Gender as an Entry Point for Addressing Social Exclusion and Multiple Disparities in Education

Technical Paper

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Executive summary

This paper has offered a critical reflexive engagement in the field of gender, education and development. In exploring the circumscribing conceptual and methodological issues it has sought to engage with knowledge practices that link what we might know and assume about gender to wider axes of inequality. To this extent the discussion used the case of gender as an example to illustrate the possibilities and difficulties of for an understanding multiple disparities.

A central point in the paper concerns knowledge practices, that is, the relationship between the way we produce knowledge and our conceptual formations. The way we research has a bearing on what we might find out and subsequently on what we might further research, in a cyclical way. As such, the discussion in this paper focussed on the dominant development discourses to explore the methodological and theoretical genesis of what we know about gender. This is used to describe how we have arrived at what appears to be theoretical and methodological stalemate. The implications are for what we already know, what we might want to know next and how this informs policy and intervention. Throughout this paper, the limitations and opportunities for understanding gender have been connected to the challenges for understanding multiple disparities that need to be addressed if we are to achieve EFA goals and global human rights to education.

Following a brief review of statistical and theoretical trends in the field of gender, education and development the main argument is that the dominant development focus on quantification and outcomes has (re-)produced both an unbalanced methodological approach and unreconstructed assumptions about gender and education. The resultant and pervasive neo-biological theories of gender are simplistic and stand in contradiction to current theories of social constructionism.

Three main themes, Identities, Processes and Methodologies are used to explore ways in which we might develop more sociologically informed knowledge to first understand and then engage with the contextual specificities of gender disparities and link these to wider forms of social exclusion.

Introduction

Gender is high on the international policy agenda and within education it is a key variable in promoting and monitoring access, equity and quality improvements. The Education for All (EFA) initiative launched in 1990 at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand was a landmark for the integration of gender and education within development. The international recognition of gender disparities in education was re-articulated at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 which established the Dakar Framework for Action and six EFA Goals. Associated with this, the Millennium Development Goals further echoed two of the gender-related EFA Goals. This international consensus has confirmed the link between gender, education and development that has been a cornerstone of advocacy and action for development.

In the almost two decades since Jomtein, the development focus on gender and education undoubtedly has sponsored significant positive changes across the globe. Nevertheless, it is evident that there are still too many children, and girls in particular, who are not having their human rights to quality education satisfied. The failure to access quality schooling has multiple configurations resulting in many children who, may never have been to school, attend erratically, have dropped out or are in school not receiving quality education. At the same time it is also clear that these children are both boys and girls and while a gender focus continues to be necessary, this single axis is not sufficient for addressing the evident multiple disparities associated with educational exclusion and social inequalities.
The human rights challenge to provide quality basic education for all children globally is enormous. It is particularly severe for the poorest children, and especially girls, on the social periphery. In this context, a commitment to EFA demands that we look afresh and think again about education for marginalised groups who endure multiple social and educational inequalities. It is not an invitation to wipe the slate clean in addressing what appear to be serious and intractable problems. Rather, it is an invitation to consider what we might learn from both the successes in girls’ education initiatives and their limitations. The emphasis in this paper is on knowledge practices - a conceptual engagement that offers some provocation to think about how our experience with gender policy, practice and theories might inform our understandings and approaches to addressing wider social exclusion and multiple disparities in education.

The paper continues with a brief acknowledgment of the gains made with girls’ education. The next section reconsiders some of the dominant strands in approaches to gender, education and development. The discussion revolves around development knowledge and the ways that it structures the field conceptually and methodologically. In this process certain emphases and absences are explored as the basis to bridge from gender inequalities to more complex multiple disparities. Identities, social processes and methodologies are highlighted in an exploration of the interaction between data, interpretation and theory with respect to gender. The limitations and contradictions raised are used to provide leverage into a consideration of wider forms of marginalisation. The conclusion provides a short summary and restates the challenge to bring what we know, think critically about this and what we might like to know to inform what we might do in order to realise our commitments to EFA.

