

EDUCATION

Gender Equality and Education in New Times

Historically, the aims of women's education have been tied to conceptualisations of ideal womanhood, and therefore, particularly in much of the developing world, been influenced by patriarchies as they have emerged and been shaped by colonial, nationalist and postcolonial contexts. Empowerment and redistribution within the family and society have come to be accepted as goals of women's education in recent times, enabling especially poor women from disadvantaged communities to contest oppression and get a 'fairer deal', thereby reducing gender-based inequalities (Dreze and Sen 1995). Women's movements around the world, and insights from organisations working with poor women show that women demand education as an entitlement from the state as well as for its intrinsic value - for gaining literacy, accessing information and facilitating thinking about the linkages between their lives and the structures and ideologies in which they are located. However, this wider vision articulated by women is rarely addressed within the far narrower, minimalist and instrumentalist approach of development policy that sees education for women as tied to the agendas of the nation - population control, childrearing practices, and in recent times, fostering economic growth through self- help groups (SHGs). Experiences of women articulating their diverse needs through education, freedom from domestic violence, access to material resources, the demand to think critically about their own situation and collectivising to end gender oppression, have got bound and often contained within such logic. In India, state-supported development programmes in the 1990s that sought to empower women, in which education played a key role, such as the total literacy campaign in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, and the Women's Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan show how effective challenges to the social and economic order could be reigned in through turning women's reading groups, in the Nellore case for example, to self-help groups (SHGs) (Pappu 2004, Chakravarti 2012). Women's empowerment, to which education has come to be inextricably tied in neoliberal policy discourse, is related to the state's approaches in appropriating the economic capabilities of poor women in the name of their own 'improvement' (Vasavi and Kingfisher 2003).

The discussion on education for girls and women in formal institutions tends to be narrowly focussed on issues of access. Important as these are, since both physical as well as social access remain critical issues for girls and women from marginalised communities excluded from education, focussing on access alone does not permit examination of the processes and outcomes of education. Even when formal institutions can be accessed, what sort of schooled subjectivities do

they offer to girls and young women? Educational processes constitute a complex field, encompassing issues related to curriculum and pedagogy, which have been shown in many contexts to reinforce and reproduce unequal gender relations. Issues of caste, class, ethnicity, race and sexuality are rarely addressed in formal institutions of learning, inhibiting critical engagements with gender as a social category and as lived experience. Further, neoliberal education reforms the world over entail reduced state investment in education and a preoccupation with a logic of efficiency that promotes education as a market for private investment. Even as market ideology in education presents itself as gender-neutral, evidence from a range of countries are pointing to its sharp gendered effects (Connell 2010). Wide differentiation of institutional quality, along with shrinking employment opportunities particularly in the organised sector, have acted to complicate issues of educational equity and gender equality: even as more women are accessing education, benefits are being reaped by women and men from privileged social groups. In contemporary times then, questions of gender equality and education have to be located within new policy discourses of women's empowerment, the emergence of hierarchical, and often deeply unequal, typologies of education at all levels, and aspirations of young women accessing, or desiring to access, education to better their lives.

Subthemes:

1. Situating gender in education – Interrogating policies and their impact on access, retention, quality.

This sub-theme will explore the shifting aims of women's education, historical trajectories of policies on women's education and discourses of gender equality and education. It will also aim to address local, regional and global experiences and analyses of girls' and women's education in formal and non-formal settings.

2. Impact of education on women's health, skills and employment and empowerment

Macro-level analysis is often marshalled in support of policy support to women's education. Women's health, fertility decline and increase in age at marriage are often posed as critical correlates of women's education, as is skill development towards employability. This subtheme will critically interrogate these findings through presentation of case studies in different contexts.

3. Re-imagining women's education: Perspectives from movements and struggles

In the contemporary context of market-driven approaches to education, it is important to revisit important learnings from women's movements and struggles for equality that can inform reimagining the forms and practices of education for gender equality. This subtheme invites papers that draw on these various experiences and narratives.

References

Chakravarti, U. (2012) Re-thinking the Goals of Education: Some Thoughts on Women's Education and Women's Development, *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 9(2), pp. 223–243.

Connell, R. (2010) Kartini's children: on the need for thinking gender and education together on a world scale, *Gender and Education*, 22:6, pp. 603-615.

Pappu, R. (2004) Within the Edifice of Development: Education of Women in India, *IDS Bulletin*.