Centrality of Gender in the Education System of Zimbabwe in the 21st Century.

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ABSTRACT

Gender dynamics and gender trajectories and their impact on education systems have long been a verdant trope of scholarly inquiry and policy focus. The centrality of gender in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes, resource allocation, and societal perceptions cannot be overstated in pedagogical and learning spaces, particularly in the context of developing nations like Zimbabwe. The present article critically delves into the multifaceted and multipronged dimensions of gender, its formation and its pervasive influence on the Zimbabwean education system in the 21st century. The phenomenon of gender is explored through a sociological lens particularly rooted in the process of socialisation, revealing its construction as an unintended outcome of interactions between social actors of different sexes and societal structures. Gender is not merely a biological distinction but a complex interplay of socially assigned attributes, opportunities, and relationships that are learned through the process of socialization. Within the realm of formal education in Zimbabwe, gender plays a pivotal role in defining the allocation of resources, opportunities, and duties along gender lines. The article examines how patriarchal norms and ideologies have led to preferential treatment of boys over girls, perpetuating gender inequalities in areas such as access to education, resource allocation, and empowerment opportunities. In the same stride, the article investigates the role of language, hidden curricula, and societal norms in shaping gender perceptions and reinforcing stereotypes. It delves into how gender assumptions and expectations influence the educational experiences of boys and girls, impacting their academic performance, career choices, and prospects. By critically examining the centrality of gender in the Zimbabwean education system, the article aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play and the need for concerted efforts to address gender inequalities and promote equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their gender.

Keywords: Gender equality, masculinity, feminity, gender stereotypes, gender association, language and gender, hidden curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The gender phenomenon in its varied dimensions is placed under the spotlight. Gender is defined sociologically and as a socialising phenomenon. It is presented as an unintended outcome of the interactions between social actors of different sexes; and between social actors and societal structures within aparticular geo-political context or milieu(Alesina et al, 2010). Gender is largely explored within the sphere of formal education in Zimbabwe. It is examined in terms of how it defines the allocation of resources, opportunities, and duties along sex lines. How it is highly influenced by patriarchy to favour men for more remunerating positions in the Ministry of Education is examined. It exploits the social relations between men and women; and between boys and girls for its continued existence. Gender strains the relations between the two sexes: male and female. How gender produces femininity and masculinity phenomena in society is explored in this article. The qualities of males are less favoured by females and vice versa. Paradoxically, the two sexes are put in tension and co-exist as competing enemies though working for each other's common good. The tensions between men and women provide fodder for the parasitic gender inequities to thrive. Gender therefore, examine the advancement of gender-based stereotypes, analysing language and its outstanding place

in gender formation. Different foci but all drawing from sociological theories are looked at in terms of how they shed light on the social construction of gender in various facets of mainstream society. Gender is presented as a product of the struggles for scarce opportunities in the education system of Zimbabwe.

The adverse effects of gender construction and how it influence educational outcomes and opportunities in pedagogical contexts or settings have been canvassed in the growing body of literature in the interface between the construction of gender, gender dynamics and equity in education. In the rural settings, cultural relations which shape gender roles is more pronounced with girls and children bearing the adverse effects thereof, through receiving poor educational opportunities and outcomes. In urban spaces, where there is little emphasis on gender roles, literacy levels are higher (Mintso, 1997). There is, therefore, need to accelerate gender equity which requires policy considerations (Gachukia, 2018). Although the trope of gender construction has been canvassed in educational literature, little has been explored in the intersectionality between gender roles, institutional buttressing of gender constructed which have already been culturally shaped and their impact on educational opportunities and outcomes. It is this missing gap in the current body of literature which this article will critically examine.

METHODOLOGY

The article is produced out of an in-depth study of secondary academic sources and considerable knowledge of developments in the education system of Zimbabwe rooted in the qualitative research methodological paradigm. The secondary academic sources comprise peer reviewed journal articles, research papers and published edited books. Such varied documentary review spice up the broadening of the existing body of knowledge. Building the article on already existing scholarly works furthers the multi-disciplinary enrichment of academic research needed for the achievement of excellence in the field of gender. Credibility of the article is high for it is based on scientifically proven foundations.

