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The Dialectic between Global Gender Goals and Local Empowerment: girls' education in Southern Sudan and South Africa

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ABSTRACT The start of the Education for All (EFA) movement ushered in a new era in education, an era linked to research on issues such as 'global governance' or the 'world institutionalization of education'. This global governance not only affects the way in which educational systems are influenced, it also involves how we view and define various issues within education. One of the major goals of the EFA movement, which has been accepted as part of the global consensus of 'what works', is the focus on gender equality, and in particular on the role education can play in empowering women and girls. This article is an attempt to understand key issues related to gender and education, and in particular the objective is to provide a critical analysis of how the global consensus in relation to gender and empowerment can be understood in a local context. The data reported on here are from fieldwork conducted in Southern Sudan and South Africa, and in this article we attempt to shed light on the local realities in relation to global gender goals.

Introduction

In a recent article, Tröhler (2010) argues:

> In the past two or three decades we have been witnessing an ongoing worldwide assimilation of the different national educational systems. This process has been promoted by international organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund investing millions of dollars in the school systems of poorer countries on the condition that organizational structures and governance systems that proved to be successful in the rich countries are implemented. The effects of this global governance are quite tangible.

Several critics of the global governance agenda described above suggest that we may be witnessing a kind of 'world institutionalization of education' (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) between unequal partners. Linked to the idea of global governance in education, it is argued that the Education for All (EFA) movement has brought about a 'consensus about 'what works' among bilateral and

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multilateral development agencies' (Mundy, 2006, p. 24). This global consensus forms a kind of discourse about education, which in turn can influence local policies and possibly even local practice. The result may not be an international model of education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), but instead a global consensus envisioned as a form of guidance or advice for policy-makers, practitioners and consumers of education. One of the key issues found within the EFA movement, and something that has been accepted as part of the global consensus of 'what works', is the emphasis on gender equality within education, otherwise referred to in this article as 'global gender goals', given that the theme of gender is a central issue in the EFA, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other global development agendas. This emphasis has, however, mainly focused on the quantitative aspects of gender – namely, gender parity. Accordingly, we currently have significant knowledge about the causes and consequences of the low participation rates for girls and young women in education, with much of the research data consisting of evidence collected through large-scale quantitative studies focusing on the numbers of girls in school (Colclough et al, 1998; Wiseman, 2008). Additionally, a considerable amount of research has focused mainly on access to education and to some degree on retention (King & Hill, 1993; Brock & Cammish, 1997; Colclough et al, 1998; Swainson et al, 1998; Baker & Wiseman, 2009). There have, however, been few studies that have taken a more in-depth qualitative approach to examining the local realities of the school environment, the community or the girls themselves, with a focus on empowerment in education.

Accordingly, in this article we aim to look inside the national systems of education in Southern Sudan and South Africa by attempting to understand and deconstruct these relatively new modes of educational governance. Our particular focus is on global gender education initiatives (the global gender goals), which, in the absence of formal, legal authority in national education systems, can be seen as influencing state policies and possibly local practice. It is not our intention here to focus in depth on state policies; instead, we take the global gender goals as our point of departure. Furthermore, we attempt to shed light on the realities of education for girls in Southern Sudan and South Africa.

It is the social aspects that are of particular importance in this article. In light of the discussion above, this article will reflect on how women and girls (and our particular focus is on girls) are viewed in the development process, particularly in relation to education. The article is an attempt to understand the key issues related to gender and education as part of a larger research project entitled Gender Equality, Education and Poverty (GEEP). The ways in which gender issues are understood globally, and which can then affect how they are dealt with locally, depends on how gender equality and equity in education are understood at the grassroots level and how the consequences of this are assessed. To carry out such an assessment, we take a post-structuralist approach to the issue. This approach examines the construction of meaning and power relationships as they affect contemporary educational decisions (cf. Harrington et al, 2008). It seeks to identify and expose biases that marginalize the educational needs of women and contribute to educational disparities for this population. Additionally, a post-structuralist perspective seeks to develop new knowledge for understanding gender differences. This kind of approach provides a different way of understanding gender and assessing inequality (Harrington et al, 2008) beyond a mere focus on numbers. It is also important to note that, given space limitations, it is not possible for us to go deeper into a discussion of the definitions of gender equality and equity here (cf. Holmarsdottir, forthcoming 2011); however, it is important that these issues are kept in mind. Related to the issue of gender equality and equity is the concept of empowerment, which we will use as an analytical tool. However, before turning our attention to the theoretical framework, it is important to provide the reader with a brief background of Southern Sudan and South Africa.

