Towards a Gender Inclusive Curriculum in Zimbabwe's Education System: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Gender disparities in every economic sector are not peculiar to Zimbabwe, but have long been standing anomalies worldwide. It is well documented that the reasons that have largely disadvantaged women stem from patriarchy, customary law and the colonial legacy that continue to short-change women. As a result women's emancipation and empowerment has become the focus of international programmes and conferences for purposes of integrating them into the development process on an equal basis with their male counterparts. Within the past three decades, the United Nations organized World Conferences on Women in Mexico City (in 1975), Copenhagen (in 1980), Nairobi (in 1985) and Beijing, China (in 1995). These moves have been complemented by calls to promote gender sensitivity in the school curriculum. This study therefore attempts to critic the gender responsiveness of the curriculum in Zimbabwe. Focus will be placed on the nature of the content of most textbooks, as well as other relevant teaching and learning materials that are used, to ascertain the gender sensitivity of the curricular. Central to the research would be the need to find out the extent to which prescribed history, literature and other textbooks in general have balanced the capturing of heroes and heroines in their content. Even when talking about nationalist movements in Africa the major question would be: Who are the leaders who receive the lime light among the men and women of fame who dominate the historical events? These and many other related queries will form the bottom line of this research attempt. For purposes of

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carrying out this research, text analysis of educational curriculum documents were carried out. In-depth interviews were used to compliment the data collected through discourse analysis of the educational curricula.

Background

Gender inclusivity has been a fairly recent discussion in the Zimbabwean society. The liberation struggle ushered in new platforms for women to participate equally together with men on both the private and domestic spheres, an opportunity women had lost due to colonialism (Gudhlanga, 2011). At independence the post independent Zimbabwean government embarked on a policy of eradicating discrimination in all sectors of the society.

The need for gender inclusivity is not confined to Zimbabwe alone but is in line with what is happening on the global scene. In a bid to lessen gender inequalities the United Nations organised conferences in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). The deliberations at these conferences included how to provide gender equity, mainstreaming and inclusivity in all areas of development and to make women realise more citizenship rights in their respective countries. In particular women's organisations as well as mainstreaming the curriculum were identified as key elements in achieving the UN Global Platform for Action agreed at Beijing.

In line with the policy of eradicating discrimination along gender lines the Zimbabwe government passed the Legal Age of majority Act of 1982. According to this Act women were no longer minors, "men and women were for the first time legally equal" (Mahlaule, 1995:7). The government also passed the Equal pay Act in the same year. This meant that women employed to do the same job as men with the qualifications would get equal salaries with their male counterparts. This was a welcome move for women who had been economically marginalised by getting lower salaries than their male counterparts (Ngwenya, 1983: 83). Also of significance was the government's introduction of the policy of universal education in which no one was supposed to be discriminated against in terms of race, sex, ethnicity and religious affiliation among others (Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2001).

Another important development that provided the impetus for gender inclusivity was that Zimbabwe is a signatory to a number of regional and international treaties that aim at creating an enabling environment for the attainment of equity and equality between men and women. These include the Southern African Development Community's Declaration to Gender and Development and its addendum on the Prevention and

Eradication of Violence Against Women and Children, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The Convention on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ECOSOCO) Convention on the Minimum Age of Marriage and Registration of Marriages (Gudhlanga, 2008). Also the SADC Ministerial Declaration of 2007 stated that women should constitute 30% of decision-making positions by 2005 and this has since been revised to 50% by 2015 (Gudhlanga, 2011).

In an effort to effectively transform the provisions of regional and international legal and human rights instruments to the practical level the Government of Zimbabwe has drawn up and adopted a national Gender Policy which aims at providing guidelines and institutional frameworks to engender all sectoral policies, programmes and activities at all levels of our society and economy. It endeavours to improve the lives of both women and men by removing the various discriminatory customs and legislations. The government also formed the Ministry of Women's Affairs at independence which was later transformed into the Ministry of Youth, Gender and Employment Creation. (National Gender Policy, 2006). The transformation was in line with developments at global level from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD) (Chinyani, 2007).

Despite all the pomp and fare, gender disparities are still evident in the Zimbabwean society. Mavhunga (2007 cited in Chinyani, 2007) argues that:

> Although government and other stakeholders' efforts through Affirmative and gender Sensitive policies have attempted to promote chances of access to education by girls
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> To remove obstacles that hamper their participation, gender parity is yet to be
>
> To be achieved … girls continue to be marginalised.

This argument also tallies with Chipunza's (2003) observation that women in Zimbabwe are being pushed to the traditional structures that are the custodians of culture.