Understanding gender

 Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female; the relations between women and men and between boys and girls (Doreen, 2001; Alesina et al., 2010). The attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and learned through socialisation. Socialisation is conceived as the process of cultural learning and social development whereby a new person acquires necessary skills and education to play regular part in a social system (Parsons, 1961). Socialisation is the acquisition of the requisite orientations for satisfactory functioning in a role. It is a phenomenon which comprises the transmission of values, beliefs, practices, taboos and avoidances of a given society to an individual   through formal and informal means through the agents of socialisation like home, peer group and school. Through socialisation, a growing individual learns to behave as per the expectations of the society. An individual learns the reciprocal responses of the society so that he can anticipate the behaviour of others towards him and his own behaviour to peers.

Socialisation is the engine for the advancement of the culture of a given society. According to Moore (1987: 4), culture is defined as follows: "A culture is the whole set of beliefs and guidelines as to how people ought to behave in any society that people regard as natural and normal." Thus, culture is learned from contact with other people around us in society. Gender is centrally placed in culture. Gender is context-bound and time-specific and ever-changing in shaping the social structure of a given society. It assumes various dimensions in different societies; though in some instances it may cut across geographical and societal boundaries. The social structure of a given society refers to an *institutional* structure comprising *cultural* and *normative* models that define the actors' expectations on their behaviour (Bernardi, 2011). It points to an ordered or organized arrangement of elements like education, politics, religion, economy to make up a coherent whole (society). Gender is produced within the organisation of societal institutions above to reduce friction.

Gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued for women as opposed to men in a given socio-cultural context. Thus, gender is part and parcel of the institutional package of a given organisation and society. Gender defines differences and inequalities between women and men in decision-making opportunities, role assignment, and access to and control over privileges and resources in many African

societies. Gender is part of the broader essential criteria for sociocultural analysis featuring among class, race and poverty levels. It is rooted in the assumptions and ideas of social actors in terms of how they define the relationship between men and women with their social surroundings. *Gender* points to the social. Roles that men and women play and the power relations between them. Such power relations have a profound effect on the access and distribution of scarce social and economic opportunities in society.

Gender is so vital to an extent of constraining coercive force on social interactions and moulding behavioural trends of a given society. It does this in clearly and physically visible means. In most rural localities of Zimbabwe, dressing is used for reflecting the gender values of the society. Typical rural women wear long dresses and men wear trousers. Women sit down on mats on the ground while men sit on stools and different raised structures. The sitting of women on the ground sociologically portrays their lowly socially defined societal position. The sitting of men on raised stools reflects their upper position in society. Thus, gender is central to the construction of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity refers to traits that are stereotypically attributed to men, is typified by the image of a strong, technically competent, ambitious, self-sufficient and authoritative leader who can maintain control over his emotions (Lefkowitz and Zeldow, 2006).

Femininity comprises traits that are stereotypically attributed to women, is associated with empathy, sensitivity, loyalty, and a caring disposition (Heilman, 2012). Femininity and masculinity are rooted in an intricate system of socio-cultural contexts rather than mere psycho-biological factors (Borgata and Montgomery, 2000). Commonly held assumptions are that not only do men and women differ, but they also tend to act like polar opposites, with women appearing to lack the qualities that are most prevalent in men and vice versa. In this respect, dominance, resilience, aggression, bravery and versatility are acceptable traits in men; but less socially acceptable in women in many societies especially of non-western roots (Zokaei et al., 2001; Ozkan and Lajunen, 2005). In contrast, women are permitted to display weakness whereas this is unacceptable in men (Rudman et al., 2008). Such socially upheld notions go a long way in exerting influence on central operations of different communities.

Based on the assumptions of masculinity and femininity above, men are more preferred for promotions to headship positions in rural schools of Zimbabwe where unforeseeable challenges surface and calling for immediate counter responses. Recruitment into the army, police and prison services in Zimbabwe is tilted in favour of men than women based on the above outlined gender-based notions. The above mentioned gender-based characterisations are rampant across various cultures, racial and ethnic divide, time spans and diverse employment settings (Schein, 2001; Ozkan and Lajunen, 2005). Gender is highly shaped by economic determinants of a society. In this regard, men receive more opportunities and more scarce resources than women for instance; in the typical African home in Zimbabwe, the back of a chicken belongs to the father on the basis of it being the biggest part of the chicken. The big domestic livestock like cattle are controlled by the father while poultry is under the control of the mother in the home.