**Gender trends**

The 2003/4 EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) focused on EFA and gender (UNESCO, 2004) and noted an 8.7% increase in school enrolments from 596 million in 1990 to 648 million in 2000. This massive increase was tempered by the estimation of 104 million children still out of school in 2000. The gender dimensions were highlighted to show discrimination against girls in the education sphere. For example, girls comprised 57% of the out of school children and in 11 countries the enrolment of girls was less than 80% of that for boys. Regions of the globe were compared showing significant differences that qualified the global trends. Contrary to the headline trends above, between 1990 and 2000, population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa led to a 17% increase in out of school children of which 23 million were girls. The relationship between low enrolments and wider gender disparities was also affirmed.

According to the most recent GMR on Governance (UNESCO, 2008) in 2006 there were 28 million fewer out of school children than in 2000 and the proportion that were girls had reduced to 54%. Nevertheless 75 million remain out of school including 12% of primary age children in developing countries. Sub Saharan Africa has 47% of the world’s out of school children with one third of primary age children not in school. Projections suggest that globally 29 million will still be out of school by 2015 and thus, the failure to meet a second MDG on time was anticipated. Other comparisons since the millennium showed that 40 million more children were in school with 135 million gaining access to the classroom for first time in 2006, an increase of 5 million since 1999. While gender parity in education had been reached by 59 out of 176 countries in 2006, an increase of 20 countries of the time period, girls were more likely never to have enrolled in school than boys, but once they had gained access they were less likely to repeat and more likely to complete school.

Other points were raised in the GMR that relate directly to the EFA goals and MDGs. The first point concerned the persistence of gender disparities and an acknowledgement of way that gender intersects with other variables including economic status, belonging to an indigenous group, linguistic or ethnic minority or low caste, and living in a rural or isolated community. The second point concerned quality
as it was noted that access and attendance in school did not guarantee that pupils would meet basic literacy and numeracy standards (UNESCO, 2008).

As a whole the report includes 162 pages solely dedicated to statistical tables as well as a plethora of statistical presentations through the textual sections of the report. It has also been found to have an insufficient gender perspective (UNGEI, 2008).

Alongside the statistical trends there has been considerable development of the theoretical lens on gender that I will briefly consider in the remainder of this section. Notwithstanding the history of female activism in developing countries (Mama, 1996; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Pereira, 2002) at the international level, three distinct approaches to gender and development are identifiable. These are known under the umbrella terms of Women in Development (WID), Gender and Development (GAD) and with a slightly different perspective, Capabilities approaches.

The liberal feminism of WID that focuses on the integration of women into existing social arrangements can be contrasted with the social transformation implied in the structural critique of patriarchy and male dominated social hierarchies in GAD (Kabeer & Subrahmanian, 1996). Using the term gender also highlighted the relational dimensions of female marginalisation that was not signified in the reference only to women in WID (Leo-Rhynie, 1999; Chant & Guttman, 2000).

The more socially and politically informed GAD approach marks an improvement on WID. The liberal feminism in WID has tended to use a totalising discourse of good, oppressed women and bad, oppressive men by comparing women as a whole to men as a whole. Such analyses offer little insight into lived experiences and the complex multi-layered realities on the ground (Cornwall, 1997). The move from a singular focus on women in WID to a focus on gender relations in GAD was promising, but as discussed below the potential of this greater sociological sophisticated has not as yet been realised. It is a WID approach that still dominates development discourse and international reports (Humphreys, Undie and Dunne, 2008). In its own terms GAD is also highly problematic. The theory of patriarchy, for example, fails to explain the collusion of some women in oppressing either themselves or other women (Kabeer, 1994). Most pertinently here, GAD (like WID) offers little acknowledgement of differentiation among women depending on their socio-economic status, social class, ethnicity, caste or locality, etc. (Kabeer, 1994; El-Bushra, 2000). Although there is some emergent recognition of diversity and agency of women and girls, there is still a greater tendency to homogenise and stereotype men (Chant & Guttman, 2000).

In a more circumspect way with respect to gender, Capabilities approaches (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) have entered the field by developed expanding notions of poverty. These have been used also to explore gender equity in education (Unterhalter, 2005). Beyond the purely economic dimensions of poverty, Capabilities approaches refer to multiple other aspects of human life. These include, for example, capabilities to access to clean water, education, health and longevity as important dimensions of human development and indicators of relative poverty (UNDP, 1998). While the opening up of notions of poverty have made important contributions to understanding developing country contexts and the position of women within them, theories of gender remain rather underdeveloped.