The Context

Both the Sudan (particularly Southern Sudan) and South Africa have experienced human oppression, but women have been especially vulnerable. In South Africa women were identified as those who were most seriously affected by the apartheid system. Under apartheid, women were subjected to a trifecta of oppression-type classifications: as women and on the grounds of both

'race' and social class. By adopting the principles of a patriarchal society, the apartheid system accentuated the subjection of women.

In the Sudan, the role of women is no less fragile than it was during apartheid. The civil war in Sudan, which has lasted almost half a century, has had a devastating effect on women and girls; this has particularly been the case in Southern Sudan, which is the reason for the specific focus on this region in the article. However, this does not suggest that women and girls are also not marginalized in other parts of Sudan. As a result of the war, only about two per cent of girls in Southern Sudan complete primary school, and the majority of girls who begin primary school end up dropping out after the first few years due to, among other things, early marriage, pressure to contribute to household chores and income (AET & UNICEF, 2002). Likewise, only seven per cent of all teachers are female, and many families are not comfortable with sending their girls to school where boys significantly outnumber girls (UNICEF & GoSS, 2006). During the war torture, murder, rape and enslavement were common. Moreover, the under-development and inequalities in traditional power structures have left the women of particularly Southern Sudan in a precarious position, suffering from some of the poorest material conditions in the world (UNDP, 2007).

While Sudan has a long way to go in terms of achieving gender equality in education - one of the main EFA and MDG goals - South Africa, on the other hand, has reached numerical gender equality. Although numerically South Africa has made great progress in achieving gender equality in terms of education, the picture becomes much more complex if we attempt to look at the construction of meaning (the discourses around gender issues) and power relationships that still exist despite the end of apartheid. Hence, a global assumption that an equal number of girls in school leads to empowerment and gender equity within society may not necessarily be correct in the South African context, a context in which we find high levels of sexual violence reported in schools (Petersen, 2007).

The comparison of Sudan, and particularly Southern Sudan, with South Africa in terms of gender equality is seen as important not only because South Africa provides an example of a successful policy in terms of gender parity; given the assumptions noted above, an analysis of South Africa may also shed light on the paradox that exists in terms of the 'global gender goals' and the often expected outcomes in terms of empowerment.

Conceptual Framework

As a framework for understanding the data to be reported on here, we argue that the concept of empowerment is of key importance. In order to understand empowerment, we will also explore the structure of power in general and link this to issues of social justice. Finally, we will review different forms of power.

It is recognized that the term 'empowerment' has become widely used in development rhetoric. While Stromquist (1993) traces the origin of the concept back to the United States civil rights movement in the 1950s to 1960s, Brock-Utne (2000), on the other hand, suggests that empowerment was coined to be applied in the mid-1970s, with the background of the legal and cultural inequalities caused by gender.

A number of development organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) use the term as a goal within their agendas. Some even claim that the term has become a 'buzzword' used by both governmental and NGOs as a toll to secure financial funding (Cornwall & Brock, 2005). The term 'empowerment' is used in areas as diverse as business management and labour unions, education, health care and ecology, although not necessarily concerning the concept of power acquisition. Due to the different areas of use and the different contextual frameworks, one specific definition of empowerment has yet to be set. Nevertheless, Stromquist (1993, p. 13) proposes a definition focusing on a 'process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society'. McWhirter (1991) offers yet another definition, which Rowlands (1997) uses to illustrate how empowerment works in the context of social work and education; it is:

> the *process* by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of
> the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for
> gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing

upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community. (McWhirter, 1991, p. 224, emphasis original)

McWhirter (1991) distinguishes between the 'situation of empowerment', where all four criteria are met, and 'an empowering situation', where one or more of the conditions are in place or are being developed.

Similar to McWhirter (1991), Stromquist (1993) sets four dimensions to fully comprehend the concept of empowerment: cognitive, psychological, political and economic. The cognitive component supports the notion that empowerment is both a process and a product, since it includes several steps of awareness and understanding.

