

## **UKFIET Keynote**

### **Education policy in hard times: the politics of gender, justice and hope**

**Elaine Unterhalter**

Thank you very much for the invitation to give this talk. It has particular significance for me as I feel an important part of the scholarship on gender, education and development has been nurtured by the Oxford conference over many years and I very much appreciate an opportunity to talk about some of this in a plenary.

Sir Sonny Ramphal opened the conference with some comments on progress and I want to use this plenary to look critically at the idea. In the current conjuncture of hard times, crisis or tipping point there is much to suggest progress is an idea whose time has gone. We are in the tunnel at the end of the light.

In the past year there have been acute crises in food, fuel and finance, each marked by gender injustice. We add these to other familiar crises of millions of children out of school or learning little within, dizzying numbers of teachers to be recruited and enormous challenges of sustaining those at work. Here too there is much gender inequality. Over the last year severe contraction in growth in the world economy has thrown millions out of work and will inhibit the growth of new jobs and improvements in conditions. Women make up only 40.5% of the labour force in non-agricultural wage employment. Because they have less access to secure employment the recession is likely to hit hard. In some countries, the sectors in which women have worked – retail, tourism and manufacture in Export Processing Zones – have been more heavily hit by unemployment than the sectors in which men work, such as construction and mining. Women predominate in informal and casual wage employment and self employment, and make up a significant proportion of the underpaid and undertrained para-teachers. For all these workers earnings are low and safety nets are less likely .

Women played a prominent part in the protests that highlighted the food crisis in 2008. 70 percent of economically active women in low-income, food-deficit counties are employed in agriculture and play a pivotal role in growing, processing, and preparing food. Women as agricultural producers face specific challenges and constraints, including lack of access to agricultural inputs and secure titles to land. Often this impacts on their capacity to keep children in schools. Increases in food and fuel prices last year literally took food out of poor women's mouths, and days in school away from children. The drying rivers and the longer seasons of drought have particular effects with regard to women's work on the land and care work within households.

In hard times gender inequalities in work and the family look set to increase, but in terms of access to schooling, politics and policy has secured some decline in inequality. With data from the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report, I calculated that in 2000 nearly a billion people worldwide had little or no schooling. These comprised out of school children, those who failed to complete 5 years of primary school or were over 15 and classified illiterate. 66% were women

and girls. 2006 data indicates 931 million people have little or no schooling. The proportion of women and girls is now 62%. Clearly this is progress, but of what kind?

The aspiration for gender equality in education has been written into Constitutions and is routinely evident in policy documents. Most teachers and civil servants working in education departments in 4 countries I have recently worked (SA, Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria) acknowledge it is important. Nonetheless, a considerable body of literature documents continuing difficulties in achieving gender equality in and through education, despite the near universal advocacy of the ideal. The persistently large proportion of women without education, well paid employment, secure assets or adequate levels of political representation confirms this. Why is gender inequality in education so pervasive? How does it interact with other inequalities such as race and class? What insights can current discussions of gender and justice bring to a critical examination of the education policies that articulate a commitment to gender equality, but find this so difficult to enact?

To examine some of the difficulties between aspiration and achievement in gender equality in education, I want to look critically at the idea of progress. The affinity between the idea of education and the idea of progress are pretty evident, tied in with vectors in the relationship of adults and children and forms of society that we wish to flourish. Partly for this reason early 20th century women's rights activists, such as Charlotte Maxeke and Olive Schreiner in South Africa, were also campaigners for women's education, seeing this as crucial to secure women competence to participate in a male world of politics and employment. But four generations on, associating gender equality with ideas of education and progress is much more problematic in theory and practice. Partly, I think, this is because of considerable ambiguity in understandings of the idea of progress.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea that progress is redemptive has been propagated widely. The notion that human action can change the world for the better is very different from cyclical ideas of change articulated in many societies before that date, where any small improvements at a particular time were believed to be followed by a long downward curve. The 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of progress linked together science, widening political participation, and concerns with improved living conditions. But it did not of itself contain a commitment one way or another to gender equality. However, some very powerful appropriations of these ideas drew on a theological assumption about human action for redemption. Through this the political idea of equality as something we can teach, learn and practice started to gain a wide currency. The campaign against slavery is a good example. Many slaves, cruelly forced into brutal conditions in America and the Caribbean, took from Christianity and Judaism the idea that all people were of equal worth and an enslaved people would one day be free. Progress could be made by humans. It is no accident that the commitment to progress to end slavery was quickly connected all around the world to a concern to end the denial of rights to women. These were worlds that could be made. The song of African American slaves ran 'This train is bound for glory'. Sojourner Truth's powerful abolitionist speech pointed out 'I have heard the bible and learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again'