Each of the three approaches have proponents that would claim positive contributions and gains made in terms of the position of women and especially poor women in their respective developing country contexts. Certainly, over time we have witnessed the compulsory rhetorical inclusion of gender in discourses of development and education. There has also been an increased visibility of women in the social landscape, in government bodies, in the establishment of specialised units and the wider availability of gender-disaggregated data (Ngan-Ling Chow & Lyter, 2002). However, as indicated above in relation to the recent GMR, there remains a general over dependence on large-scale surveys, gender-disaggregated statistics, measurable outcomes, and short-term pragmatism (Lewis, 2004). WID, GAD and Capabilities approaches share similar shortcomings in reducing the complexity of
gender relations to an oppositional binary. Current international development targets, donor agendas and government policies have taken up and reinforced this limited conceptualisation of gender. This theoretical stunting has important bearing on the kind and quality of the data that we might seek to help us understand how gender and other social phenomena persistently present barriers to the achievement of human rights, the EFA goals and the MDGs. This discussion continues in more depth in the next section.

**Dominant discourses of gender, education and development**

**Starting assumptions**

In advance of my engagement with the dominant approaches to development and education and gender, it is important to clarify a couple of points fundamental to the logic of the discussion presented here. The first concerns the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice or action. The key point in this conceptual paper is that particular theorisations imply certain forms of practices. By the same token, practices or actions (and indeed policies/advocacy that promote certain forms of practice) are informed by theories whether or not these are made explicit or remain implicit. Part of the challenge offered by this paper and the UNGEI Global Advisory Committee meeting as a whole is to make explicit some of the implicit theories or assumptions that have informed our position in relation to policy, advocacy and practice in the field.

The second preliminary point concerns the centrality of language to the construction of social truths. Simply put, language begins to constitute social realities as we use particular words, terms and phrases to apprehend, describe and understand our social world. This is the integral connection between language and knowing (Foucault, 1972). Further, as language is an historical artefact that develops over time, traces of its cultural genesis remain embedded in its structure and expression (Derrida 1976). In this sense, there is a need to be attentive to the particular historical and cultural baggage that the dominant English language brings into our postcolonial world (Lewis, 2004). There are also inevitable inequalities and cultural absences that derive from the current dominance of English in a poly-lingual globe. Given both the historical and contemporary dimensions it is important for us to be reflexive about the way our language frames the debate, highlights certain social phenomena and eschews others, and then informs action, intervention and evaluation.

The remainder of this section on gender, education and development gathers the above two points together in a discussion of how the dominant discourses frame the field conceptually, circumscribe action/practice and inform policy and evaluation. In this critical account certain absences and lacunae with respect to the gender agenda will be explored as a means to (re-) construct orientations and perspectives as the basis for addressing complex and multiple disparities.

**Data and subtext**

A dominant source of knowledge about education and development are the quantitative data sets and indicators presented in the tables of periodic reports of many international agencies. The Human Development Report (UNDP, 2008), for example, contains statistics covering 177 countries presented in 35 different tables in 354 pages. Despite concerns raised about the reliability of the data (Tabachnick & Beoku-Bets 1998; Booth & Lucas 2004), statistical sources are important in providing a view of what is going on within and across different countries. By simply measuring, calculating indices, listing, ranking, grouping and categorising, implicit and explicit comparisons are made and invited between different contexts and over time. Specifically, these data provide the basis for multiple comparisons, in which outcome indicators are used in the construction of international hierarchies and to evaluate and inform national policy and practice.

The focus on gender has led to increases in the availability of gender disaggregated quantitative data and the construction of various gender-related indices (e.g. GPI, GDI). As with other statistical data this presents the opportunities for comparisons that focus on gender differences realised in gender ratios and the identification of gender gaps. As useful as these might be, it is in this process of
statistical description and analysis that definitions of gender are produced and disseminated. More specifically, statistical comparisons are based on conceptions of gender as a discontinuous variable with the categories, male and female, presented as a gender binary. Direct comparisons between these categories both produce a gender opposition (males vs. females) and construct an implicit gender hierarchy. This is exemplified by the gender parity index (GPI) which has values between 0 and 1 to indicate disparity in favour of boys; 1 is parity, and a GPI greater than 1 indicates a disparity in favour of girls (UNESCO, 2002, p.305). While a useful indicator for making the extent of disparities evident, it also constructs a gender hierarchy in which males are the standard against which girls are compared. \(^1\) This is itself an inequality.