Such engenderisation of the private and public spheres of the society results in huge disparities between men and women (Rudman et al., 2008; Xiumei et al., 2012). In related trends, women award themselves lower wages, are less likely to demand equivalent wages and are more satisfied to receive lower earnings than their male counterparts (Wajcman, 2000; Williams et al., 2010). However, men and women are not always passively shaped by gender-typical behaviour. They sometimes call upon their power of agency that capacitates them to develop peculiar gender traits best suited to save desperate situations in which they are caught up (Forseth, 2005). Men and women are not born with masculinity and femininity as part of their genetic make-up. Rather, they adopt masculinity and femininity concepts through acculturation (Berger et al., 1995).

Furthermore, what is regarded as gender-appropriate can alter over time, and gender assumptions are invariably interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location-related factors (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994). The combined effect of gender equality, feminism has challenged traditional concepts formed of feminine women and masculine men (Wayne and Cordeiro, 2003). In considering these patterns, some women develop and adopt masculine personality traits, and maximize their use based on gender-atypical behaviours. As such, gender inequality is socially constructed and bears huge economic connotations in favour of men.

Background to the pervasiveness of gender in education

According to UNESCO (2011), gender inequality refers to unequal possession of opportunities between men and women in the realisation of their human rights and unequal potential to contribute to political, economic, social and cultural development of their society. Gender inequality in education points to unequal educational opportunities that encompass access, retention and learning for girls and boys. Gender inequality in schools occurs if educational systems in terms of contents, learning materials, teacher attitudes and behaviours, classroom and discipline practices are organised in ways that depict biased social norms about the expected roles and opportunities for boys as opposed to girls (Myers, 2007). Zimbabwe worked hard to achieve gender equality since its political independence in 1980. In its commitment to curb different forms of sex discrimination, the government of Zimbabwe is a signatory to many international gender declarations and conventions.

It is a signatory to the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Following that, the Zimbabwe government put in place a number of policies to advance gender equality. These include the gender affirmative action policy of 1992, the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission, and the National Gender Policy of 2004. Despite the concerted efforts by the government, gender inequality is still pervasive in schools and the education system. The gender inequality dynamics influence the manner in which boys and girls are given differential treatment in schools. Gender inequality affects male and female teachers in terms of appointments to senior positions and school administrative posts (Vaughan, 2016).

Preferential treatment of boys over girls in schools

Women constitute half of humanity (UNICEF, 2007). Despite them constituting such a significant percentage of the world population, most societies place more emphasis on educating males. Of the 781 million illiterate adults worldwide, two thirds of them are women (United Nations Report, 2010). This is rooted in the unabated ancient practice of focusing women's education on skills that prepare girls to be wives and homemakers. There has been a role assignment and division of responsibility between men and women. Men were regarded as the bread-earners for the family; while women were regarded as homemakers, mothers and nurturers. As such in poverty-stricken communities of Africa Zimbabwe included), families prioritise boys to girls when resources become depleted in terms of meeting educational expenses like buying books, school bags and uniforms.

The girls are usually discouraged from acquisition of education, due to limited financial resources. Their male siblings may teach them, what they will have learned at school that just enhances their basic literacy skills of reading and writing. Additionally, a lack of appropriate school facilities like classrooms, playgrounds, libraries cause learners to drop out before their educational skills are well sharpened. This affects girls more than boys for girls are socialised to like the home and domestic chores more than anything else by patriarchy. In Zimbabwe, there is a tendency by the ministry of education to promote boys' high schools like Churchill boys' high school in international sporting activities at the expense of girls' high schools like Harare Girls' High School. Such unfair treatment of schools along sex lines is tantamount to gender inequality in education.