The second dimension is psychological, which entails that women develop feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Stromquist, 1993). This self-worth and self-esteem provides women and girls with the power to act at personal and societal levels to improve their condition. In addition, this means the formation of the belief that they can succeed in their efforts to bring about change. However, self-esteem and confidence of one's self-worth is not something that a person can be taught or given; it must come from within the woman herself, although the conditions must be provided for these feelings to develop.

The third and fourth dimensions emphasized by Stromquist (1993) are of an economic and political nature (cf. Ekne, 2010). If one or more of these dimensions are present then, according to McWhirter (1991), the situation can be empowering. Consequently, Stromquist (1993) argues that all four dimensions need to be met in order for real empowerment to be evident. However, given that our data focus on young girls, and given their age, economic and political empowerment may still be out of their reach, but they may still experience an empowering situation (McWhirter, 1991). Moreover, Rowlands (1997) states that some of the confusion around empowerment arises because the root concept 'power' is itself disputed.

The Composition of Power

Power has been the subject of discussion for centuries, from Hobbes and Machiavelli to Foucault and Giddens, and it is found within many spheres. Within development discourse, a view of 'development as westernization' has come to dominate, and often the 'power over' aspect of empowerment is present. A classic example of this use of 'power over' can be seen with initiatives made in the West, by people in the West, and by people in the West implementing these initiatives upon people in the South. Although with the best intentions at heart and the goal of empowering, for example, underprivileged women in Africa, the mistake many western NGOs have made is to implement initiatives in the South that perhaps are more suited to a western context (cf. Brock-Utne, 2000). In turn, this means that power is something that can be bestowed by one person upon another. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that if power can be bestowed upon a person, it can as easily be taken away (Rowlands, 1997). It is this power over in terms of the global agenda that we attempt to highlight in this article. In particular, we are asking if we are witnessing a kind of power over in terms of the gender focus in education.

To understand the different ways to conceptualize power, Rowlands (1997) distinguishes between four forms of power:

– *Power over*: Controlling power, which may be responded to with compliance, resistance or manipulation.
– *Power to*: Generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation), which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.
– *Power with*: A sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together.
– *Power from within*: The spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extends, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13)

By looking at the aspects of 'power to', 'power with' and 'power from within', one understands power more as a process, seeing empowerment in a different light than with 'power over'. Thus,

'power to', 'power with' and 'power from within' can be seen as related to the concept of agency. One aspect of power to is a kind of leadership that comes from wanting to see a group achieve to the full extent of its 'capabilities' (cf. Sen, 1999), where there is no conflict of interest and that the group has set its own collective agenda (Rowlands, 1997). Kelly (1992, cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 12) argues: 'I suspect it is "power to" that the term empowerment refers to, and it is achieved by increasing one's ability to resist and challenge "power over".' Furthermore, it is argued that empowerment can also be seen as linked to the idea of equity or justice. Teehankee (2007) argues that justice is a 'contested concept that evokes varied claims to fairness, equality, impartiality and appropriate rewards or punishments'. Furthermore, he argues that there are three liberal conceptions of justice - namely: libertarianism, liberal egalitarianism, and liberal developmentalism. Given constraints of space in this article, we will focus on the latter as it links with the underlying theoretical foundation of the GEEP project, and we believe it also links well with the concept of empowerment.

It is argued that '[l]iberal developmentalism is a fairly new dimension to the liberal concept of justice that emerged from the writings of Amartya Sen' (Teehankee, 2007). With his argument founded on the Aristotelian concept of the 'good life', Sen (1992, 1999) emphasizes that the goal of both justice and poverty reduction should be to expand the 'functional' capability people have to enjoy. For Sen (1999, p. 75), functionings are 'valuable beings and doings', such as being nourished, being confident, or taking part in group decisions. It is also acknowledged that certain capabilities, particularly education, enlarge each other, which results in creating new possibilities and actions – namely, power to (Rowlands, 1997). Moreover, functional capability is linked with Rowlands' (1997) various forms of power, specifically power to, power with and power from within.

Nussbaum (2003, p. 34) points out that 'women's current preferences often show distortions that are the result of unjust background conditions. And agency and freedom are particularly important goals for women, who have so often been treated as passive dependents.' We argue that this agency and freedom is associated with Rowlands' (1997) power to, and as a result may be linked with empowerment in the form of the cognitive, psychological, financial and political dimensions. Ultimately, the issue of capabilities is about allowing room for choice by pointing out 'that there is a big difference between pushing people into functioning in ways you consider valuable and leaving the choice up to them' (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 40).

