Practical Effects of Gender Disparities on the Persistence of other Education Disparities

A response to “Gender as an Entry Point for Addressing Social Exclusion and Multiple Disparities in Education”
by Dr. Mairead Dunne

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First, a profound thank you to Dr. Dunne for this provocative paper and to UNGEI for the invitation to be with you today.

I was asked to respond to the paper by addressing the question, “What are the practical effects of gender disparities on the persistence of other education disparities?”

Several key points from Dr. Dunne’s paper are particularly salient to discussing the practical effects of gender disparities: (1) First, the importance of broadening conceptualizations of gender, dismantling the binary and going beyond the question of “How do girls compare to boys?” (2) Second, the need to move beyond a singular focus on gender to multiple identity formation to understanding how gender interacts with ethnicity, and language, and abilities, physical disabilities, and other social categories – what we might call the “gender AND” approach; (3) Third, the importance of examining power and social processes of becoming gendered in the context of other processes of marginalization; and (4) finally, the importance of and need for more empirical research in examining multiple perspectives in local contexts.

Dr. Dunne’s paper challenges us to shift focus away from the easy question of “how do girls compare to boys in various categories” to address the harder, more complex questions related to social processes and gendered identities as they intersect with other multiple identities, such as ethnicity, language, class, religion, varying abilities, physical disabilities; such as living with AIDS, in conflict situations, or as refugees. The questions may be more difficult, but she reminds us that they are likely to lead us to deeper understandings of the social conditions of the final 10% of girls and boys who are out of school and direct us toward more informed local interventions to ensure education for all.
I will explore gender disparities then by examining gender as a social construct – not a biological binary – and as a social process through which power and privileges are unevenly distributed (i.e., conferred on some and not others), as well as resisted, negotiated, and shared. The education disparities under discussion will include such persistent education inequalities as those in the teaching and learning processes and in school participation or enrollment, thus providing context to these otherwise decontextualized statistics that Dr. Dunne critiques. Credit must be given to Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed (2006) for their global review of education for socially excluded girls in Inexcusable Absence, and to May Rihani (2006) for their important work in this area. In these remarks, however, I will focus on the particular, drawing examples from qualitative and mixed method research study findings recently completed or currently underway. These are, of course, only illustrative, and regrettably, most social categories and invisibilities will not be explored or exposed. We anticipate that they will be explored in detail in the next GMR that is under discussion at this UNGEI meeting.

First, in expanding conceptualizations of gender, Dr. Dunne notes that more data on specific marginalized groups beyond the notion of the ‘poor’ would help to answer the question “which girls?” (or which boys) and would provide some demographic contours to describe populations that are often clumped together and described as “the poor” in low-income countries. One study that provides such data is a UNGEI study that was conducted under the auspices of UNICEF, UNESCO, and Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training, in 2005 – 2006. Researchers from the Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education in Hanoi, Dr. Joan DeJaeghere from the University of Minnesota, and I conducted a qualitative study on the transition from primary to secondary education of girls from four non-dominant ethnic groups in Vietnam – Hmong, Gia Rai, Ba Na, and Khmer girls who lived in poor communities in three different regions of the country – North, South, Central Highlands (UNICEF, 2008; DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009). While all families and girls in the studies were poor, the practical effects of gender inequalities in relation to other persistent educational inequalities varied. For example, when food was scarce, Gia Lai girls in the Central Highlands were given less to eat than their brothers, and stayed home from school because they were hungry. In contrast, Hmong girls and their brothers may have had food to eat when food was scarce, but if they did not have rice, which they were required to bring to boarding school in partial payment for their education, then they would stay away from school. Intervening in gender disparities related to girls’ absences in education for Hmong families in Lao Cai needs to be different from interventions for Gia Lai girls in the Central Highlands.

Second, Dr. Dunne reminds us that in addition to the vital focus on gender, we need to move intersecting identities from the background into the foreground and seriously consider the ways in which girls, boys, men and women socially construct and enact identities in social relations between and within different groups of social disadvantage.

