

## **Negotiating meanings: Gender in international education NGOs**

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### **Introduction**

This paper is based on initial research conducted in international NGOs (INGOs) as part of the global research component of the *Gender, education and global poverty reduction initiatives project*. I hope to identify issues emerging from the first five in depth interviews conducted to date, looking at how the different organisations are engaging with global policy around gender and education and conceptualising issues relating to gender equality and education in contexts of poverty. I will identify different approaches to working on gender equality in education in their institutional practice.

Through this I try to draw out some of the factors that appear to hinder – or enable and support - meaningful institutional engagement with gender, and the successful integration of concerns around gender equality into education programmes, relating these to some of the conceptual ideas that Elaine Unterhalter developed in her book *Gender, Schooling and Global Social Justice*, and that we have developed further through the project.

Gender equality in education has gained increasing prominence in global policy in the last decade through agreements such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the Education For All goals as well as the Beijing Platform for Action on gender equality. The *gender, education and global poverty reduction initiatives project*, is examining initiatives which engage with global aspirations to advance gender equality in and through schooling in contexts of poverty. We are looking at how these are understood, interpreted and acted upon what meanings of gender, education, poverty and global obligation are negotiated. The project is a partnership between the Institute of Education, the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Kenya and Wits and UKZN in South Africa. Case study research is examining how global policy goals are being interpreted and acted upon in 5 different sites in each country.

The research in global institutions that I am doing complements the case study research in Kenya and South Africa. This global research component, was not initially included in the research project. However the influence that international institutions often exert in the global policy arena, as well national and local processes, meant that understanding

the ways in which they interpret and work on issues regarding gender, education and poverty and how they interact with others at different levels was essential to understanding the connections and disjunctures between global, national, regional and local policy and practice regarding gender, education and poverty reduction. Moreover, as a collaborative research team split between Kenya, South Africa and UK we felt that it was important to ensure that our own research focus and methodologies didn't themselves contribute to reproducing vertical (neo-colonial) power relations, by making Kenya and South Africa subjects of our research without also scrutinizing institutions in the North and in the UK. This global research turns the gaze onto Northern based policy makers in global institutions, as they too become the subject of our scrutiny.

### **Methodologies and the interviews conducted so far**

We are still in the early stages of this international research, which will be based on the analysis of policy and operational documents and in-depth semi-structured interviews with key figures within the agencies actively engaged in the **Global Education For All movement**. These include **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) - in particular the INGOs - United Nations Agencies, Bi-lateral donor organisations and multi-laterals such as the World Bank**. We are also interested in organisations that are active in the **global women's movement(s)**: indeed, we are particularly interested in the disconnections that appear to exist between the Education For All movement and the global women's movement(s) and the implications this has for understandings of and practice regarding gender equality in education.

The interviews themselves constitute a process of (self) reflection (and critique) both for the interviewees and the interviewer. They provide a space to discuss and question assumptions and regarding understandings of the concepts themselves, as well as to reflect on the implications of different ways of doing things and individual and institutional practice. One interviewee, who had commented early on in the interview on the need for more self reflection among advocates for education and for gender equality explained,

“...what you have done - I have also been reflecting on these issues too. I was like, “I don't know how I am going to answer these questions” but [the interview] has really helped me reflect”

Around twenty interviews will be conducted over the course of the research, of which six have been completed to date. Five were carried

out in **INGOs or INGO partnerships**. This paper is based on an initial analysis of these interviews.

### **Framing the problem**

Throughout this paper I draw on ideas regarding different approaches to gender and poverty that Elaine Unterhalter developed in her book and which we have used and developed through the project. In her book Unterhalter identifies three different approaches to understanding gender equality in education, which relate to three different conceptions of gender:

- **Gender as a noun** (gender parity – numbers of boys and girls in school);
- **gender as an adjective** (linked to gendered power relations and their intersection with race and class); and
- **gender as a verb** (linked to post-colonial notions of people moving spaces: ‘doing girl’, ‘doing boy’, ‘being girl’, ‘being boy’ – these are different in different spaces, with different meanings).

Through our project we have also tried to apply a similar framework to understandings of poverty:

- **Poverty as a noun:** basic needs – income, hunger/food security
- **Poverty as an adjective:** how you *live* poverty – processes of exclusion, spaces of power
- **Poverty as a verb:** ‘doing poor’ differently in diverse settings

Within the different individual and institutional responses to questions regarding understandings of gender equality in education<sup>1</sup> and the interaction between notions of gender and poverty, participants drew on these different first two views of gender – and poverty - in different, and sometimes, conflicting ways.