Rowlands (1997) states that within the generative power to and power with interpretation of power, empowerment is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests, interests of their own choosing, and interests of others in order both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision making and actually to influence such decisions. It is this awareness that we will attempt to shed light upon when we discuss the empirical data.

Data Collection

The data used here have been collected by all three researchers as part of the GEEP project, and as a result, the overall focus by the three researchers has been a critical analysis of how global aspirations to advance gender equality and equity are understood in a local context. Thus, we argue that the data have served to highlight various aspects of the overall project focus and in turn provide a comprehensive understanding of local realities from different perspectives.

Hence, Holmarsdottir has focused on Southern Sudan, while Ekne and Augestad have done research in South Africa. In October and November 2009, and again in September 2010, Holmarsdottir conducted fieldwork in Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan, in order to examine what we know and do not know within the theory domain on gender and education, focusing specifically around the themes of equality, equity and empowerment. The data are a result of several focus-group discussions that took place between Holmarsdottir, her research assistant and a group of girls aged 14-16. When the data collection began in 2009 these girls all attended Grade 6 in a school in Juba often referred to as 'a school mainly for returning refugees as the language of instruction is English' (interview, ministry official, Southern Sudan, 19 October 2009). In addition to focus-group discussions Holmarsdottir conducted individual interviews with the focus-group participants as well as interviews with ministry officials, teachers, and various NGO staff. Observations in the school and local community have helped to contextualize and supplement the

data collected in the individual interviews and through the focus-group discussions. The case examples presented from South Africa are based on research collected by both Ekne and Augestad in South Africa. Before describing Ekne's fieldwork, it is important to note that in order to protect our respondents' identities, fictitious names are used for all the girls reported on in this article (both from Sudan and South Africa), the ministry officials are only identified as 'ministry official', and teachers are referred to simply as male or female teachers.

Ekne conducted her fieldwork in October and November 2008. The main objective was to investigate whether or not education could be seen as a tool of empowerment for girls (Ekne, 2010). The findings are based on two focus-group discussions with five or six girls in each group and four individual interviews, in addition to informal and formal classroom observations. The girls interviewed and observed attended Grade 6 in two separate townships schools just outside Cape Town. The individual interviews were conducted to provide more in-depth information and to follow up on the data collected in the focus-group discussions (FGDs), while the observations were helpful in giving a rich and detailed picture of the reality of the setting.

Augestad collected her data in a single school located in a township on the outskirts of Cape Town in July and August 2009. Augestad's data include interviews, observations and personal diaries written by the students. The main focus was to shed light on how gender and development may be connected by focusing on the gender discourses expressed and performed in the home/community and in the school. Furthermore, she attempted to reflect on the role of education as an agent of change when it comes to promoting gender equality and equity (Augestad, 2010).

We would now like to focus our attention on the girls themselves and on their thoughts about education. Our goal is to give a glimpse of what the girls think about education, their hopes and desires and some of the challenges they face. Ultimately, we attempt to shed light on whether or not education can be seen as empowering in the lives of these girls.

'Equipped with Knowledge': girls' perceptions about schooling

I feel lucky that I get to go to school, but also I feel bad because I am the only one in my family that is in school. My uncle brought me here to Juba to go to school because in Yei we only have a chance up to Grade 3. (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009)

As pointed out earlier, the educational-access issue, in terms of having the chance to attend school, is much more precarious in Southern Sudan than in South Africa. In South Africa, however, the 'gender disadvantages ... cut in the other direction', with boys being less likely to be enrolled in school than girls (UNESCO, 2010, p. 61). In the quotation above, this girl also points out that in Southern Sudan, even boys are not in school, as both her brothers and sisters in her village do not 'get the same chance to attend school' as she does (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009). For this girl and the other girls in Southern Sudan, school represents an opportunity and a possibility for a different kind of life and perhaps a different kind of future than women traditionally have in Southern Sudan.