**Conceptualisations of gender**

The highly consumable nature of gender-disaggregated data, especially in relation to the EFA goals and MDGs, has been a significant driver of research. It is fair to say that the data and analysis has also helped to make girls and women more visible in development discourse. Notwithstanding the positive force of these quantitative accounts, they also have a dominating influence on the very notion of ‘gender’ itself.

The gender binary or ‘bio-logic’ (Oyèwùmí, 2002) conceptually refers back to a simple sex difference\(^2\) has been sustained and remains dominant within discourses of development, despite the availability of more sophisticated theories of gender and social life. Even the 2003/4 Global Monitoring Report on gender equality (UNESCO, 2003), reproduced rather than destabilised the reductive neo-biological gender binary. Although there was explicit acknowledgment of the social construction of gender and some theoretically diverse research evidence was included, gender-disaggregated statistics dominated. The strongly legitimated quantitative approaches to description and analysis of social life effectively reduce and truncate conceptualisations of gender to biological sex difference providing little or no space to move towards understandings of the social construction of gender. The shift in nomenclature from sex to gender has evidently not produced the relational understanding that it signals. The focus of the debate quite clearly remains on women and girls with males largely absent or peripheral. The importance of the social and of the relationships between females and males in the reciprocal construction of gender identities effectively lies dormant. Despite the rhetorical shift from WID to GAD, the signifier gender predominantly refers to women and girls (Kabeer, 1994; Cornwall, 1997; White, 1997; El-Bushra, 2000).

As suggested above the statistical categories tend to naturalise and essentialise gender identities, grafting gender onto biological sex. The notion of gender identity as given rather than accomplished finds resonance with a pervasive ‘girls as victims’ discourse (Mohanty, 1991a, b; Kapur, 2002; Saunders, 2002; Lazreg, 2005; Dunne, Humphreys and Leach, 2006; Leach and Humphreys 2007). Females are often portrayed as without agency and subject to patriarchy and male domination; they are constructed as docile subjects (Dunne, 2007a). Such representations of powerless females without agency again refer to underdeveloped theorisations of social life and the complex ways in which all people understand, negotiate and navigate their social identities and lives within different material contexts. This re-engagement with active human subjects is vital to complement the objectified and aggregated male and female produced in quantitative data and analysis as well as some other earlier research within both WID and GAD approaches.

These limitations with respect to social construction of gender are multiplied for intersectional analysis that aspires to explore the interaction of gender with other forms of educational

\(^1\) Statistical comparisons across countries similarly construct international hierarchies in which nations are categorised as being of ‘high’, ‘medium’ or ‘low’ development, or ‘likely’, ‘unlikely’ or ‘potentially’ capable of achieving the MDGs.

\(^2\) The existence of intersex communities and research on the social processes of medical ascription of sex/gender to young babies demonstrate, the male/female dichotomy is neither natural nor clear-cut (El-Bushra, 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 2002).
marginalisation. The current emphasis on comparison between females and males as a whole directs attention to the differences between gender groups and deflects attention away from differences within groups (Cornwall, 1997). This makes it difficult to ask ‘which girls?’ and thus presents a specific limitation for the consideration of other forms of social disadvantage especially where the differences within groups e.g. between poor and wealthy boys might be more significant to social and educational exclusion than the differences between groups e.g. wealthy girls and boys. While the focus on gender is vital, the absence of other qualifying social categories provides a very blurred lens on inequalities. More data on specific marginalised groups beyond the notion of the ‘poor’ would certainly assist with the identification of ‘which girls’. It would also provide some demographic contours to describe populations that have been too often clumped together and homogenised as the poor in low-income countries. Improved knowledge about the ‘internal others’ in developing nations has the potential to open avenues for better understandings of the lives and contexts of the marginalised. This would be an important first step towards improved educational service provision. Given the wide range of social and political contexts, however, this is unlikely to be through blanket or formulaic intervention.