Aspects of these ideas are powerfully expressed in our 21<sup>st</sup> century striving to make the world

better through the MDGs or EFA, or a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Education, which carries ideas of personal transformation and fulfilment, is a natural instrument to effect aspiration. Women's education and gender equality have considerable prominence both in the MDG indicators, the EFA goals and the Beijing Platform of Action on women's rights.

But there are at least two orientations to how one understands this front seat on the progress train given to gender equality in education. In shorthand, I'll call these the intrinsic women's rights version and the instrumental social stability version. In the women's rights version, gender equality in education enhances women's rights and wider social mobilization to redress poverty and inequality and promote the empowerment of women. In the social stability version, gender equality in education is not about women and girls themselves, but a form of social vaccine or contraception to secure other development goals, such as population reduction, children's survival, economic growth and better functioning institutions. In the women's rights version the content and organization of schooling are important, while in the social stability version 'getting girls in' to school takes priority regardless of the conditions they encounter within school and beyond.

But reading history only in terms of this redemptive idea of progress, has its counterpoint. Much fine-grained work has documented the mixed blessings and indeed costs or illusions of progress. Working with research teams in four African countries, I have heard some teachers, school management committees, and government officials say that poor parents do not want progress. They do not want to educate daughters and sometimes are reluctant to school sons. Parents who take children out of school are portrayed as ignorant, burdened down with religion or culture, or neglectful of children's needs. Parents themselves talk about aspirations for schooling but pressures to take children out of school because of costs, struggle for livelihood and the brutal impacts of chance events like illness, unemployment, official failures to share information or deliver adequate provision. The illusion of progress is thus sometimes presented as a failure of understanding of those furthest from its goals. This perception of a barrier between those who are for and against gender equality in education, and thus implicitly progress itself, because of poverty or some notion of culture or a lack of training is deeply problematic. It entails a politics of blame, rather than building conditions in which differences and exclusions can be critically discussed.

Another version of the idea of progress as illusory is generally not expressed by women, but still has considerable currency. Here education is bad for women because it destroys happiness, most appropriately achieved through motherhood and life at home. While for many women family life and the experience of motherhood is a source of joy, not all women want or can have this experience. The idea of motherhood as some kind of zero-sum game of essentialised identity set against access to education, a free mind or a secure livelihood is troubling. In 2002 James Tooley published the *Miseducation of Women* arguing that women sacrifice domestic happiness for education and career. Equality feminism, he wrote, forces women to study maths and science, when that isn't what their brains are good at. It should be halted and instead the choices of men and women, whatever these may be, are to be applauded. In a similar vein a colleague in Tanzania has questioned whether girls entering and progressing through school brings contentment. He contrasts his own life, with a late marriage due to many years of work on his PhD and a move from his home to the capital, with that of a woman he knew at school.

She remained in their village and now has the respect of grown-up children and grandchildren. In these versions of the illusion of progress, formal education does not bring a woman happiness or contentment, (although it does bring the male professors a high income and status). What neither account considers is what conditions of inequality characterise the decisions of the women and men concerned.

A more extreme version of the idea of progress as illusion is in the backlash of violence against women seen as 'too educated' or 'too out of place', sometimes accompanied by attacks on the men who support them. For a long time I considered it a perplexing contradiction that South Africa has both a very high proportion of well-educated women, many in senior positions politically and economically and some of the highest documented levels of violence against women in the world. But Catherine Odora Hoppers has suggested these might be connected. Women's progress through education or political struggle elicits the antagonism of some men to that success. Sometimes that anger is expressed in violence to teach women not to cross boundaries or talk back.