Mary Ann Maslak’s (2003) ethnographic study Daughters of the Tharu examines the participation in primary education of Tharu girls in a Nepali community through the multiple
perspectives of gender, ethnicity, caste, and religion and the interaction of individual agency with social structures. Tharu girls and boys typically have low primary school participation rates in Nepal. In the community where Maslak lived, Tharu fathers and mothers supported education because they believed that as Tharu they had been discriminated against in receiving formal education in the past. And Tharu mothers also identified with the mothers of high caste culture in the village in support of their daughters’ education. Both cultural and class identities contributed to more Tharu girls participating in school in this Tharu community than in others. But sending a girl to school was still contested in some families, and where fathers and mothers did not agree, they turned to a religious ritual that the father performed to settle the decision. The mother, who was not allowed to participate in the ritual, would accept the decision. Maslak notes that the opinion of the god was the same as the father’s in every case. So the practical effect of gender disparity in the process of household decision-making that intersected with religious ritual in some lower caste Tharu families translated into one or more girls never enrolling in school. Various interventions are currently underway to encourage Tharu girls to attend school, including a scholarship program for girls provided by the international NGO “Room to Read.” Maslak’s work raises the question whether these interventions address or might skate over these power dynamics in the family, and reminds us that we need to attend to these questions.

Third, Dr. Dunne’s paper reminds us of the importance of examining social processes of becoming gendered and processes of marginalization. She mentions in particular the necessity of bringing to the foreground violence, sexual abuse, bullying. In the Viet Nam UNGEI study, an out-of-school Khmer boy in Vietnam who was smaller than others in his age group described tearfully the bullying he had experienced from other boys and stated firmly there was nothing anyone could ever do that would make him go back to school. Girls in countries of every region of the world have experienced sexual harassment from male peers, teachers, or school administrators, and boys too suffer these injustices. These are not merely inequalities but they are human rights abuses that we need to move to the top of the agenda. In terms of practical effects, they certainly are related to persistent education disparities in dropout, attendance, completion, and achievement, although often the relationship may remain hidden due to the stigma with which the victim must contend.

The paper alludes to but does not elaborate on achievement, and it is important also to explicitly examine the social processes in the area of teaching and learning (e.g., learning to read and write, to do mathematics, to gain skills for life) and the practical effects of gender inequalities. In a recent study of five schools in Malawi where girls and boys had achieved significant learning gains in two subjects, Nancy Kendall (2008) and her research colleagues observed changes in school culture, including gender-fair practices, such as teachers calling on girls and boys in equal numbers. Teachers also appeared to be using active learning techniques, as girls and boys formed small groups for practice. Upon closer observation, it became clear that the leaders of the small groups consistently were boys. Why? Because, the teachers reported, the group leaders need to be the smartest ones in the class, and those were the boys. As pedagogical practices shift from whole group to
small group instruction, our gender lens also must refocus on the student-to-student social processes in the classroom. Who is participating in the small groups? Are these groups reproducing the gendered power relations and persistent educational inequalities in classrooms where dominance is conferred on the boys? Or, as observers in other classrooms have noticed, are a few children who answer all the teachers’ questions in classroom the privileged “stars,” sitting close to the teacher, and the majority of girls and boys, including those with special needs, sitting on the sidelines or ignored in the back of the class or in the small group?

When examining these social processes, inequalities related to language, culture, or other social constructs may emerge as primary at times, with gender inequalities in gender performance ever-present but moving out of the foreground. Parents, girls and boys from all four ethnic groups in the Viet Nam study expressed the desire to have teachers of their own ethnicity in the schools who spoke the same languages they did. While the government’s official position supports mother tongue language instruction, there was no mother tongue instruction for girls and boys in these communities – and, since girls got out less, their Viet Namese language skills were worse than boys’ and, consequently, these girls struggled with classroom learning and with most areas of academic achievement (UNICEF, 2007; DeJaeghere and Miske, 2009).

Finally, Dr. Dunne reminds us of the importance of and need for more empirical research in examining multiple perspectives in local contexts. A major girls’ education project currently underway is doing this, and is breaking new ground in the ways in which it is tracking and studying gender disparities related to other persistent education disparities.

In 2005, CARE-US based in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, launched the Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative (PCTFI) with a generous donation from Patsy Collins’ estate that was given to CARE-US for basic education for girls. The initiative was designed to focus on educating “the most marginalized girls” in countries where CARE works, and, thus, to learn about the complexities of and pathways to educating the last 10% of girls and boys in order to achieve Education for All.