Ideology and gendered distribution of headship positions in education

The structural arrangement that initiates and legitimises the systematic oppression of girls is heavily embedded in patriarchy and structured power dynamics or trajectories that characterizes the Zimbabwean society. Schools act as vehicles for transmitting the values of the society in which they are situated. In this way, schools find themselves propagating patriarchal values that are oppressive to women. Atypical example is when female learners are called upon to engage in the cleaning of classrooms at school that is time-consuming while boys engage in lighter tasks. The preparation of food for visitors to the school and the washing of club uniforms of the school is allocated to girls alone. This is caused by patriarchy that according to Hartmann (2002), is an ideology premised on the supremacy of males over females that enables the boys to dominate girls at school.

The scenario is vehemently opposed by feminists. Feminism as a perspective emphasizes the belief that women and men are equal and should be equally valued, and having equal rights (Odaga and Heneveld, 1995). In addition to that, there are more male school administrators and science teachers than females in zimbabwe (Chabaya et al., 2009). Many female teachers have university degrees and relevant teaching experience that qualify them to become school heads. However, glass ceilings are placed on their way to prevent them from promotions to headship positions. As argued by Chabaya et al. (2009), as of June 2004, there were 246 secondary school heads in Masvingo province. However, only 14 (5.60%) were female heads and 8 (3.25%) were female deputy heads. In the case of primary schools, there were a total of 693 school heads and only 68 (9.81%) were female heads while 56 (8.08%) were female deputy heads (Chabaya, et al., 2009).

In the case of universities, Gaidzamwa (1992:10) pointed out that "the University (of Zimbabwe) provided an atmosphere and opportunities for female academics with little experience to join in administration, but the higher levels of university administration remained male dominated". While females chose careers with less struggles and conflicts, such choices made them economically exposed as compared to males. According to Budig (2002; Franzway et al., 2009), personality traits are essential human capital characteristics that signal vital employee productivity assets. Positive associations existing between males, masculinity and wealth have been scientifically proved (Williams et al., 2010). Leadership capability is signalled through masculinity that, in turn, is accompanied by workplace rewards (Franzway et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2010).

Thus, it is arguably sound that the few female school heads above minimize their feminine associations and engage in compensatory gendered practices to assume dominant positions as their masculine traits become an important production asset to the government Ministry of Education that runs schools in Zimbabwe. the attitudes held by women who excel in their careers include high self-efficacy, a strong desire to succeed and provide leadership and the general adoption of career, as opposed to family identity; that result in them being social outcasts in the mainstream societies of their origin (Eagly et al., 2000; Koenig et al., 2011). Women are becoming more similar to men in terms of their career aspirations and achievements. They are also more inclined to view themselves as possessing qualities associated with strong leadership (Dennis and Kunkel, 2004; Vongas and Al Hajj, 2015). The social ostracism that comes with divergence from the culturally upheld femininity beliefs of docility and shyness scare away many professionally competent women from fighting for leadership positions in the education system in Zimbabwe.

Explained from a different angle, the gendered constraints of girls in education are positioned in the hegemonic base of the Zimbabwean society. Hegemony refers to forms of supremacy obtained by some social groups (boys in this case) primarily by consent rather than coercion, by moral and intellectual leadership rather than by domination (Christie, 2008). The power of a leading social group is maintained by a combination of consent and coercion; however, consent through ideological justification occurs in societies influenced by capitalism like Zimbabwe with coercion visible only in moments of particular crisis (Gramsci, 1994). In its broadest sense, hegemony is a relational concept that includes consideration of relations of coercion and consent in the maintenance of control.

Looking-glass concept

Cooley coined the phrase *looking glass self* to denote the view that individuals tend to react in terms of their self-concepts as communicated to them by others especially their significant others (Mead, 1934). Therefore, the meanings that individuals come to perceive themselves in terms of are a social construct. Girls avoid challenging tasks in their academic careers for they act in ways reflected by teachers who perceive them as weak. Through role taking, individuals develop a concept of self and by placing themselves in the position of others they are able to emulate others and reflect upon themselves. It is widely assumed that women are mothers, wives and breadwinners in their homes (Genene, 2003). So, to some female students, the assumption is that is no need to work hard academically as their roles in life are pre-determined by society. In other words, after being highly educated, the best place of a girl remains in the home as a mother or daughter and not in the office as a school headmistress. In a study, Mwaba (1992) cited in (Mapuranga and Chikumbu, 2015) found that a sample of South African secondary school boys and girls characterised housecleaning as

predominantly women-only jobs. This negatively affects girls' performance in schools. Thus, in the southern African region, girls are educated for the realisation of their domesticity societal roles.