If we are in school then we have a chance to be a doctor or a teacher instead of meeting a man who will take care of you. Some girls go for these 'sugar daddies', but they can let you down. It is better if you can do business. But best of all is to go to school so you can have a good job and take care of yourself and not depend on someone to take care of you, like our mothers. (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009)

The sugar-daddy trap mentioned above is not an uncommon issue, particularly when money and maybe even the need to be popular are crucial for girls. Thus, girls can often find themselves in an adolescent peer group culture within the school environment, which encourages male and female pupils to conform to certain stereotypical behaviors, making girls particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse (Leach et al, 2003). This is a particular problem in the school in Juba, where there are many students who are over-age, and thus it is not uncommon to have students aged 17-19, or even older, sitting in a Grade 6 classroom together with younger children. In a context of poverty and deprivation it may also be very difficult for girls to resist gifts or money from sugar daddies or even teachers. In this way, girls are gradually and unwittingly coerced by obligation into a dependent and exploitative sexual relationship (Leach et al, 2003). Thus, for the girls in this focus group,

school represents a way of challenging the expected role of girls as future wives, servants (sexual and in other ways) and caretakers. According to Stambach (2000), schooling can therefore be seen as a substitute for marriage in the social status it provides to girls, and it thus reduces the need for and dependency on the social capital that comes from husbands. For these girls, they have a strong belief in the possibilities of becoming doctors, teachers or even scientists resulting in other opportunities than, for example, their mothers have. The result is control over their own lives involving their own choices in life (Nussbaum, 2003), as 'opposed to having to rely on someone else to take care of you' (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009).

Like the Sudanese girls, the South African girls feel privileged and happy that they have the opportunity to attend school:

> Education gives me confidence! Because when you are equipped with knowledge you find that you are accessible to opportunities and you can get things that make you strong. (Interview, Adele, South Africa, 17 August, 2009)

> I am proud to be at school, it is the right place to be. Many children are on the streets and not in school. They are unhappy and do not want to be on the streets, but have to because of the situation they are in. (Interview, Tandi, South Africa, 12 November 2008).

The 'situation' referred to by Tandi is life in the townships, a life which includes housing problems, extremely high unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, poverty and high levels of violence, particularly gender-based violence. Moreover, we see here a view that school is an important foundation for developing certain capabilities such as knowledge, reason and maybe even autonomy through what Adele denotes as strength. The confidence Adele talks about is linked to self-worth and self-esteem, which are important in order to achieve empowerment (Stromquist, 1993).

Equally, the South African girls conveyed feelings of being scared when they were at home, this given the exposure to drugs, alcohol, crime and other forms of violence on a daily basis. The girls interviewed all had personal experiences with these challenges in one way or another.

> I feel scared sometimes because on the weekend and afternoons some people are drinking alcohol and sometimes they come to our home when only kids there and then we don't feel safe. (Interview, Zoleka, South Africa, 4 November, 2008)

Being a girl growing up in a township in post-apartheid Cape Town is challenging, particularly as girls are often victims of sexual violence (Leach et al, 2003). However, the belief of a positive future, despite the daily challenges these girls face, is highly motivating for their current academic aspirations.

> Education is important because if you don't have education you have nothing ... it will change your life because education opens doors to your future. I have learned a lot from school, because before, I couldn't count, but now math is fun. (FGD 2, South Africa, 11 November 2008)

> For me education is the only way that someone like me can achieve and fulfill her dreams. Education is like the coolest thing because it makes us understand the world around us. (Diary, Lindile, South Africa, 4 August 2009)

These girls feel that the education not only equips them with tools that are useful in everyday life, but also represents a hope for the future and the possibility of change, just like the girls in Southern Sudan.

> Education can open your mind and then you understand things ... and this will make you different from somebody who doesn't know... Education will help the person to be independent and responsible. She will find her way in the future and not like the one who doesn't know, she will just do things randomly. But the one who is educated she knows her plans and will become independent and responsible. (Interview, Sara, Southern Sudan, 20 September 2010)

Furthermore, the positive visions and the benefits of receiving an education are described as:

> [being able to] become a lawyer; because I want to protect people who are in trouble, but haven't done anything wrong. (FGD 2, South Africa, 11 November 2008)

> … be a doctor because I want to make the number of people dying in hospital to go down. Doctors help people survive, and live. I want to be one of them. (FGD 2, South Africa, 11 November 2008).