Identity
Theorisations of identity are useful here for moving beyond the categorical constraints, by both opening a larger space between sex and gender and in connecting gender to other social identities. A key point, discussed in the previous section, concerns the recognition of individual agency in the production of self. Rather than the docile subject determined by biology, as implied in the statistical tables, the gendered subject is in a constant process of becoming. Identities are produced through the constant interplay of agency with social structure (Giddens, 1991). Gender is described as a social performance enacted within the contingencies of particular contexts (Butler, 1990). The references to context and structure are important in signifying that gender identities/performance are constrained by access to resources as well as through the formal and informal regulation of social institutions like the school, family, etc. (Connell, 1987). This is what gender as a social construction refers to. A more dynamic and socially located understanding of gender makes untenable notions of gender as the inevitable outcome of biology. It is the processes of becoming gendered that are critical. These processes are necessarily contingent as people in different contexts do not have access to the same range of possibilities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). This implies the importance of moving beyond the ‘what’ of being a sex/gender to thinking about the ‘how’ of gender becomings. This is a step further than an ‘either, or’ (male or female) within the sex/gender binary to multiple gender configurations.

Understanding gender as a process of accomplishment (a becoming) draws attention to the contextual and local. Everyday relations, language and actions (performances) constitute identities. Identities, however, are never singular; we are never simply a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. Our gender identities are always intersected by, for example, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, etc. As multiple, fluid and dynamic (Butler, 1990; Hall, 1996), identities are performed differently and with different emphasis in different contexts and times. Admittedly, not all these might be salient in a GMR but unless we recognise the multiplicity and contingency of identity we will find it difficult to understand social life and its multiple disparities. As without such understandings it is unlikely that EFA goals can be realised, it is important to consider how gender has been connected to other identities. Gender and poverty have been inter-related and discussed in terms of female disadvantages with respect to, for example, economics, literacy, education and health. It might be argued, however, that the statistical focus on gender has forged and rationalised a social division that has become a singular discursive axis with limited scope for considering intersecting identity practices e.g. minority ethnic girls. As Chandra Mohanty comments (1991):

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3 It is important to acknowledge a tendency to compartmentalise education from wider aspects of social life even though they are germane to educational and social gender equality. Deeper understanding of these connections is predicated by the increasing decentralisation of school governance. Importantly, a small but growing literature has started to explore health and education together (see for example Pollitt, 1990; Del Rosso & Marek, 1996; Pridmore, 2007).
To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes that our consciousness of being ‘women’ has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just with gender. But no one ‘becomes a woman’ (in Simone de Beauvoir’s sense) purely because they are female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex. (pp. 12-13)

The truncation of gender identity processes through the reduction to, and compartmentalisation in, oppositional, even antagonistic, gender categories (female and male) thus provide discursive constraints on the intersections of gender with diverse ethnic, religious or class identities (Mohanty 1991, Mbilinyi 1992)⁴. Efforts to understand (and perhaps to intervene in) gender and multiple disparities would seem to demand serious consideration of the ways identities are socially constructed and enacted in social relations between and within different groups (see Connell, 1987, 1995 with respect to gender). The singular focus on gender, whether strategic or temporary, effectively pushes intersecting identities into the background. It is the visibility of these additional identity fragments that are crucial to understandings of multiple disparities. Oyèwùmí (2002)¹ has warned that a singular focus on gender, set aside from other intersecting hierarchical kinship relations, leads to distorted social analysis and the production of erroneous truths about African societies. The implication is that there is a need for more nuanced and sociologically informed research and analysis to understand how material inequalities (and multiple disparities) are produced, reproduced and resisted.

Processes
Returning to gender, theorisations highlighting gender processes and performances have made important distinctions and connections between sex, gender and sexualities (Butler, 1990). These insights have the potential to contribute significantly to understanding gender-related disadvantage that are not possible within mainstream development discourse that, as argued above, sustain the logic of a biological binary with respect to sex and gender and never speak sexuality. The folding back of gender into biological sex, together with the absence of sexuality has produced assumptions of heterosexuality. The theoretical unpicking of this discursive formation helps us to notice the ways in which ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980) or ‘the heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990) powerfully regulate gender and sexual relations. The ways that heterosexuality structures the field and impinges on individuals otherwise remains unspoken and effectively invisible. The analytical gains of using a conceptual frame that includes normative heterosexuality, masculinities and femininities (sexualities) to deepen understandings of gender and sexual relations have been amply demonstrated in a number of qualitative studies in a range of contexts (see for example, Pattman & Chege, 2003; Dunne et al., 2005; Dunne, 2007b; Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Bakari & Leach, 2008; Humphreys, 2008). In some cases, the studies have illuminated the ways that everyday life in educational institutions is centrally implicated in gender and sexuality identity processes (and educational outcomes). In other cases, the research has indicated the social complexities of the known gendered phenomena such as civil conflict, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS (Dunne, 2008). While as yet largely underdeveloped (Nfah-Abbenyi, 2005; Undie & Benaya, 2006), theoretical and empirical work beyond the conceptual constraints of the biological binary and the obsession with outcomes has the potential to re-engage with some persistent and intractable social inequalities and exclusions.

