Gender and Education: A Review of Issues for Social Policy

In this paper, Ramya Subrahmanian provides an overview of key issues relating to the achievement of gender equity in education, laying out some of the contradictions and tensions in donor discourse and policy efforts, and pointing out some of the disjunctures between policy assumptions and the complexities of household decision making in different contexts. The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in the importance accorded to education, with both “instrumental” as well as “intrinsic” arguments made for increasing financial investment and policy attention to education provision. Investing in education is seen as one of the fundamental ways in which nation states and their citizens can move toward long-term development goals and improve both social and economic standards of living. The education of women in particular is seen as providing the key to securing intergenerational transfers of knowledge, and providing the substance of long-term gender equality and social change. Yet the author argues that analysis of how advances in female education can be achieved requires sophisticated conceptual frameworks and tools, which unpack the intersections and interlinkages between social and economic aspects of exclusion. In particular, she argues that it is necessary to understand household education investment strategies as part of a continuum of well-being decisions, vulnerable to the counterpressures and fluctuations caused by economic insecurity and social disadvantage.

Although significant gains have been made in women’s education as a result of global advocacy and donor pressure, more often than not these gains are fragile, vulnerable to changes in economic and social environments, and lagging behind male rates of enrolment and achievement. Achievements are particularly visible in the primary education sector, whereas gaps are still large in the secondary and tertiary sectors, especially in the countries of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Although enrolments have gone up, good quality, accessible and affordable education is still lacking in many countries. Furthermore, an educational “gender gap” persists, despite a well-developed and accepted body of scholarship on the factors that constrain female education achievement relative to that of men, and despite the prediction of high rates of return to state and household investment, especially in primary education.

Subrahmanian addresses several interrelated themes relating to achieving “education for all”. The difficulties of crafting “global” education policy are noted in relation to the diversity of needs and constraints that obtain in different contexts. This is equally true about the efforts to develop global consensus on how to address gender inequalities in education. Current global discourses rest on assumptions that are contested in the gender and development literature. The argument that investing in education generally, and women’s education in particular, is good for development is consistently made in policy documents of the World Bank and other agencies. These arguments, however, have limited value. While female education appears to have a positive impact on many variables relating to child survival and fertility, the extent to which it enhances the quality of women’s lives in a substantive way is not clear. Instrumentalist rationales are important for securing investments in female education, but they obscure issues of power and agency that are critical for developing a gender-aware perspective on the design and delivery of education services.

The argument that both private and social rates of return are high—particularly to primary education—is another consistent thread running through global policy documents, notably those of the World Bank. This argument is highly contested, both on methodological and con-categorical grounds. The author questions the notion of "investment" underpinning analyses of the rates of return to education and the related and implicit assumptions about why households do or do not send children to school. Household investment and education strategies in many cases do not reflect policy confidence. While levels of supply are far from adequate in many parts of the developing world, the mixed and changing patterns of education participation in certain countries indicate that household investment decisions intersect with experiences and calculations about value, returns, aspirations and evaluations about prospects for long-term change in individual circumstances. These are in turn gendered and shaped by prevailing social and cultural norms.

A crucial aspect of current debate is the achievement of efficiency—reducing the costs of pro-viding education for all—without compromising equity. Contradictions between policy commitment to equity and the backlashes prompted by macroeconomic policies have resulted in ex-acerbation of prevailing patterns of inequality in some countries, and the creation of new forms in others. Despite some increase in the allocation of resources for elementary education, the costs of providing quality education continue to rise. Policies for raising revenue, whether through taxation or through charging user fees, have implications for the equity challenge, as the paper argues.

Access, retention and achievement are all pressing challenges to equity in education, but cannot be addressed without analysis of the socioeconomic complexities within which household decision making is embedded. Subrahmanian reviews evidence that demonstrates the intertwining of four broad types of factors that shape individual or household decisions about investing in education: the macroeconomic context, which shapes employment opportunity, inter alia; household livelihoods and aspirations, and the extent to which they permit resource commitment; economic and financial work contributions; assessments of the prospects and capacities of individual children, which have a particular impact on girls and disabled children; and factors relating to school fees, in terms of proximity, quality and inclusiveness. She argues that these factors or dimensions impact on both boys and girls, with differential effects.
The review examines gender in terms of demographic trends, health indicators, the effects and causes of violence, education indicators, labor market trends, and social protection. It identifies gender issues across sectors, with a view to improving the Bank's efficiency, and effectiveness, in reducing gender inequities that affect both women, and men, though discussion on male gender issues is limited. Major findings indicate that mortality rates linked to external factors (i.e., traffic accidents, homicide, suicide), differ greatly by gender; pre-natal care for pregnant women continues to...

The gender issues depicted here are not only the review of literatures but also the result of observations of gender based issues in real situations and continuing effort for better ways of addressing it at the grassroots level. Gender issues function at household, community and national level adhered in society’s social, cultural, economic and political system. Social Impact of early marriage: • Denied education and own choices • Illiterate mother more often raise illiterate child • Increased rural to urban migration • Fistula patients, avoided by the husband and society • Psychological trauma from the 1st sexual experience • Many children (early pregnancy).