> [Have] a good future … to study first and be a good accountant and then get a big home where I can take care of my children and myself. That I can do what I have to do, what is important and what is positive in life. That is a good life for me. (Interview, Martha, South Africa, 3 August 2009)

For these girls, education not only represents the possibility of change, it also allows them to make a contribution to the lives of others. The girls in Southern Sudan likewise tell stories of how school has provided new possibilities and taught them new things 'that we would not get from sitting at home, things like how to read and write' (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009). In Southern Sudan, being at home represents a kind of idleness, just sitting, whereas school provides possibilities to learn new things they would not have the opportunity to learn at home. In this way they feel able to challenge the expected role of 'just sitting at home'. What is most interesting is the paradox they describe when talking about home. All the girls in the Southern Sudan study are responsible for the majority of the household chores, such as fetching water, cooking for the family and cleaning the compound in which they live - in other words, they are all unpaid servants living with distant relatives in town. Despite the fact they are not just simply sitting around at home, and often describe all the chores they have to do both before and after school, this is how they see the situation for many girls who are at home doing these kinds of chores instead of being at school. Thus, the domestic work of both the girls in this study who are in school and of those girls who are not in school is not seen as 'real work'.

In terms of the psychological aspect of empowerment, self-worth and self-esteem emphasized by Stromquist (1993), the stories of all the girls represent an opportunity to develop a stronger self-image not only by understanding their own situation, but also by reflecting on the plight of others. However, it appears that the girls in South Africa can envision more possibilities than the girls in Southern Sudan. Yet, there is hope for empowerment among most of the girls, which is reflected in the different stories they tell. The girls also envision not only individual empowerment, but also collective empowerment, where they as individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone, involving both power to and power with (Rowlands, 1997). For instance, Rebecca sees education as something that will benefit the larger community rather than the individual:

> Those who benefit from education are those people in the Ministry, those people you meet outside and the community. When you are educated you will work for the Ministry and this will help the other children in school. You will also meet people outside of the country and then you will also come back and help your own people who are not educated. This is the benefit of education. (Interview, Rebecca, Southern Sudan, 18 September 2010)

For Rebecca, personal empowerment in terms of education might be hard to imagine, since she had to leave school last year. Although technically she is viewed as a drop-out, this was not by choice - she became pregnant, which resulted in her being told to leave school. The boy who got her pregnant has, however, not been asked to leave, demonstrating that the reality of gender equity is much different from what policies might suggest. Even though Rebecca expresses a real desire to go back to school once the baby comes, she also admits the likelihood of this happening is very slim. During the FGD in 2009, Rebecca indicated that school was empowering and it gave her a hope that she would one day finish school and get a job, becoming independent and living a life of her own choice. Rebecca's story, however, represents a reality for many girls in Southern Sudan, once again showing the different possibilities available to girls in different contexts. For Rebecca, getting pregnant was her way out of a home in which she was basically an unpaid servant for her uncle and his family. During the interview she shared her frustration over the lack of opportunities available to her as her uncle and his wife stopped paying her school fees, and as a result she was forced to get the money in other ways. One way she raised money, she told me, was to sell small

items in the market, and the money she made was given to her uncle for safe keeping, only to be told when it came time to pay school fees and that he had used the money for other things and could not help. Feeling alone and frustrated, Rebecca turned to a boy at school for support, for her becoming a mother was one possible escape out of a home in which she felt unwanted and abused.

Thus, building of one's self-image can be done through direct involvement of the women. 'Women must participate in problem definition, the identification of concrete solutions to the problems, the implementation of these solutions, and the assessment of the efforts taken' (Stromquist, 1993, p. 15). This might be more difficult for Rebecca than for some of the other girls who, according to our data, have more options available, and thus other possibilities. Feeling in control over one's life is an important aspect of the psychological component of empowerment, but for Rebecca this may still be out of reach, whereas the other girls appear to have more control over their lives.

Having looked at the girls' own stories, we would now like to turn our attention to what we see as the gap between the policy on the one hand and the realities on the ground on the other.