However, the emphasis that they put on each and the ways these understandings of gender related to understandings of policy and practice regarding gender equality in education varied considerably between participants. To a large extent the conceptualisations of gender – and poverty – on which they drew in their responses corresponded closely with the different ways in which they viewed particular global initiatives and their relevance for their work.

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<sup>1</sup> These included questions such as “what do you see as the main/most critical issues; what are the links between gender equality and education; what would success – achieving gender equality in education look like”

## **Global frameworks**

### **The MDGs and gender as a noun**

The Millennium Development Goals framework is that within which most of the participants interviewed situate their work – and their understanding of gender.

Three of the participants spoke primarily or entirely about the MDGs when asked about how they related to global policy frameworks. While recognising the limitation of the MDG target regarding gender equality in education – which simply refers to equal numbers of boys and girls in school – or **gender as a noun**, these participants did not see the MDGs as inherently problematic. One commented,

“its pretty clear, it’s a desirable goal, its what we all want”

Where they had concerns these were more focused on implementation, and the difficulties of holding donors and governments to account, rather than with the goals themselves which were seen as useful and desirable – if insufficient.

Perhaps unsurprisingly this (pragmatic) view dominated the responses of those participants who, when asked to articulate their own understandings of gender equality in education, drew largely – or entirely – on a conceptualisation of gender as a noun, and to a lesser extent as an adjective.

One participant primarily focused on issues around access, considering gender (as a noun) simply as a barrier to educational access. This participant recognised that gender was not at the centre of their – or their institution’s analysis.

A concern with gender based on understanding gender as a noun – about counting numbers – was largely understood as being about girls. However, one participant, used their understanding of gender as a noun to express a particular concern with **boys** dropping out of school, arguing that “boys are now the most crucial issue.”

Others, while maintaining a dominant focus on enrolment also spoke of the need to consider the nature of the gendered power relations that keep girls from school in the first place and look “beyond access” to consider conditions within school – suggesting a construction of gender as both a noun and an adjective. – although their primary concern was getting girls in and through school,

“I would not look at access only... I think the major issues for me are retention of girls in school for example. Girls are being enrolled in schools and data is so clear in places who they drop out quickly. And this is not just because they may lack interest... but because the school environment that is not conducive. There are issues about sexual violence”

These participants saw education, gender equality and poverty as closely and intrinsically linked, although, interestingly in their practice they often appear to be treated quite separately. This link seemed to be viewed as automatic: the interconnections between the three issues appeared to be regarded as so self evident that they did not require unpacking or close examination. This was clearly the case for those participants who identified most closely with the MDG framework, and who took a view of gender as a noun.

Gender inequality was seen as a factor that hinders educational participation (especially for girls), and, importantly education was seen as instrumental for making progress on both gender equality and poverty reduction. Poverty referred primarily to concerns with doing well economically (poverty as a noun). One participant explained that

if you address gender and education then that “automatically solves the poverty programme”.

Another commented that,

“you would rarely see an educated women who is not doing economically well.”

**Thinking beyond the MDGs: Gender as a noun, adjective and verb**  
There were however different views.

While working with/within the MDGs framework was the dominant position, two participants expressed considerable concern about the MDGs.

One of the other participants stressed that they identified more closely with frameworks such as CEDAW than the MDGs. They were particularly worried about the time-bound nature of the MDG targets, however they stressed that this was a personal rather than institutional position.

A second – and stronger - dissenting voice argued that, far from being helpful, the MDGs actually “actively undermine” the more substantive Education For All and Beijing Frameworks, which encompass a broader – and more transformative agenda regarding gender and education and education. They were explicitly concerned with the MDGs narrow framing of equality based on gender as noun only:

“The MDGs narrowly focuses on this sort of parity question which is quite limiting and leads to quite sort of instrumentalist interventions rather than things that are committed to a transformation”

They saw the predominance of the MDGs on the global stage as limiting space for engagement with or attention to the wider concerns around gender and education contained within EFA and Beijing as they occupy their “language and territory” and capture donor support and attention.

These more ambivalent views towards the MDG target reflected the participants’ own approaches to gender, which drew on ideas around gender as a noun, adjective and to some extent as a verb.