Chinyani (2007) notes that, "the recurrence of gender concerns, despite decades of gender activism illustrate that gender disparities are still embedded in the Zimbabwean social, political and economic system". She questions why the nation is not responding to seemingly inevitable global dictates of gender

equality. Chinyani (2007) further suggests that a lot still needs to be done to attain a level of gender parity.

Many educationists share the conviction that the school curriculum can provide a fix to societal problems (Chinyani, 2007). This is based on the fact that "once something becomes school knowledge its implementation is legitimised and is deemed worthwhile knowledge" (Chinyani, 2007). The school system cannot be a solution unless it offers the right curriculum as Gordon (2000) cited in Chinyani, 2007) argues, "An important aspects of education, which channels children into gender roles, is the curriculum that they are permitted to study". Gordon further notes that at independence Zimbabwe inherited gender differentiated curriculum where subjects were defines as masculine and feminine". The major question that merits investigation is: Can the Zimbabwe school system be an agent for gender inclusivity?

Conceptual Framework

The paper will take the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which addresses women's issues. It emerged in the 1980s as an alternative to the earlier Women in Development (WID) focus of excluding men in women's emancipation. GAD as an approach employs a holistic perspective and looks at the totality of social organisation, economic and political life in order to understand the operation of particular aspects of society. It is concerned with the social construction of gender and assignment of specific roles and responsibilities and expectations to women and men. In contrast to the emphasis on exclusively female solidarity that is highly upheld by radical feminists, the GAD approach appreciates and to welcomes the contribution of men who share a concern for issues of equity and social justice. GAD also sees women as agents of change rather than passive recipients of development assistance, and it stresses the need for women to organize themselves for a more effective political voice (Mulugeta, 2007). It also examines social structures and institutions. The gender approach to development advocates for the lessening of social inequalities between men and women. Therefore it is imperative to use such an approach in our endeavour to understand the role of the curriculum in promoting gender inclusivity.

There has been a tendency of using the term gender synonymously with sex; therefore it is imperative to define gender, gender equity, gender equality, gender inclusiveness. Gender is not a physiological but a social concept that refers to sets of culturally defined character traits labelled as "masculine" and "feminine" (Peterson and Runyan, 1999: 257). Similarly, Riches

(1988) in Chabaya (2007) refers to the term gender as the cultural interpretation of maleness and femaleness as masculinity and femininity. In other words, gender refers to socially learned behaviour and expectations that distinguish masculinity and femininity. Capper (1993:94) says , "gender is socially constructed and describes the characteristics we ascribe to people because of their sex, the ways we believe they behave and the characteristics we believe they have, based on our cultural expectations of what is male and what is female". More importantly, because society places different values on masculine and feminine behaviours, gender is regarded as a basis for relations of inequality between men and women (Peterson and Runyan 1999: 5). Gender as a concept is described in various ways, but in this paper takes the position that it is a social construct as opposed to sex which is biological.

Gender equality refers to a social order in which women and men share the same opportunities and the same constraints on full participation in both the economic and domestic realm (Bailyn, 2006). It emphasises treating people equally. Equality as a concept does not recognise the differences and conditions that these people may bring in which may stifle achievement of the intended equal outcome (Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2001). Gender equity in this paper means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or / and treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities (ABC of women's rights and gender equality, 2000: 48). Gender equity recognises differences and accommodates them in order to prevent the continuation of the unequal status quo. In other words, equity emphasises fairness in the process and outcome.

It is also important to understand what curriculum entails; curriculum deals with the actual content of education. It involves methodologies and processes by which learning takes place. Curriculum deals not only with facts and figures but also with the culture and values of a society. Teaching and learning takes place within a context of the conceptualisation of a society, its values, its direction and its role in the world as a whole. It also involves the hidden curriculum which incorporates often the unspoken but nevertheless important messages which are transmitted within the whole education establishment (USAID Gender mainstreaming). The curriculum can therefore re-enforce the status quo or it can question the status quo.

United Nations Gender Curriculum module (2007) defines gender sensitive curriculum as, "one which addresses all the teaching and learning arrangements (including the learning environment) that affect student outcomes. It examines understanding of masculinity and femininity and takes into account social constructions of gender. A gender inclusive curriculum is achieved by consciously selecting, reflecting upon, and addressing choices about classroom planning, implementation and evaluation" (UN Curriculum Module, 2007). Developing a gender-inclusive curriculum is complex and this paper endeavours to see how the Zimbabwe school curriculum can be used as a tool for promoting gender inclusiveness.