The Gap between Policy and Practice in Girls' Education

We have programs in schools run by Save the Children UK. We also have Promotion Advocacy for Girls' Education Movement (PAGE) and Girls Education Movement (GEM) both run by Unicef. All these advocacy programs are run by NGOs; the government does not have its own projects. We started to think about girls' education in 2001 when I was with the Directorate for Girls Education. Our Unit does not focus on Education for All that is with the Directorate for General Planning, instead we focus on advocacy for girls' education through these NGO projects. Some of these projects provide girls with 'comfort kits' [containing female hygiene products] and others provide incentives such as take home rations [through the World Food Program]. These help to keep the girls in school, but we also need female teachers as they are role models, but the government does not have plans on how to do this. (Interview, ministry official, Southern Sudan, 28 October 2009)

The 'official view' presented above suggests that the government in Southern Sudan is not necessarily taking on a leading role when it comes to promoting girls' education. Instead, the NGO sector appears to come up with ideas and projects in which the government is playing a secondary role. Some of these projects were graphically depicted in various posters around the National Ministry of Education offices, but such posters were absent in the local education offices. Some of these posters show girls carrying their 'take home rations to support girls' education', while others show smiling girls with their books in hand and slogans such as 'education is also important for girls'. What was interesting with the posters is that they depict girls only, as if girls attend single-sex schools. Thus, the pictures promoting girls' education do not necessarily challenge the traditional gender relations where females are often separated from males in Sudanese society. Moreover, despite this official view of education, the research evidence reveals a very different everyday reality, with schools catering to both boys and girls. The data from the FGDs with the Sudanese girls also reveals projects that have never reached them:

Yes we heard about these comfort kits, but we have never received them. I did hear that school X got something like this twice, but we have never had anything. We have also never heard about these other projects [programs by Save the Children UK, PAGE and GEM] or about this thing called 'gender' either… We did have someone coming from Juba hospital to talk about HIV/AIDS, but they never came back to talk more about this and we don't have things like this in our lessons. (FGD, Southern Sudan, 29 October 2009)

The result is that the official view or rhetoric about girls' education contradicts what these girls experience on the ground. The reality is scores of big projects and promises, which, at least for the girls in this study, miss the mark completely. We argue that the result is a kind of power over in terms of the global agenda where we are witnessing a type of controlling power, which is responded to with compliance on the part of the government in terms of accepting these projects. At the same time, the government appears not to be following up on these projects or making sure that they reach all the girls on the ground. The result is not a borrowing of ideas in terms of a

gender focus in education, but more a kind of educational transfer where, according to Ochs & Phillips (2004, p. 9), this transfer could lie between what they term 'required under constraint' and 'negotiated under constraint' in terms of the degree that the government feels obligated to take on such NGO projects and ideas. Given the capacity level within the government, as a result of years of war, it is of course not surprising that this is the current situation in Southern Sudan.

In South Africa, however, we may see another picture, as several years have passed since apartheid, and the capacity level within the Department of Education is very different to what we see in the Sudan case. Several educational documents and policy reports have been issued in the post-apartheid era, which emphasizes the necessity of assuring equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls. Moreover, gender equality in education is part of the larger vision of a democratic society based on the principles of equity, non-racialism and non-sexism. For instance, the White Paper on Education and Training of 1995 committed the government to investigating developing gender equity strategies in education (DoE, 1995). The establishment of the Gender Equity Task Team (GETT) in 1996 was also a comprehensive investment in targeting gender in education. GETT provided a range of recommendations for the Department of Education on how gender issues should be addressed and assessed within the education system in addition to concrete recommendations on pedagogical and structural means to achieve gender equality in schools (cf. Augestad, 2010). Despite the 'official' version focusing on gender at the policy level, teachers in the schools in South Africa paint a very different picture:

> I can't see not in one book that gender issues are addressed in particular. We need to have resources and pedagogical material to get full information about these things [gender issues]… Maybe these things are ignored as they are not seen as important issues. We don't have anything in our school that addresses this properly. (Interview, female teacher, South Africa, 3 August 2009)

Regardless of the lack of teaching materials and pedagogical tools available to the teachers, the voices of the students suggest that gender is addressed in school, but that this becomes difficult to take on once they leave the classroom:

> We learn about these things, inequality, you know. But I don't think education is playing a role when it comes to changing this situation (gender inequality) because it doesn't make a difference for me! If we are going to learn things here in the school and then in the end of the day we are not going to use it and not being able to share it with the family what I learn here in school, then I think it is useless. (Interview, Miriam, South Africa, 3 August 2009)

For Miriam, learning about gender inequality appears to have little impact on her life, as she feels helpless in challenging the inequalities she meets outside of school. The learning that is taking place may also be limited to a mere mentioning of these issues, as suggested by the teacher, where teaching materials and pedagogical tools are absent. Thus, when students are only given limited information but not the tools to make real changes, how can we expect them to challenge traditional gender practices found in their homes and communities? We may likewise ask whether the schools are simply paying lip service to the policy aims and, in turn, the global gender goals.