Both these participants expressed an explicit concern with processes of attitudinal change, discrimination and exclusion and discrimination and the ways in which multiple dimensions of gender inequality are contested or reproduced – seeing education as a space within which these processes occur:

“It’s the actual fact of the power imbalance between males and females and how that is perpetuated in both personal spaces and institutional spaces and then reinforced through legislation, tradition, cultural roles. “

A view of gender as an adjective and a verb as well as a noun also had implications for the way in which issues around not only girls’ education but also boys and masculinities were approached. In contrast to the earlier participant’s analysis based on gender as a noun (which did not pay attention to what boys drop out means in terms of understanding broader gender inequalities within society), the participant most concerned about the MDGs explained:

“I think it’s probably more to do with boys being able to contest. There’s a sort of rejection of the school and it’s an active rejection by boys in some ways, um, which girls are less able to partake in”

Such an analysis, hinging on what “being (or doing) boy” means in particular contexts (gender as a verb), and how this intersects with the persistence of unequal gender power relations (gender as an adjective), leads to quite a different interpretation of boys drop out in certain contexts. It suggests that boys’ drop out and underachievement is an issue of concern is it not associated with gender relations favouring girls or women, but with those that continue to discriminate against girls and women.

This clearly illustrates the way in which how gender is understood leads to different interpretations of the same phenomenon, with very different implications for policy and practice.

This group also viewed the relationship between gender, education and poverty differently. When both education and gender equality were explicitly framed as political rather than simply technical processes involving counting numbers or transferring skills, this (causal) relationship became more complex – though no less strong. One participant explicitly spoke of the need to ensure that education is a transformatory space that enables the transformation of gender relations and the empowerment of girls and women, while acknowledging that this is always – or automatically the case:

“The school should be a space that is stimulating and empowering for girls and in most cases its not.”

This participant recognised that the multiple dimensions of inequality means that transforming gender relations requires making changes at different levels and in different spaces. Education still has a key role to play, but there is a concern with the sort of education – and both poverty and gender equality are explicitly linked to notions of empowerment.

### **The institutionalisation of gender**

To a large extent the different approaches to the MDGs and other global policy frameworks, and the particular understandings of gender that these entail appears to reflect the personal experiences and approaches of the individuals involved, and their own (activist/professional) backgrounds.

However – as emphasised by the participants themselves – in most cases it also reflects the institutional contexts within which they work and the extent to which this encourages or enables them to incorporate gender into their work in a meaningful way and explore broader understandings of gender equality in education. Only one participant appeared to put forward a view that they recognised as being very different to that held at institutional level (although several of the others were not entirely uncritical of their institutions handling of the issues).

The organisations interviewed varied hugely in the extent to which they appear to be taking gender seriously as a central focus of their work, and regarding the approaches they took to working on gender and women and girls' rights. Three different approaches emerge:

- Following the frameworks
- Following the competition
- Focusing on rights

### **Following the frameworks**

All the participants clearly felt quite close to global policy spaces around the MDGs – in clear contrast to the research we have been doing in schools in Kenya and South Africa where there was a clear sense of distance and disconnection from these processes.

One participant – who clearly felt frustration with the lack of a strong gender focus within their organisation - explained the way in which such frameworks framed their work institutionally. This participant – although critical of the MDG framework, stressed that frameworks such as the MDGs were useful to enable them to push gender within their own organisation:

“For me, for the type of work that I do, they are useful because, so for instance, this push on gender and diversity, that we're having within the organisation... The legislation forms a framework that can push us. It can help us engage with government, because governments have agendas they wish to meet... It can help us engage with partners on a more local level, we have a mandate. So I think, in terms of our relationship, in terms of advocacy whether internal or external, they are very useful

Legitimacy to talk about gender issues is therefore tied to the global frameworks themselves rather than work and experience at local level. And institutional interpretations of – and action around - gender are



restricted to the notion of parity contained within the MDGs - **gender as a noun**.

### **Following the competition**

Linked to this was the way in which participants from the same organisation explained how their organisation was influenced by the work of agencies perceived as being their competitors. One explains how they can use the reports of another agency to push gender in their own work.

Such comments appear indicative of the “corporatisation”, or “marketization” of international aid institutions. In a market based approach gender is embraced when it is viewed as necessary in order to enhance the work and image of the institution vis-à-vis competitors rather than because of a belief in the importance of working on gender issues, or because of bottom-up pressure from partners or beneficiaries.

The view held by one participant that gender is about “technical expertise” (rather than a political process) also reflects such an approach. So too does the acknowledgement that gender is taken more seriously if an instrumental argument can be used to link it to poverty reduction:

I use the rhetoric myself I know if I talk about poverty reduction within the organisation it's more likely to get a space and I then can link gender into that

Such a market based institutional approach clearly gives certain leverage to “gender champions” to push gender within the organisation. However, the experiences of these participants would seem to suggest it does not support a deeper and engagement with gender issues that goes beyond considerations of **gender as a noun** and limited **interventions** focused on girls' education.

Attempts to *mainstream* or institutionalise gender are fragile and unsustainable. They are dependent on the “market whims”, available *technical* expertise and the efforts of one or two poorly supported “gender champions” within the organisation.