Language and gender formation

Dudu et al. (2008) posit that language is a major contributing component of gender stereotypes. The English language denigrates and debases women when it treats them as exceptions. A boy is a real poet while a girl is a poetess. A man is a real headmaster while the lady teacher is a headmistress. In the school drama club, a boy is an actor while a girl is an actress. This trivialises female gender forms. Deriving the feminine form from the masculine suggests women are mere extensions and appendages of men. In addition to that, such gender connotations extend to some names of female learners. Names such as Georgina, Francina and Francisca, Henrietta, Josephine and Ragina are derivations from George, Francis, Henry, Joseph and Ragies (Unger and Crawford, 1992). In addition to that, the name John for boys has Johanna and Joanne being derived and given to girls.

Alfonse is a name for boys while Alfornsena is derived and given to girls. Similarly in the Shona language spoken by the majority of indigenous Zimbabweans, male names have female derivations. Farai being a boy has Farisai as the female derivation. Namatirai a female name is derived from boys' name Namatai. Ripai is a name given to boys while Ripirwai is derived and given to girls. Shupai is for boys while Shupikai is the derivative name for girls. Dadai is a name for boys while Dadirai is the derivative given to girls. Ruramai for boys has Ruramisai as its female derivation. In the Shona names above, the derivative names for girls are founded on instrumental connotations reflecting high degrees of passiveness and helplessness in desperate situations of society.

On the other hand, the original names are decorated with connotations of agency; reflecting the boys as having the instinct to turn around desperate situations and causing action in driving the engines of society. Such a scenario of girls being portrayed as instrumental and boys as agents stems from the patriarchal nature of the Shona society in Zimbabwe. Such a philosophy results in teachers having higher regard for boys than female learners. Out of that, the head boy is placed in an upper position by the school administration than the head girl in terms of treatments and favours while on paper, the positions of the two are the same within the school setting.

Likewise, Sir and madam are respectable terms used to address male and female teachers in Zimbabwean schools respectively. However, the term madam can also refer to a brothel-keeper, while a pimp can never be addressed as sir. This shows how much female titles in the school have been debased to assume sexual connotations. Language and images used in school textbooks and teaching materials influence students' gender perceptions. In some Chemistry and Physics textbooks, pictures are drawn of a boy carrying out an experiment and a girl reading the results of the experiment; that debases the position of the girl in the learning scenario. Through the hidden curriculum, a girl is portrayed as having weaker aptitude than her male counterpart in this case.

Hidden curriculum and gender formation

The hidden curriculum is implemented in many instances in the school to determine the various placements of boys and girls. In most schools, learners in secondary school are put in different classes at form 3. The hard sciences class is in most cases dominated by boys. Most of the girls are placed in the commercials and arts classes. The placement of more boys in the hard sciences class gives them advantage over the girls for the learning of biology, physics and chemistry widens their career choices and places them on a path to more paying jobs after completing A level and tertiary-training. From the arts classes, the girls end up being clerks, cooks, and language teachers; jobs that are not highly remunerating as compared to engineering, medicine professions pursued by boys from the hard sciences classes.

Adding on to the matter of differential treatment, boys' football is given 90 minutes while girl's netball is given 30 minutes. This gives more time to boys in terms of using the school facilities yet both pay the same school fees. Through the hidden curriculum, boys are portrayed as stronger than girls in terms of physical

fitness. In athletics, girls are mostly confined to short distances while boys engage in long distances. Again, this reflects girls as members of the weaker sex. When addressing learners at school, teachers always say "Good morning boys and girls". The sequence of sex in the addressing statement always starts with boys and ending with girls. Such a standing arrangement of sexes gives more respect to boys than girls.