Furthermore, as pointed out earlier, statistics in South Africa show that the country has reached numeric gender equality in education - in other words, it provides equal access to education for both boys and girls (UNESCO, 2010). While this achievement is seen as noteworthy, it might be more relevant to ponder what the word 'access' really means. Certainly, if schools are unable to challenge traditional practices that can harm girls, in many instances focusing simply on access will not necessarily lead to empowerment.

> We can go back to the tradition again! If a man beats a woman the woman is not supposed to do anything about that, the women is just supposed to stay and do nothing. She must not fight back; she must not go for help. The man will just beat her. This is very complicated. Everything is legitimized by tradition! (interview, Martha, South Africa, 3 August, 2009)

Thus, for South Africa, despite all the lofty words, the reality of what is happening on the ground reflects

> [a] culture [in which] the girls used to sweep the floors and the boys would do other things. It was our culture but now we try to change this and we don't have these rules. Each and

> every individual should know what is right and wrong. So we can take on this culture and make our students understand that we are the same and that they should not treat our girls the way our fathers have done. (Interview, male teacher, South Africa, 12 August 2009)

Although the suggestion here is that the school is trying to do away with various traditions, attempting to reflect some of the values found in many of the South African policy documents, Martha suggests that, despite many women and girls now having access to education, these traditions still have a powerful influence over the lives of many of these women and girls. Ultimately, gender equality and the empowerment of girls both within and outside schools need to move beyond mere instrumental aspects as described above.

Conclusion

In attempting to 'go beyond the numbers game' (Holmarsdottir, forthcoming 2011), Unterhalter (2005, p. 85) maintains that a post-structuralist approach provides a way of understanding gender that relies not on a mere 'counting of girls and boys, but on qualitative studies of the nature of power, discrimination, exclusion from decision-making, and denigrating portrayals'. In this article we have attempted to understand gender by using this approach and in turn by highlighting the voices of girls themselves. This has resulted in an attempt to identify and expose biases that marginalize the educational needs of these girls, reflected in their own understanding of the role of education in their lives and in turn highlighting the educational disparities that exist.

Our overall conclusion suggests that empowerment is not necessarily an automatic outcome of education, with the individual stories providing a more nuanced picture of the possibilities and challenges in education. Conversely, the previous section has tried to tease out the more 'official' version in terms of girls' education, and in particular to highlight some of the contradictions that exist between rhetoric and reality by, for example, shedding light on the attempt to implement gender programs in schools. On the other hand, the real-life stories told by the students and teachers in these three case studies reveal another picture, where there are few resources and where little attention is focused on changing gender-insensitive practices in school or in the community.

In this article we have taken up Unterhalter's (2005) challenge in looking beyond the many educational initiatives for girls that simply see access as a key to social and economic well-being; as if merely gaining access to a school institution will automatically provide girls with an education that will empower them further in life. This empowerment in challenging gender inequality outside of the school was certainly pointed out as difficult for some of these girls. Instead, we have considered not only the 'official version', but also the non-official picture by both highlighting the girls' own thoughts and desires and focusing on things such as pedagogical content and the social setting, which are often ignored (Unterhalter, 2005). As Unterhalter (2005, p. 84) reminds us, '… high levels of sexual violence reported in schools are one feature of the ways in which participation is not a simple process of enrolment and retention and passing exams'; likewise, empowerment of women and girls in both South Africa and Southern Sudan might not be a simple process of changing traditional practices.

According to Morrow (2007), one cannot refer to access as 'meaningful' education on the basis only of enrolment, as access stands for more than whether or not children are enrolled in school. Education becomes meaningful when it provides children with 'epistemic access' - that is, access to learning and content knowledge (Morrow, 2007). Thus, both Morrow (2007) and Unterhalter (2005) argue for moving beyond simple numbers when attempting to understand gender equality, equity and empowerment.

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