Sometimes the view is advanced that progress is illusory because if women or girls advance educationally or economically they do so at the expense of men or boys. There is only one cake and if girls do well in examinations, it somehow *causes* boys to do badly; if women gain employment, however poorly paid or insecure their jobs might be, or however few women may rise to senior positions, it takes work away from men. The idea that girls and boys are competing *with each other* for educational success or livelihoods importantly puts on the table the complexities of class and race and the form of education provision. My own educational biography highlights how white middle class South African women in the 1970s had opportunities denied many black women and men of the same background, or accessed with much greater levels of struggle. And doors never opened for women and men of our generation whose lives were marked by the race and class discrimination of the time. In societies with histories of social division and power struggles over resources, progress in education or any other sphere may indeed be illusory, if it is not accompanied by attention to a more substantive notion of equality. Thus, policy affirmations in South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria of equal opportunity to complete school and for the talented to go to university do not look at the huge inequalities between schools in terms of levels of teacher qualification and commitment to sustain children's learning, the language divisions, the levels at which parents can support children to learn, given other household obligations and insecurities, and the forms of discrimination children will encounter within education institutions. The gender dynamics of families and schools throw up perverse effects, which sometimes lead policy makers to conclude gender isn't an issue because girls are in school and many boys are not (in some areas in South Africa) or girls do well in examinations (in some areas in Tanzania and Kenya). A conclusion can be drawn from this that progress is illusory, but it is a conclusion that does not look deep enough at the gender power relations at play. At the level of a particular school or work-place the success of a woman might be achieved at the cost to a man, but micro cases do not give us insight into the range of gender relations in the society.

Here is one last version of progress as illusion. Numbers of girls and boys enrolled and progressing through various stages of education have increased considerably since the 1960s, whatever the significant problems of assembling statistics, delivering quality or disaggregating

down to local levels. This is one of the great social revolutions of our time. In 1965 the primary GER for girls in the Arab states was 41% and now is 92%; comparable figures for boys are 71% in 1965 and 102% in 2006. In Africa primary GER in 1965 was 37% for girls, and in 2006 89%; for boys it was 56% in 1965 and 101% in 2006. But expansion of opportunities in education does not translate into other equalities. In only a handful of countries do women and men earn the same amounts over a lifetime; in only a tiny number is there anything like equal numbers of women and men in decision-making bodies, and in a number of countries the gender gaps in health provision are startling. Violence against women is widespread and often normalized, not named or recognized. However, taking some of the most evident violent actions, it is estimated one in every five women worldwide will experience violence in her lifetime, sometimes resulting in serious injury or death. What is the reason for these long-standing inequalities? Do women collude with the illusion of progress and choose lower paid and more insecure work, despite educational achievements? Do women refuse to participate in decision-making for a range of reasons linked to different personal and political priorities? Or do everyday practices of work or political participation operate with legal frameworks and contours of ownership to exclude and undermine? While we cannot generalise for all women or men and all aspects of the political economy or socio-cultural formations, it is evident that the illusion of progress merits serious political and policy work. Achieving gender justice with intrinsic benefit to girls and boys, will not happen just because enrolments increase. A critical view of progress requires considerable socio-cultural and politico-economic understanding of gender, the value of education and the complexities of substantive notions of equality.

I now come to a third way in which I think we can understand progress. In this version progress is a form of bargain with the past to try to do better for the future. It is unlike the redemptive version of progress where the ideal drives forward and matters, regardless of the context or the responses elicited. It is also unlike aspects of the illusory idea of progress which suggests particular essential ideas of women and men and does not consider how these themselves are manifestations of social conditions. In this version of progress, what is required is both an understanding of the conditions in which change is to be effected and some of the reasons why it is valuable. Robin Alexander yesterday skillfully took apart the 'what works' approach to school effectiveness. I want to contrast that with a notion of progress where what works is associated with what matters and progress is our realization of this. This position on progress is probably the most difficult to work with requiring an understanding of the complexity of history and locale, engaging a discussion of gender that talks to changes in public institutions, private relations of family, and the question of sexuality.