On the other hand, a study by Chabaya et al. (2009) gives family attachment as a major obstacle for female teachers' denial of school headship positions. Most female teachers prefer to stay with their families rather than pursuing career advancement in places away from the family. This is caused by the fact that "from an early age, daughters are groomed for their marriage roles of wife, mother and food provider and they are conditioned from an early age to believe that a woman is inferior to a man and that her place is in the home" (Dorsey, 1996:30). In South Africa, female teachers usually deny promotions in distant schools from the locations of their husbands who culturally decide family residence (Mahlase, 1997:90). More so, Women's low self-esteem and lack of confidence, myths, stereotypes and prejudices related to femininity act as hindrances resulting in low uptake of school headship positions by women (Coleman, 2001:7).

Aschwanden in (Sebakwane, 1994) argues that gender socialisation is practiced, not to prejudice the child against the other sex, but to let it grow "naturally " into its predestined role and to make the child look forward with pleasure to its predetermined task. In this respect, personality traits are perceived as productivity-related attributes. They have the capacity to influence wages and preferences; that can affect education and job choices. This then culminates into either positive or negative workplace biases (Heckman et al., 2006; Mueller and Plug, 2006). In order for a girl to be socially acceptable both at school and in the society, she has to meet the societal standards of qualifying femininity. In most African societies, the standards include passiveness, domesticity, shyness, purity, submissiveness, and piety (Isazadegan et al., 2013; Abedi et al., 2015). Domesticity locates a woman in the home; in charge of the fireplace; cooking for the family; taking care of the kids and caring for sick and old relatives of her husband.

All of the above feminine duties comprise unpaid work in different countries including Zimbabwe (Ferrant, 2014; Jafari, 2014). Based on these feminine assumptions, women are most favoured for social work and nursing qualifications in the field of academia. Purity and piety are high cardinal virtues associated with femininity. A young and typical girl in cultured rural localities should be pure (virgin). Having lost her virginity, the young woman is of low societal value. Associated with that is piety. Women are believed to be holier than men as reflected by their tenderness, shyness and kindness (Kazemipour, 2004; Qarakhani and Masoumeh, 2007). As a result, high school girls in Zimbabwe avoid too much involvement in sporting activities at school that are likely to break their virginity accidentally like cycling and high jump. When a young lady gets married with her virginity intact, her husband pays a cow to her parents for her purity and as a way of showing his gratitude over the pure state of his wife in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, ladies are culturally expected to be submissive to their husbands. They are culturally trained to be submissive from tender ages of around 12 years as they enter the individuation stage. A combination of the standards above produce a person who is very humble and fragile; who avoids fora and classes where boys are dominant of which such areas will be highly rewarding like the hard sciences class in the school and the public sphere in the society. Thus, girls are socialised to be weak and highly drained in terms of the fighting spirit that is needed for them to undertake the hard sciences subjects like physics, maths and chemistry whose enrolment is dominated by boys in Zimbabwean high schools. While gender has made big in-roads into the Zimbabwean education system, the country's curriculum is being driven by postmodernism that is outmanoeuvring masculinity and femininity gender-based notions through the centralization of multiple realities in society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gender inequality refers to the socially constructed perceptions of viewing boys and girls in a school environment by way of debasing girls through covert and overt means. Masculine personality traits increase competency levels and are usually exploited by men due to their patriarchal acculturation; with few women experiencing the same under strict conditions of social ostracism from their societies of origin. Teachers need to refrain from the use of biased, sexist, stereotypical and prejudicial discourses in their

interaction with learners. The school curricula should de-construct the gender roles and stereotypes embedded in it. Gender inclusive language should be employed in schools. The use of images like photographs, illustrations and book covers should promote equal treatment of boys and girls within the school environment and in career choice preparation after finishing high school.

The school as an institution serves as an agent of the dissemination of gender inequality embodied in the curricula in both the formal and hidden forms. The school transforms boys and girls from being humans to being persons who are socially defined in terms of given social contexts. As such, transitional measures should be put in place to reduce the influence of the wider society on the school; and increase the influence of the school on its external environment largely comprising the local society in which it operates. The reversal of the relationship reduces the coercive force of some patriarchal values and traditional practices that favour boys at the detriment of girls; for the acceptance of gender inequality on the part of girls is not strictly voluntary. Rather, girls may support gender inequality scenarios from a sense of commitment or out of having no alternative.

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