To promote south-south sharing of knowledge, four countries were selected to work together in the first knowledge cohort over a 10-year period. The marginalized populations who are the focus of this are two non-dominant (non-Khmer speaking) ethnic communities in the sparsely populated highlands of northeast Cambodia; girls from non-dominant ethnic groups in rural Tanzania and rural Mali; and urban girls from two peri-urban communities in Honduras – all poor communities. During the first 18 months of the initiative, these four countries developed and conducted an in-depth Situation Analysis using primarily participatory and qualitative and some quantitative methods, collecting data to understand the processes, structures, beliefs about, and challenges to educating girls in these particular locations. Each location has now designed its own set of interventions to strengthen education for girls (and boys) among these marginalized populations. Over the next decade, the CARE country offices will be collecting qualitative and quantitative data to be
able to examine incremental changes for the girls in these four areas: educational attainment, quality, gender equality, and empowerment.

Educational attainment will not only measure educational completion and achievement but it will also examine “competence;” that is, how girls apply the skills they learn through education to other contexts at home and in future work. Educational quality examines whether the educational environment is gender-sensitive, healthy, safe, and protective; and whether the educational content is relevant and the instructional processes are child-centered. Gender equality assesses girls’ and boys’ educational opportunities, as perceived by adults and by girls themselves, and whether educational processes (e.g., teachers’ gender sensitivity) create equal educational opportunities for girls and boys. Girls’ empowerment through education assesses girls’ agency within the broader system of strategic relations and structural environment. Girls’ agency – the extent to which girls’ exercise their rights within school and community contexts – and the “strategic relations” indicator assesses the degree to which formal and informal decision makers in the school and larger community make decisions in favor of girls’ rights. The structural environment indicator examines the extent to which girls have equitable access to basic human services.

PCTFI Coordinator Margaret Meagher advocated in Education For All (EFA) GMR preparatory meetings in Paris for measures to go beyond that of traditional enrollment, completion, etc., to include new measures such as these related to empowerment and equality. Whether or not these measures are included in the next GMR, we need to begin to find ways to expand our measurement of girls’ education. As Dr. Christopher Johnstone, Co-Principal Investigator from the Minnesota International Development Education Consortium (MIDEC), which is working in a public-private partnership with CARE on the research aspects of the PCTFI project, has reminded us, “We treasure what we measure” (Miske, 2008). We need to begin to try to measure the impact of our interventions on empowerment and on equality.

What are the practical effects of gender inequalities on other persistent education inequalities in these sites? To illustrate, in three sites girls or their mothers stated “we are not as smart as boys and men,” and their expectations for themselves and for their performance in school was lower than for boys. Across all four sites, girls’ workload was significantly greater than boys’ and their status was significantly lower. Not surprisingly, in five out of seven villages in Cambodia, girls’ school attendance was significantly lower than boys’. In one country where participatory, child-centered learning methods were observed in one-fourth of the classrooms, girls with special learning needs were not called on and were ignored by teachers (Miske, Miric, DeJaeghere and Meagher, 2009).

A cross-site analysis to find similarities and differences across sites was a high priority for CARE for the first four countries. Dr. Dunne’s paper is an important reminder that examining girls’ (and boys’) construction of multiple identities in each site, and understanding how girls and boys become gendered and how these processes interact with other social processes would be an equally important analysis to undertake.
The range of practical effects of gender inequalities on other persistent educational inequalities that emerged in these qualitative studies is not surprising to most of us here. They perpetuate, exacerbate, and do not interrupt other persistent education disparities. Examining these processes in particular locations reminds us that the inequalities as they are enacted call for particular interventions, not one-size-fits-all, and that examining the processes of change and transformation for girls, boys, and their families in these settings will be equally important. Perhaps one focus of the GMR should focus on this: bringing together and analyzing findings from existing qualitative studies, as well as mapping out social disadvantage and a future agenda for research and for action. As Dr. Dunne has aptly noted, examining multiple perspectives in local contexts, accessing local perspectives and knowledges to understand the specifics of the processes of social production of disadvantage may not only better serve our commitments to educational inclusion and equality but will enable us to begin to imagine a world in which there truly is education for all.

References