Opportunities availed by a gender sensitive curriculum

Gender is recognised as a key to many forms of social development: many studies have already shown that the education of women leads to lower child mortality, better nutrition for the family and higher levels of education for the family. The Ouagadougou Declaration on the Education of Girls (1993) acknowledged that girls' education contributes greatly to improved quality of life and enhances national development through:

- Increased economic production rates
- Improved hygiene and nutritional practices
- Reduced child and maternal mortality rate
- Reduced fertility rate.

It is therefore important to examine the existing curricula in terms of how far they incorporate gender issues into the teaching and learning system, and further see how it can be used for promoting educational reform; towards a gender inclusive curriculum.

Method

For purposes of carrying out this research, text analysis of educational curriculum documents was carried out. Documents that were analysed were Zimbabwe secondary school English, Maths and History textbooks to identify the portrayal of both masculine and feminine genders. In-depth interviews were used to compliment the data collected through discourse analysis of the educational curricula.

Actual Research Findings
Prominence of male figures and silencing or overshadowing female heroes

The content analysis of history textbooks demonstrated that men were given prominence in Zimbabwean history and yet there were also women who played a very significant role in the history of this country. Pre-colonial history focuses on powerful men like Lobengula, Chaminuka and Mapondera among others. The only female who is given prominence is Mbuya Nehanda and other women are never mentioned as playing significant roles in Zimbabwean history. During the liberation struggle emphasis is put on male nationalists like Joshua Nkomo, Ndabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe, Leopold Takawira, Josiah Tongogara and Jason Moyo among others. Even the Lancaster House negotiations were dominated by men.

Even though women are absent in Zimbabwean history they played significant roles. Research has proven that Zimbabwe has produced powerful women political figures since the pre-colonial period. Some of the most powerful women in the history of Zimbabwean politics, during *pasichigare* were Modjadji, Nehanda and Lozikeyi (Makwenda, 2009). The Monomutapa kingdom produced one of the respected woman leaders in Southern Africa, Modjadji, The Rain Queen (Makwenda, 2009). In c1800 Modjadji left Great Zimbabwe left under controversial and mysterious circumstances and headed southwards to present day South Africa. She founded a people known as the Balobedi who have been ruled by matrilineal line of queens (Makwenda, 2009). Also powerful female leaders were seen in 1893 when the Ndebele kingdom under king Lobengula was disturbed and Lobengula was attacked and overpowered by Cecil John Rhodes' soldiers and driven north of Zimbabwe. He disappeared and was never found, it is believed he died there and up to now he has no grave (Makwenda, 2009). Lobengula's disappearance created a large commotion in the Ndebele state as his soldiers wept and demanded to know where their king was so that they could follow him. During this time Lobengula's wife took over the reins of power and led the Ndebele nation. Queen Lozikeyi, like Mbuya Nehanda is an icon of the Zimbabwean people. ZIPRA soldiers invoked her spirit for guidance during the liberation struggle. There were songs composed in her honour and in praise of her leadership qualities, but these stories cannot be found just like her story has not been told. Makwenda (2009) learnt of Lozikeyi at Oxford in London.

The dominance of males in the Zimbabwean school textbook has also been observed by Gaidzanwa who states that "Zimbabwean school textbooks emphasised gender stereotypes of roles; that domestic work was for women" (Gaidzanwa, 1985). Chitsike also observed that secondary school textbooks in Zimbabwe highlight

men's achievements and ignore women's. Dudu et al (2008) also found out that English language textbooks used in the Zimbabwe secondary school are written from a male perspective and trivialise women. They also observed that despite the fact that over the past years, some women have risen to prominence but the content in school textbooks continues to portray men in prestigious positions while women are portrayed as feeble, dependent, insecure, and needing men than men need them, among a host of negative portrayals.

Oppression of women is glorified
Some prescribed literature texts for the three prominent languages, Shona, Ndebele and English support oppression of women and glorify male promiscuity on the grounds that "This is our culture" and it is not supposed to be questioned. This is the "hidden curriculum" which deals with the cultural aspects which are not spoken about but have to be observed and practised. Similar observations on the oppression of women were also observed by the UN Gender mainstreaming Team (2010) who stated that on many university campuses getting drunk may be seen as an expression of power and freedom and maybe practised by otherwise powerless male youths. If female students also do that they are not forgiven. The baiting and sexual harassment of women students may be seen as an expression of manhood. Its worst expression may be seen in rape, where the hidden curriculum says that a woman who says "No" really means "yes" (Gender Mainstreaming).

Stereotypical images of men and women
The Zimbabwe school textbooks demonstrated that unless the issue of gender is openly addresses, gender prejudice may unconsciously seep in to the curriculum. There are numerous examples of gender stereotyping in the textbooks such as doctors and engineers always being depicted as men and nurses as women. Active and productive roles are always associated with masculinity and supportive and passive roles being depicted as women's roles.

