

March

International women's day



Importance of female teachers and the realities in Africa

Gender parity in education is a global priority for UNESCO. In Sub-Saharan Africa, girls and women are much more often disadvantaged than males in getting education opportunities. To promote gender equality in education in Africa, female teachers play a key role. Empirical evidences show that female teachers impact positively on girls' enrolment, retention, academic performance, and school experiences (Haugen et al., 2014). The positive correlation between girls' education and the presence of female teachers have been largely attributed to several factors including:

- Parents not allowing their daughters to be taught by a male teacher in some conservative communities;
- The presence of women in schools impact positively on girls' retention in school and on their achievement;
- In schools, gender-sensitive women teachers can act as advocates for girls, representing their perspectives and needs, and promoting more girl-friendly learning
- Cultural attitudes and societal values significantly act as barriers to women's education, especially in science and mathematics, which have been dominantly for males.

In spite of the existing evidences of the advantages in ensuring equal access for females and males, teacher preparation and professional development seldom pays attention to the different experiences, perspectives, and priorities of women, and assumes gender neutrality of being a teacher. ¹Women continue to be underrepresented in the teaching task force in most of the Sub-Saharan African countries. According to UIS (2010), in Sub-Saharan Africa women make up 46 percent and 26 percent in primary and secondary teaching forces respectively. Earlier studies show that countries where women constitute only 20% of teachers, there are far more boys than girls entering school (UNESCO, 2003) and the situations seem to remain the same. The countries with the lowest proportion of female teachers often have the lowest net enrollment rates for girls, while in such areas female teachers appear to have the greatest impact.

In order to encourage more women to participate in fields traditionally reserved for boys and men, policies, programmes, and practices among member states have to be addressed. Some of the efforts within the Africa region includes the commitments of African heads of states in the 2015 and 2016 on advancing gender equality and women empowerment.

AU Support for women and girls empowerment and gender equality

The African Union declared the theme of the year 2016 as *African Year of Human Rights with particular focus on the Rights of Women*, which is a show of commitment of Africa's leaders to issues relating to gender equality and women's empowerment. The African Union Commission (AUC) organized the 8th pre-summit event in January 2016, during which participants reaffirmed their commitments to the gender policies, frameworks and commitments.² Such includes the contents of the 10-Year Implementation Plan of Agenda 2063 of the AUC, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), the African Women's Decade (2010–2020), the Beijing +20 Declaration and Plan of Action, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and other related Resolutions. The Agenda 2063 and its 10-Year Implementation Plan recognizes gender equality and women's empowerment as a critical driver for the transformation and development of Africa in all its seven aspirations. The commitment of Heads of State and Government of the AU to Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (GEWE) is reflected in the dedication of two consecutive themes for 2015 (“Year of Women's Empowerment and Development Towards Africa's Agenda 2063”) and 2016 (“African Year of Human Rights, with particular focus on the Rights of Women”) to address gender issues.

1 The Impact of Women Teachers on Girls' Education - Advocacy Brief. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2006

2 See Communiqué of the Pre-Gender Summit adopted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 20th January 2016

However, it should be noted that the GEWE frameworks still remains a challenge for most African countries, premised on its slow pace of ratification and domestication; inadequacy of technical and financial resources for operationalizing the agenda; threats to Africa's development due to climate change, conflicts, terrorism, illicit proliferation of arms and health pandemics (Ebola, HIV/AIDS) and their disproportionate negative impact on women's lives and well-being. The critical role of women's sexual and reproductive health is also underscored given that deaths continue to occur from pregnancy-related causes. These and more limit the achievement of equality for women in all shares of life including the teaching profession.

Consultations and agreement have been carried out regarding the creation of opportunities, narrowing the gaps, and finding solutions for enhancing women's socio-economic empowerment and ensuring that women are at the centre of sustainable development, peace and security, regional integration, and economic growth in Africa. Hence, there is the need to align national regulations and policies with practices of financial institutions, investors, and businesses in order to improve women's financial inclusion, effective participation in both formal and informal economies, strengthen gender budgeting processes, increase gender sensitivity of macro-economic policies and strengthen women's access to public procurements among others.

There is also a call for greater commitment towards resolving issues relating to increasing the representation of girls and women in Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and in Technical Industrial Vocational Education and Training (TIVET); the curbing of sexual and gender-based violence, discriminatory practices, Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) such as child, early and forced marriages among others to stem the gap in gender equality gap.

IICBA's work on girls' education

UNESCO-IICBA is implementing girls education projects entitled "*Retaining Girls in Lower Secondary Schools and Increasing their Learning Outcomes*" funded by the Italian Government and the Japanese-Funds-in-Trust. The projects aim to reduce the dropout rate and improve learning performance of girls in secondary and preparatory schools, designed with the assumption of addressing the challenges that girls are facing in class rooms, school environment, families and communities at large. There are three major components of the projects: 1) capacity building of school teachers, school management staff, and teacher educators in the teacher training colleges in gender responsive pedagogy (GRP); 2) establishing a community-based Girls Education Support Structure (GESS) in order to advocate for the promotion of girls' education in the locality where the schools are located; 3) setting up viable and sustainable Income Generation Activities

(IGA) for girls in need to keep them in schools. *Read more about the projects and the case of Zeyneb.* The sustainability of these and similar projects will go a long way to curb future gaps in educational attainment between boys and girls and their subsequent participation in the world of work.

Way forward

Meeting the teacher challenge in Africa involves creating teacher professional development programmes that accommodates the peculiar needs of both male and female teachers. These will involve career planning to ensure regular additional experience and pedagogical skills. It also entails formal experiences gained from pre-planned workshops, seminars, conferences, mentoring programmes, and staff exchanges among others. These efforts can be complemented by the informal acquisition of knowledge through the reading of relevant publications, documentaries, and other teaching and learning support programmes (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). At the school level, professional development involves skills and abilities to initiate innovative ideas including the mainstreaming gender responsive pedagogy which emphasizes on the practical skills for relating to male and female learners within the classroom and in the school environment; training of the school management team by targeting school managers to create a gender sensitive environment; ensuring gender responsive teaching and learning materials are available in schools; making sure that gender responsive language is use during the teaching and learning process.

References

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