In Kenya a substantial education aid package has overarching goals for advancing gender equity. The expansion of provision of primary and secondary education are popular policies but the implementation of gender equity in practice at all levels from the Ministry, through districts down to school level leaves much to be desired. There is not enough money, knowledge, support, time or status to be gained from paying attention to gender. There are not enough fine-grained ways to measure gender. At a rhetorical policy level there is a commitment to progress, but at an institutional level or in the social relations of delivering education, the persistence of gender inequality is explained by lack of resources, the choices of parents, or the difficulties of partnerships with NGOs. But these are only part of the story. In addition the gendered history of colonialism and the formation of the post-colonial state, the gendered effects of structural

adjustment and the position of women's activism in the struggle against this are all part of the explanation for these difficulties. One of the problems of concern with *education* policy and progress is its lack of attention to this wider canvas of gender and political economy. In thinking about progress as a bargain, I think what is entailed is a very personal form of discussion examining the past (global, national, and local) and values for the future, some critical review of why change is difficult and what actions against injustice could be taken. In training teachers and administrators to take forward the MDGs or EFA or the Beijing vision we do not go deep enough into the very personal and historically grounded level of knowledge and reflection needed to think about this form of progress or develop practice.

Some recent work by Amartya Sen on justice has been helpful in trying to appreciate the problem of progress. Sen is critical of what he terms transcendental ideas of justice (such as those of prominent political philosophers like Rawls or Kant). These are universalist and entail specifications of perfectly just social arrangements. Indeed the notion of progress as 'glory', a perfectly just set of ideals, might be one such idea. Sen argues that a considerable problem for proponents of positions on what constitutes justice is that they do not consider, for example, that equality in one area, let us say gender equality in education (which is expensive) may not be consonant with value in another area, possibly aggregated expansion of economic growth. Various formulae are advanced to balance these difficulties, such as the notion of social contract or Rawls' two principles of justice, but these do not of themselves explain why some arguments about a just society are better than others or how feasible the implementation of justice might be. Advocating gender equality in education as a principle of progress does not in itself answer the criticisms from the perspective that progress is an illusion, which is partly a critique about alternate values and partly a comment on the feasibility of implementation. The argument that the benefits of women's education are problematic does not address the question of how we can overcome the problem and reduce the educational, political and economic injustices of women and men. Sen's argument is about the importance of developing comparative assessments between different alternatives through public discussion. He points to the well-meaning rhetoric associated with a call for global justice without appropriate institutions to give this effect, and goes on to set out a framework for his comparative approach. This entails a focus on the choices that are actually on offer, the plurality of principles and interpretations that may be in play, the permissibility of partial resolutions, a stress on public reasoning and attention to assessing human lives in terms of capabilities, that is reasoned values and the significance of agents.

I want to look at Sen's contribution from three perspectives. Firstly for how it helps illuminate the notion of progress as a compact with history, secondly how his insights regarding comparative assessments of justice chime with some contemporary discussion of comparative education, and thirdly how it helps throw light on some of the debate about cosmopolitanism.

Thinking about progress on gender equality and education as a compact with history entails going beyond the rhetoric of global and national declarations to substantive institutional and individual change. Sen's realization focused comparative approach suggests a number of ways to do this. If we think about South Africa what choices are on offer regarding gender equality in education and how can these be expanded? South Africa has good levels of gender parity in enrolments and attainment, partly because of some expansion of education provision associated with the politics of apartheid and partly because of significant policy changes and investment in

infrastructure since 1994, but this is very poorly and unequally distributed. Within race and class structures capabilities are unequal and unequally realized as functionings. In a number of areas women teachers seeking promotion to senior positions face considerable difficulties, partly because of the importance of local associations of patronage and power with their own gender dynamics. Within many schools an everyday taken-for-granted sexism reproduces assumptions about appropriate sexual behaviour, who does the cleaning, and who is responsible for poverty and care. Confronting this culture of inequality requires enormous courage and talent. There are robust constitutional commitments and considerable resources *do* exist to support change for gender equality, but they are not always used. In each province, provincial gender officers could be important allies in local struggles over gender equality and challenging sexism at school level, but they do not take this remit. A vocal women's movement, with an important reach to young women could have an expanded range of action around education, but for historical reasons has not worked much in this area. Data from a number of research projects I have worked on over the past 9 years suggests the institutional resources do not connect with everyday practice. Gender equality in education is sometimes understood as a problem with boys' underachievement, sometimes as the need to make the same provision for boys and girls. Although a wider notion of gender inequalities beyond school is frequently outlined, this is not linked with concrete policies or politics. Indeed few forums exist to examine different interpretations. The rhetoric of progress often obscures opportunities for deeper discussion, examination of presuppositions and their histories. Moreover existing approaches to measuring gender equality or inequality in schooling are very attenuated. They are not considered together with measurements in relation to decision-making or other aspects of socio-economic flourishing. Achievement by girls in one space, say exam results, obscures lack of achievement in others. But making comparative assessments in missing dimensions would allow us to consider gender questions of enrolment or exam success in relation to other capabilities, how these have changed over time and what is important to measure for the future. Progress is thus about linking policies and politics with comparative assessments of what matters and translating this into what can be realized.