The issue of stereotypical images of men and women is not confined to Zimbabwe alone. Writing in the Botswana context Bhusumane (1993) observed that school textbooks were gender biased. Bhusumane (1993), further stated that, "reading through most textbooks creates a feeling that men are creators and rulers of this world". Also the prescribed history and literature textbooks have more heroes than heroines. In Africa students are exposed to male leaders of nationalist movements like Kwame Nkrumah, Samora Machel, Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela and Joshua

Nkomo among others. Students also read about men of fame from other parts of the world. These include Vasco DaGama, David Livingstone, Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare and Socrates among others (Bhusumane, 1993). Hence these book publishers should stop depicting men playing major roles and women occupying subordinate positions. Instead they should also focus on female heroines.

Interview Findings
The findings of the interviews on the Zimbabwe school curriculum confirmed what we had already found in the textbooks. This is because the curriculum operates within a certain social environment, and the Zimbabwean one is promoting male dominance at the expense of women. This is not typical to Zimbabwe alone but in other countries as well. The USAID funded project in Malawi revealed that the focus on getting girls into school without addressing impediments in the learning process always put girls at a disadvantage. The evaluation revealed that wide perceptions of girls' weakness in English hindered girls in upper grades where English was the medium of instruction. The study also indicated that girls had been regularly classified a "dull, second-rate students incapable of answering questions and the boys were assigned high status tasks like timekeeping and ringing the school bell, whereas girls were responsible for sweeping and arranging furniture (Kendall, 2006). Such negative stereotypical images of women and positive stereotypical images of men contribute to the reinforcement of the gender gap in education.

Conclusion
The analysis of the Zimbabwe school curriculum has demonstrated that both men and women are still depicted in stereotypical roles. There is need to sensitise the society which produces these textbooks so that the curriculum can be gender inclusive. Once the textbooks are gender inclusive this could go a long way in producing educational reform towards a gender inclusive curriculum.

Recommendations
- To ensure that gender concerns are identified and addresses at the highest level of politics and public policy.
- To integrate gender awareness components into pre-and-in-service teacher training.
- There is need to divert the school curriculum from its present role of intergenerational reproduction of patriarchy.

- All school curricula stakeholders need to need to be allocated adequate resources to promoting gender inclusive curricula e.g. gender policy in terms of school content.
- There is need to carry out countrywide advocacy campaigns to eliminate negative societal and cultural attitudes that underpin the absence of women in the curricula.
- Need to work hard on the hidden curriculum.
- Gender sensitisation of the curriculum; the school is viewed as a socialising agent, gender sensitive courses to be introduced at all levels of the school curriculum. As Stromquist (1995) noted, "schools should offer courses for both boys and girls that address sexuality in its social context. The current school syllabi focus on anatomical and physiological features of sexuality, rather than the social dynamics of sexuality and how these dynamics tend to affect women negatively".
- Ensure that gender concerns are identified and addressed in activities focusing on global issues such as HIV and AIDS and education in emergencies or post conflict situations.
- There is need to involve key faculties in particular male colleagues in engendering the curriculum. For those teachers both male and female, still in colleges, the curriculum in higher education needs to incorporate gender awareness programmes. Gender sensitive education needs to be introduced and enhanced so that those teachers will not perpetuate male dominance and female subordination in their lessons.
- To sensitise academic staff to the gender dimensions of teaching and learning; it is an important first step towards the transformation of the curriculum, including content, methodologies and processes.
- Need to have dedicated professionals who will carry through the reform, and on the other hand, the institutionalisation of the reform within the organisation itself, in the form of statutory requirements, financial support, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation, rewards and penalties.
- School material to eliminate stereotypes and discrimination reflecting positive roles of boys and girls; the materials should show women as full citizens who have equal rights and duties as men and who can be trusted in enacting social and political roles.

- Need to resuscitate the UN Science camps for girls in secondary schools.
- Furthermore the government should introduce a thorough sex education programme in learning institutions as suggested by Stromquist (1995). Such programmes would assist in modifying preconceptions of femininity and masculinity. These sex education programmes should be introduced quite early in the school years because behavioural and attitudinal approaches to sexuality are best introduced in early childhood, at about 5 years of age (Chabaya and Gudhlanga, 2001). This approach has been used in Sweden and they have managed to do away with such gender biases to some extent (Stromquist 1995). Also parents should desist from buying girl children doll toys only, but should go ahead and buy them toy cars, planes and guns just like they do to boy children. Children will learn that they are equal at an early age and as they grow up no sex group will feel to be either superior or inferior to the other.

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