This is reinforced by a recognised lack of links to women's organisations, hierarchical structures that do not facilitate efforts to build bottom-up processes that support gender equality, and very low levels of financial investment in gender focused work and personnel.

This form of institutional functioning, and its impact on the way in which gender is addressed and thought about appeared to be more or less present in most the organisations involved – and the participants were actively aware of it - concerns about it emerged in different ways in the responses of most.

### **Focusing on rights**

However, there were indications of attempts to embed gender more deeply within institutional structures – and these corresponded to understandings of gender as a noun, adjective and verb, and to more active engagement with global policy frameworks beyond the MDGs (Beijing, EFA)

One participant spoke positively about the efforts their organisation had made to really take gender seriously. This corresponded with moves to make the organisation more Southern, and less Northern based had entailed a decision to move beyond simply “mainstreaming” gender to frame work explicitly around women and girls’ rights, accompanied by the investment of considerable financial and human resources in women’s rights work.

There were clear efforts to build links and work more closely with women’s organisations, and attempt to build bridges between work on women’s rights and work on education.

However, in practice this has not always been easy and it is clear that tensions remain within the organisation and with partners, particularly around different understandings of gender, equality and women’s rights and what they mean for education projects:

“Underneath the discourse around girls’ education, what we are trying to transform, there are some people who are keen to have girls go to school and stay in school so that they become better housewives. And there are others who want girls to go to school so that they can actually transform society and the danger is that this sort of access to schooling for girls is seen in a sort of utilitarian way... its not about the girls themselves.”

In some cases at country level programme directors and others have used the argument that gender is Western imposition to resist a stronger focus on women’s rights. Viewing women’s rights as central to human

rights, and therefore establishing it as a “non-negotiable” within the organisation has been one response to this.

Such an approach has clearly not yet reached its full potential. However it clearly gets much closer to moving beyond isolated interventions for girls education towards attempting to ***institute*** rights.

To some extent there are also moves towards embracing processes of critique and ***interaction*** to support capability expansion, by building links and reaching out to women’s organisations. However there have clearly been difficulties with successfully engaging all stakeholders *within* the organisation in constructive dialogue.

### **Top down and bottom up**

For all the participants leadership from the top of the organisation clearly had an important impact at promoting – or hindering – effective action around gender equality. Where it had been possible to make progress on establishing gender as an important issue within the organisation – including within education programming, strong leadership from the top was cited as important in all but one case – even in the organisation where progress had been most difficult. Conversely, when it had been difficult to progress, reluctance at the level of headquarters was seen as important. One participant explained how this resistance was not always direct – gender is not rejected outright - rather it is “very passive” resistance whereby resources and attention are simply not invested in gender initiatives as they are not seen as a priority. They explained that this form of passive resistance is the hardest to tackle, as, it is difficult to engage with it, challenge it openly, or enter into a debate – as can be done more effectively with much of the resistance to gender (as outside and imposed, or as differently understood) at country level.

Establishing gender as an institutional priority often then appears to be quite a top-down process – from the local to the global – though one participant suggested in their organisation that the reverse was true. In general however ensuring that work around gender, and different, local understandings of gender relations and their links to poverty and education are not only engaged with and support but are also able to “bubble up” to the global appears to have been more difficult.

Facilitating these bottom up processes and discussion around different meanings and interpretations of gender equality –may be an essential component of embedding gender within organisations in a way that is both meaningful and sustainable in the long term. Building links with

women's organisations and activists at local as well as national and global levels as well as consolidating intra-organisational horizontal links between teams is likely to be an important part of doing this (involves recognising gender as political not just technical).

### **Some initial conclusions**

The interviews – and the differences they reveal between both individuals and institutional approaches – for me have been very interesting. The participants involved are active in many of the same spaces through collective fora and campaigns such as the global campaign for education. Yet they clearly differ considerably in terms of their approaches – both to the issues themselves and the extent to which they feel able and supported to engage with different global frameworks and meanings of gender, and the implications that this has for serious and sustained engagement with gender equality in education and its links to poverty.

There appears to be a spectrum from “market-led” approaches to those based on a more political commitment to gender and women's rights – but this is not clear cut and often individuals draw on aspects of both in explaining their own and institutional approaches.

It appears that fragmented efforts to incorporate gender as a noun into education work – as the result of “market pressure” – can be successful in bringing about programmes or interventions for girls' education – focused on getting girls in school.

However more sustained processes of institutionalisation and interaction around gender equality require a more nuanced approach to gender as a noun, verb and adjective, recognising gender and education as political processes, investing seriously in gender/women's rights, with strong leadership, and, importantly opening processes of collaboration, critique, dialogue and debate both within and outside the organisation.