How does Sen's notion of comparison resonate with trends in comparative education and education for international development as fields of scholarship relating to gender equality? League tables have been used to present rankings of one country that does better than another in examination results or skill formation for girls or boys. This assumes a kind of perfect importance about mathematical ability or the link between education and employment. Comparative education has also been noted for highly contextualized studies, for example of how schooling reproduces gendered exclusions from curriculum or constraints on access to higher education or the labour market. But this work often does not ask what alternatives are feasible. Interesting work on the translations and transformations entailed in the movement between aspiration and realization appear to raise the same range of issues Sen does. What translations or transformations take place in the move from the ideal to the feasible? Is a particular arrangement or movement from one context to another more just or equal? Are better or similar actions against injustice enjoined and realized in this movement?

Lastly, what light can the practice of comparative assessment and the experience of work in comparative education and international development throw on the notion of cosmopolitanism portrayed as a form of progress to counter unilateral US power and provide a normative and

institutional frame for ideas about equality. Some writers, eg Habermas and Held argue for a cosmopolitan institutional order to be achieved through reform of existing architecture of the UN and other global bodies. The current campaign to establish a well resourced gender entity within the UN system indicates this is not empty theorizing. An institutional arrangement to leverage change towards gender equality is envisaged, that would enable efforts to go beyond minimal provision of contraception or school places for girls. But a different thread in the argument about cosmopolitanism acknowledges the multivocality of discussions about global democracy. Chantal Mouffe, for example, suggests that insistence on global constitutionalism will overlook the politics that divides us and this politics is sharp if one looks at issues we are concerned with such as gender, education or poverty. For Mouffe failure to acknowledge the hegemonic processes at work globally limits the possibilities of counter-hegemonic projects. Using my schematization, one could say the Habermas/Held position on a reformed global order presents the notion of progress as ideal, while the Mouffe critique says this is illusion. Does the third version of progress as a bargain with history take us any further in thinking about global justice and gender equality in education? Does connecting that bargain with the process of comparative assessment linking what matters with what works through a realization focused approach allow us to acknowledge politics, but give politics itself some multidimensionality so that counter-hegemonic projects are not only framed discursively, but also engage with practice, evaluation, agency and expanding capability space. While currently there is only fragmentary agreement on what gender equality in education looks like and much persistent reproduction of inequalities, we could think about cosmopolitanism in terms of some global deliberation on what gender equality in education is, why it is valuable, not only in particular locales but for all inhabitants of the planet, what is feasible and why in terms of resources, social relations, institution building, the processes of deliberation and making assessments. I think this encapsulates something of Sen's idea of realization focused comparison. For those of us who teach or research in support of a MDG, EFA or Beijing agenda we have considerable opportunities to begin just such a discussion.

Over the past 20 years we have achieved an enormous amount in expanding education provision and registering the significance of gender, class and race equality. But globally the substantive equalities we link with progress have not been attained. The hard times we live in are partly material and partly a socio-cultural denial of the importance of substantive gender equality. I have tried to link hope of gender equality in education not to impossible dreams or their imperfect practical realization, but rather to a reasoned set of assessments, the critical examination of values through politics and policies, and actions for gender equality in education each of us could take. We actually have the methodologies for this, but we probably need to build stronger networks with teachers, campaigners and administrators as part of a bargain for progress grounded in reflections on practice.

In 1981 in South Africa, in one of the darkest times of apartheid a group of women's organizations came together in Cape Town to develop a discussion about gender equality. This meeting of the United Women's Organization was addressed by an activist from the 1950s and 1960s, Dora Tamane, who had worked in non-formal education. She was 81, blind and in a wheel chair and she urged the meeting to think about gender and equality with the words 'We opened the door for you, you must go forward.' In thinking about progress in hard times I suggest it is important to understand the doors in our tunnels, who or what might open them and

why we want to go forward.