At this point it is worth noting that despite the significance to educational and gender outcomes of violence, sexual abuse, bullying and other social processes (Human Rights Watch, 2002; UNICEF, 2007; Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2006), the data emphasises

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⁴ A similar point may be made in relation to global divisions in which the ‘developing nation’ is the ‘other’ of the developed nation and this becomes the discursive axis in which there is limited space to consider the internal ‘other’ within nations or identity practices in social class or ethnic terms.
enrolment, repetition, persistence, drop-out and attainment and calculations of gender gaps. The gaping absence is knowledge about the social conditions and processes that are highly implicated in these measured outcomes. To remain silent on such threats to human rights, personal safety and quality of life is to prioritise these outcomes in ways that are difficult to justify and that are unlikely to reflect the concerns of those vulnerable to, or excluded through violence or abuse. Additionally, the focus on these outcomes is to treat educational institutions as black boxes and to assume them to be benign. This is contrary to the picture provided by much research into the social and political dimensions of life in school (see Dunne, Akyeampong and Humphreys, 2007 for a review of this literature). Established institutional structures and traditions of practice are extremely powerful in framing how we understand ourselves as people, our place in our communities, our cultures and identities. Educational institutions exert influence far beyond a restricted (and contested) cognitive domain.

In broader terms, the separation of social/educational outcomes from social processes is a decontextualisation. It is one step in an effort to generalise or universalise that disconnects people from the social contexts that construct their relative advantage or exclusion. As such, the decontextualised and frozen statistical data offer little lead in understanding, for example, why there is high dropout of females in Punjab or even, which girls are dropping out. The capacity to describe the ‘how’ of development from such data is limited as interpretations can only be made in terms of the framing assumptions and social stereotypes. The focus on outcomes, the ‘what’, pushes into the background the different local social circumstances, within which different indices used to measure and compare development are produced. Effectively, it separates development outcomes from the social and cultural conditions of their production in ways that provide no space for an accommodation of local particularities and contingencies (Kabeer 1994; Mohanty 2003) and thus produces a homogenising effect across diverse national and local circumstances. The debates about feminisms and gender across ethnic, national and regional are a specific response to the assumptions of a generalised and universal female subject position. The multiplicities can only be recognised if we similarly recognise the social processes through which our gender identities are produced and intersected by religion, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.

**Methodological tensions**

The significance of context to understandings of social life, identities and how exclusions work (and how they might be addressed) raises methodological questions concerning the production of knowledge about development. The emphasis on context implies the need for local studies accessing local perspectives and knowledges to understand the specifics of the social production of disadvantage. The gulf between this approach and those that dominate the development field is wide, even though, through the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) attempts have been made to broaden the kinds of indicators and the data collection processes (see UNICEF, 2007). This apparent impasse between macro- and micro-perspectives was evident in the GMR on Quality (UNESCO 2004), which despite the attempt for a greater process-orientation remained substantially within the thrall of quantitative indicators. In particular, it did not manage to ‘commit gender treachery’ by dislodging the gender binary (Kisiang’ani, 2004). The same might be said of much research that has explored the field of gender, education and development that operates unproblematically with decontextualised quantitative data and/or universalised conceptions of gender (see Humphreys, Undie

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5 There have been some important efforts to develop additional indicators that are also context related as means to more socially nuanced analysis, see for example [www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org).

