Empowering the Girl Child: A review of Scholarship Programmes

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Introduction

Gender inequality in education has been at the centre of debates on development for more than two decades. It is one of the major challenges faced by women and girls, and with serious human and economic impacts on the society. Over the years, significant improvements have been achieved in the domain of accessibility to education (construction of schools and provision of scholarships to cover enrolment fees, etc); but despite these realisations, an estimated ‘77 million children, 55% of whom are girls, are still denied any form of education’ (Unterhalter, 2010:1). This begs for a review of strategies to include the creation of a conducive environment that would facilitate retention and success of girls in school and in life. In other words, ‘having enough schools does not guarantee full enrolment’ (Liang and Marble, 1996:1) on the one hand and enrolment does not guarantee attendance on the other.

Like women, girls need to be empowered in order to be future leaders, self-fulfilled individuals and models in their communities. Acquisition of knowledge and skills towards achieving these objectives will not be obtained simply be providing access to education while overlooking socio-economic, political, cultural, infrastructural and personal factors which might have a negative impact on their effective presence in school. It is the result of this loophole that justifies assertions according to which the rate of retention in schools is generally very low for girls, as well as their ability to ‘effectively read, write, or do simple arithmetic’ (Esplen, Heerah and Hunter, 2006:2) That is the raison d’être of this essay. It aims to challenge instrumentalists’ programmes that fail to empower the girl child beyond mere access to education. It argues that, access to education is a necessary but not a sufficient measure to promote girls’ empowerment. As a result scholarship programmes aimed to bridge gender gap in education should take into consideration the context in which it is implemented, the actual needs of the people it wants to help, without overlooking external socio-economic, political, cultural and infrastructural factors with potential influence on the effective presence and success of girls in school.
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The first part of this write-up examines the state of girls’ education in the world and particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is followed by an analysis of selected scholarship programmes aimed to bridge gender inequality in education and their capacity to empower the girl child. The essay concludes by positing that scholarship packages for girls should be tailored to their actual needs bearing in mind the context in which they are implemented, and should aim at moving beyond mere access to education/school to ensure success and sustainability.

I – Gender inequality in education: a reality

Major challenges to girls’ education involve their accessibility to school and capacity to complete a level of education, being primary or secondary. Statistics show that every year, about ‘104 million children aged 6-11 are not in school’ and amongst these, ‘60 million are girls’ (Herz and Sperling, 2004:2). Furthermore, ‘nearly 1 billion people in the world have had no schooling or left school after less than four years… [and] nearly two thirds are women and girls’ (Unterhalter, 2010:1, 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the situation of girls’ education is of particular concern. According to Burns et al (2003), ‘more than half of girls – 54 percent - do not complete even a primary school education’ (Herz and Sperling, 2004:2), yet women and girls’ education is of prime importance to every nation.

Research has shown that women and girls’ education can be of major contribution to growth and development. According to Schultz (2002), ‘wage gains from additional education tend to be similar if not somewhat higher for women than for men and … the return to secondary education in particular are appreciably higher for women (Herz and Sperling, 2004:3). This positive influence is equally beneficial to society in terms of health, good governance; the fight against violence, gender inequality and corruption, etc. As highlighted by Sen (1999), women and girls have a lot to gain from being educated and these gains trickle down to society via the family. This capacity for educated girls and women to be efficient citizens as a result of education could be described as empowerment; in other words, ‘increased female education is one of the most powerful tools to empower women within the family and society’ (Herz and Sperling, 2004:5).

In this context therefore, it is of major importance to promote girls’ education and this entails, more than mere accessibility to schools. Girls and women face different internal and external challenges with major influence on their capacity to effectively attend school, as well as http://www.e4conference.org
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succeed not just in class but in the community. Scholarship programmes aimed to achieve gender parity in education ought to take those internal and external factors into consideration in order to reduce the risk for girls to drop-out of school before completing their level of education (be it primary or secondary) and increase the likelihoods for success in class as well as girls’ capacity to be assertive, self-fulfilled citizens and efficient leaders.

II – How scholarship programmes can empower the young girl

Access to education is an important measurement for girls’ empowerment. However, it should be noted that girls’ empowerment should move beyond mere accessibility to reflect considerations for the context as well as internal and external factors influencing girls’ actual needs relating to their effective attendance and success in school and in the community. When scholarship programmes are well designed and implemented, they are great tools in providing women and young girls with the knowledge and training necessary to become productive citizens. Varied scholarship programmes have been implemented in order to achieve the above.

The Mais Escola para Mim or “More School for Me” is a girl specific scholarship programme which aims to bridge the gender gap in education. It facilitates enrolment and completion of secondary level of education. The uniqueness of this programme is its consideration for obstacles that lead girls to drop-out of school. This include: ‘extreme financial hardship, sexual abuse and harassment, and complex discriminatory social and cultural norms that reinforce gender inequalities’ (Lurdes Mutola Foundation, 2007:3)

The USAID girls’ education initiative including the Africa Education Initiative - Ambassadors’ Girls Scholarship Programme (AEI-AGSP) equally forms part of these scholarship programmes which give major importance to the context and community participation to promote girls’ education, enrolment, retention and success in school and in life. It provides room for community mentoring and girls’ acquisition of life skills through various forms of mentoring activities including science camps, career fairs, excursions, etc.

The ‘Eduque a la Niña’ scholarship programme in Guatemala aims to achieve ‘the greatest impact on the school attendance, school retention and achievement of girls, and to find the most cost-effective strategies for promoting girls' participation in and completion of primary school’ (Liang and Marble, 1996:3). It offers a scholarship package together with provisions

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for community participation in girls’ education, thereby reducing the drop-out rate and increasing success not just in school, but in the community.

These and few other scholarship programmes are a revolution in the fight against gender inequality in education. They move away from the instrumentalist approach which places emphasis on measurable outcomes such as amounts and number of fees paid or books supplied and to what number of girls without consideration for socio-economic, political and cultural factors influencing girls’ retention and success in school. Bridging the gender gap in education bearing in mind internal and external factors to girl education will contribute to empower the girl child and enable the later to be self-fulfilled, a future entrepreneur and leader as well as model in her community. Identified innovations in these programmes are as follow:

- the institution of after-school programs;
- the involvement of parent committees in the selection process and monitoring of scholarship activities in the community;
- the involvement of community outreach workers as guides/tutors to parents;
- the establishment of strategic partnerships with community organizations and school committees;
- the organisation of weekly mentoring meetings by community women of varied profession (police women, lawyers, teachers, farmers, business women, councillors, parliamentarians, etc) who serve as role models
- the organisation of weekly mentoring meetings by female social workers;
- the development of improved classroom teaching techniques
- the encouragement of female teaching staff in schools especially in rural and remote areas;
- the institution of incentive programmes (food, water, oil, transportation stipend, etc.);
- the provision of toilet facilities and toiletries for girls (to avoid absenteeism during their menses);
- the provision of reading lamps and kerosene to facilitate studies at home (after school), etc;

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Conclusion

Over the years, the fight against gender inequality in education has suffered from serious challenges such as the capacity to retain girls in school and to ensure their success. Such challenges have been addressed using effective measures which built on the context and took into consideration internal and external factors influencing girls’ retention and success in school and in the society. By so doing, these measures have contributed to empower the girl child beyond mere accessibility to education/school. As a result, it is clear that ‘broad social measures and reforms beyond the education system are needed to promote women’s rights, [girls’ rights], empowerment and leadership...’

References


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