways in which wider social structures shape opportunities and aspirations are equally important to understand, especially as they will shape the content of learning, and deeply influence the attitudes and behaviours of educators and learners, amongst others. Gender inequalities within education are also likely to reinforce wider social inequalities, reproducing notions of gender differentiation and legitimating them in social discourse and also in social practice. Indicators of gender equality thus need to be extended beyond the education system to a selected range of other indicators of gender equality, as a way of alerting educators to the deep links between education and other social institutions and processes. Thus rights through education are equally important to include in our assessment of substantive gender equality.

However, overly broad definitions of these rights are likely to confound the project of definition beyond the point of usefulness, and fall into the trap of viewing education as a ‘magic bullet’—while this critique is mounted specifically against the view that female education is the solution for population crises and other development or social goals is fraught with methodological and conceptual problems, and too narrowly focused on an ‘input–output’ model of effects. However, there are some important ways in which rights within education can lead to the securing of rights through education, as borne out by the second MDG which sees education as a vehicle for greater gender equality and empowerment. A focus on other rights can help us focus on the ways in which educational processes need to be strengthened to exert a positive influence on other social structures and institutions.

The importance of focusing on ‘rights through education’ becomes pertinent particularly when we review evidence of the inequalities which continue to face women in the world of employment, work and political representation—in short, the public arena. Whilst much has changed in terms of women’s access to paid work, questions remain about the sustainability of such gains in the face of rapidly changing economic environments (Razavi, 2003). Further, gains made by women in the field of education are often undermined by deeply embedded gender inequalities—this point is illustrated by the continuing advantage in the world of work enjoyed by men even in contexts where they perform less well than women in education. Indeed, some have argued for the Caribbean and for the UK, where girls outperform boys in secondary school, that it maybe precisely the security of male advantage in the world of work that creates disincentives for their performance in schools. While the issues of gendered performance patterns remain a matter of debate, there is clearly good reason to continue to use ‘rights through education’ as a relevant set of indicators for assessing progress towards gender equality in education, in order to ensure that a fuller picture of gender equality is arrived at in assessments of progress.

5. Enabling substantive gender equality in education

Achieving substantive gender equality in education entails tackling gender ideologies that constrain enjoyment of the full array of positive freedoms that are valued in a rights and capabilities...
approach. This entails firstly putting women back into the picture as rights-bearers and not deliverers of development, and extending our interest in how women’s education impacts on others, to assessing how education impacts on women themselves. For instance, while many studies indicate that education does bring changes in the quality of life for men and women, even if incremental, less focus has been placed on how these changes benefit women directly.

As UNESCO (2002) argues, the links between rights to education, rights within education and rights through education are not linear. Rights to education do not guarantee rights within education, and neither do rights within education secure rights through education. Yet, we need indicators for all three dimensions to help track progress at different levels of policy monitoring. Gender parity and greater gender equality in schooling can, and often do, co-exist with gender inequalities outside of education. Powerful examples of these are provided in countries where gender parity in secondary education has been achieved. In the United Kingdom, girls have been systematically doing better than boys (Arnot and Phipps, 2003). In France, whilst girls have caught up with boys and now outperform them in secondary schools, gender inequalities continue to prevent girls’ equal entry to specialised training institutions, for example (Baudino, 2003). In some Latin American countries, the level of women’s participation in secondary schooling is surpassing that of men. In a number of Gulf States, notably Bahrain and Kuwait, more women than men are enrolled in university education. Yet in all of these countries, there continue to remain inequalities [to varying degrees] in employment, wages and political representation.

This makes two things apparent. One that a multi-dimensional approach is necessary for addressing gender equality in education, and two, that for formal education to translate into gender equality, enabling conditions need to be identified. Enabling conditions as identified above include those that enhance substantive freedoms and choice, and they include a focus on equality of treatment and opportunity. These enabling conditions form the basis of the actions that states should take in order to secure rights for women to, within and through education.

Therefore, in addition to gender parity and gender equality, definitional clarity needs to be extended to the concept of gender equity, particularly for operational purposes, and for measuring the effectiveness of measures adopted to achieve gender parity and gender equality. Gender equity is defined here as a policy concept which places emphasis on redistribution of resources between women and men in a way that addresses gender-based asymmetries in investment and capacities of women and men. That is, gender equity measures are those that recognise that in order to promote equality between women and men to, within and through education, special measures may be required to redress prior inequalities that constrain women’s access to and utilization of resources on an equal basis with men. These, as noted earlier, include paying attention to the unpaid responsibilities women bear, particularly in the arena of human reproduction, which remain undervalued and hence uncompensated, and continue to serve as a barrier to women’s full and equal participation in education, amongst other processes. Recognition of barriers, however, includes paying attention to those barriers that arise as a consequence of the internalization of self-perceptions [reinforced often by society/community] of their lesser abilities or value by girls/women. Thus gender equity measures need to be both gender-aware and transformative of gender relations in the ways in which they operate, within the possibilities offered by the environment in question.

A final point to note: by focusing on equality of treatment and opportunity through a gender lens, we need to emphasise equally the importance of paying attention to the kinds of behaviours and attitudes that impose gendered expectations on males within the schoolroom. As Sewell et al. (2003) and Figueroa (2000) have argued for the Caribbean, dominant constructions of male identity and masculinity can bring enormous pressure to bear on boys significantly affecting their performance in school. Similarly, in the UK, expectations for boys to underperform as an aspect of their ‘laddish’ identity can turn into
self-fulfilling prophecies (Arnot and Phipps, 2003). Thus the promotion of gender equity in education will necessitate viewing as discrimination against males, the constant reinforcement of particular dominant masculinities that encourage boys to underperform, to view themselves as socially superior and possibly more powerful than their female peers and to behave in ways that constrain the full participation of female peers in schooling processes.

References