6 There were important breakthroughs made in this report that highlighted the significance of in-school factors and processes in the production of educational and social inequalities. It does represent a move beyond a sole concern with the numbers and has stimulated general advocacy for learner-centred pedagogies, continuous assessment, mother-tongue teaching, consultative disciplinary practices, as well as more specific advocacy that brings quality and gender together (see for example FAWE, 2005, and Oxfam, 2007).
& Dunne, 2008 for a review of the literature). Despite the limited and partial understandings produced (as argued above), it is not uncharacteristic for much development research to move seamlessly to advocacy and/or intervention that can be ‘rolled-out’ globally (Dunne, Akyeampong & Humphreys, 2007). Indeed, this potential for wide-scale implementation is a critical requirement for many research or development funding bodies. Even if this imperative to action arises from a broad commitment to an equity goal, when based on macro-level generalities it is an effective denial of the relevance of context. Such decontextualisation objectifies people and simplifies the complexities and contingencies of social life and universalises gender (and other) processes. To justify action/advocacy in specific fields in reference to broad scale quantitative data is to unreflexively locate poor progress/development as deficits within that field and to produce personalised pathologies of its citizens (Walkerdine 1988; Kabeer 1994). Local and individual social logics are subordinated as they are interpreted through the muscular universalising logic of economic development.

Although it might be a start, the methodological point is not simply about the inclusion of more qualitative data on social and educational processes with which to qualify the quantitative accounts. It is a broader point about the construction of knowledge about low-income country contexts. The specific point concerns a reliance on quantitative data and analysis with its limited capacity, interest and value in reading the small stories about social processes and human agency. In the absence of explicit reflexivity about how the dominant discourses construct the field, these methodologies might be regarded as techniques of power that produce the docility of ‘others’ within the low-income country contexts. Oyèwùmí (2002) also reminds us, in reference to Africa, that dominant understandings of social phenomena have been historically produced through specific racialised and gendered discourses of colonialism. While over the last decade or so there has been a notable increase in the use of qualitative and mixed methods research, the domination of macro-perspectives and quantitative methods and analysis has militated against localised research, understandings of particular social meanings, and ultimately more appropriate theorisation.

It appears to me that our commitments to educational inclusion and equality might be better served if the multiple perspectives in local contexts were engaged with. It is here that we can access social meanings and hear accounts of the ‘how’ of multiple disparities. These understandings then can be used to negotiate intervention, guide policy and critique theory in more effective ways. The challenge is how this might interact with more traditional forms of data and analysis which play an important role in providing one account of the world we live in. As suggested by others, the way forward is perhaps to be critically eclectic and to apply knowledge from all sources while remaining vigilant to the partiality of all perspectives and wary of the universalising tendencies of hegemonic discourses (Kolawole, 2004; Lazreg, 2005). Through this critical reflexivity new spaces can be opened up for new understandings with which to help us address gender and multiple disparities in educational and social life.

Conclusions

This paper has offered a critical reflexive engagement on knowledge practices in the field of gender, education and development. In exploring the circumscribing conceptual and methodological issues it has sought to link what we might know and assume about gender to wider axes of inequality. To this extent the discussion used the case of gender as an example to illustrate the possibilities and difficulties of for an understanding multiple disparities. A central point concerned the relationship between the way we produce knowledge and our conceptual formations. The way we research has a bearing on what we might find out and then on what we might research, in a cyclical way. As such, the discussion in this paper focussed on the dominant development discourses to explore the

methodological and theoretical genesis of what we know about gender. Again this was used to describe the limitations and opportunities for understanding multiple disparities as a remaining barrier to the achievement of EFA goals and global human rights to education.

The dominant development focus on quantification and outcomes has produced an unbalanced methodological approach that has compartmentalised the field and reproduced assumptions about gender and education. The resultant neo-biological theories of gender are simplistic and stand in contradiction to current theories of social constructionism. The singular macro-perspective also has rendered complex social arena mundane. Thus, the social processes and identity work around gender are made invisible. In addition, the possibilities for intersectional analysis to link gender to other structures of inequality (ethnicity, religion, etc.) are also absent. This presents a serious void especially as it is in local arena that the process of inclusion and exclusion operate. While there has been an increase in the use of qualitative and mixed methods research, the domination of macro-perspectives and quantitative methods and analysis has militated against localised research, understandings of particular social meanings, and ultimately more appropriate theorisation. There is an evident need to open out in a systematic way to more qualitative accounts that focus on identity processes and incorporate local knowledges to counterbalance the data on the educational outcomes. Understandings of these social processes through intersectional analyses will be invaluable in guiding policy and intervention related to multiple disparities.
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