Author: Caroline Manion
Gender Equality in Education Policy:
A Case Study of The Gambia

Caroline Manion
OISE, University of Toronto

Abstract: This short piece introduces and overviews my doctoral research on gender equality policy and practice in The Gambia. Included in the discussion are details concerning the study background, purpose, analytic framework, and methods. A brief thematic summary is provided of the central findings concerning the global-local dialectic in the production and construction of gender and education policy knowledge.

Keywords: gender equality, higher education policy, human capital, international development, social justice; Sub-Saharan Africa, The Gambia

1. Introduction

Girls’ education has been promoted by the international development community for over two decades; however, it has proven harder to promote gender equality beyond education than it has been to promote gender parity in education (see Unterhalter 2007). Of significance is the global circulation and coexistence of two competing policy orientations concerning gender equality in education: economic instrumentalism and social justice. The cost of ignoring how and why Southern governments and their development partners choose to promote girls’ education is high: an over-emphasis on economic efficiency and economic instrumentalism can mean that the
root causes of gendered inequalities in society remain unchallenged, and more social justice-oriented reforms become marginalized.

My goal in this short piece is to introduce and thematically overview the findings from my doctoral research in The Republic of The Gambia (henceforth referred to as “The Gambia”), the broad purpose of which was to assess the scope education policies provide for positive change in the lives of Gambian girls and women. In particular, I used a critical feminist lens to examine the production and construction of gender equality in education policy knowledge in The Gambia, as represented in government and donor policy texts, and in the perceptions and interactions of different policy actors.

The Gambia is a small Muslim-majority country in West Africa, almost entirely surrounded by Senegal except for a small portion of coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. The country has the dubious distinction of being the first and last British colony on the African continent (1783-1965). Ranked 151st out of 169 countries in the Human Development Index of the most recent Human Development Report, The Gambia is among the poorest countries in the world (UNDP 2010). Expanding and improving the quality of formal education has long been a central development priority for the government and its donors. Yet, a high population growth rate in The Gambia has been identified as a constraint on the Government’s ability to serve the educational needs of its growing population (World Bank 2009).

Since the late 1990’s, donor-supported national efforts to promote and enhance girls’ educational opportunities appear to have had a significant impact with respect to girls’ enrolment, particularly at the basic education level (grades 1–9). For example, gender parity has been achieved at the lower basic level, and gains made in terms of girls’ education enrolment at the secondary level (World Bank 2010). Despite these gains in girls’ participation in formal education, as of 2008 only 34 per cent of Gambian women aged 15 and over were considered literate compared with 57 per cent of the adult male population (World Bank 2010). Indeed, the reproduction of gender norms rooted in socio-cultural, economic and religious processes that generally relegate many Gambian women to second-class status, appear to co-exist in tension with the official state discourse concerning the critical importance of promoting women’s advancement, particularly
through enhancing formal education opportunities (see Bessis 2005; Touray 2006). See Appendix for a brief analysis of the symbolic significance of the “Gender Equality” monument in The Gambia.

2. Gender Equality in Education Policy Models

A critical feminist analysis of the gender, development and education literatures reveals three main policy models that can inform girls’ education policy and practice: human capital, human rights, and human capabilities (Robeyns 2006). Each of these models carries particular knowledge and assumptions concerning the “why” and “how” of girls’ education, which I conceptualized, following Unterhalter (2007), as part of a continuum constituted by economic utilitarianism, including narrowly conceived “economic empowerment” goals, at one end, and social transformation goals, including an expanded notion of empowerment, at the other (see also Kabeer 1999).

Human capital theory views human beings as important inputs for increased productivity and therefore the goal of increasing girls’ educational access is to expand the pool of available resources for labour. From a human capital perspective, the primary goal of gender equity in education policy is the identification of the most cost-effective strategies to expand the access of women to education in order to maximize their economic contribution to development as skilled workers (Beneria & Sen 1997). Ignored in such economic-instrumentalist formulations are the social and cultural dimensions of development as well as questions concerning the role of schooling in promoting broader goals of equality across multiple categories of difference. In contrast to the economic instrumentalism of human capital-based education reform policies (global and national-level), human rights theory forcefully asserts that education is a fundamental human right of all people regardless of any extrinsic values it may imply with respect to productivity or earning potential.

The relationship between human rights and human capabilities is not as easily delineated as that between the latter and human capital theory. However, while both Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) have developed somewhat distinct perspectives on the capability approach, both agree that rights and capabilities are complementary concepts (Unterhalter 2007). However, they are not synonymous concepts, with human capabilities being
more helpfully and accurately understood as an “expanded notion of rights” (Unterhalter 2005, p. 115). Advocates of the human capability approach have argued that rights have often been “utilized rhetorically and rather loosely,” and that formal commitments to rights made by governments and the donor community have not gone far enough in terms of spelling out the specific content of rights or the subsequent obligations of different actors, including governments, donors, civil society, communities, individuals (Robeyns 2006, p. 87).

Based on the above briefly sketched distinctions between human capital, human rights, and human capabilities policy models, and drawing on feminist ideals that emphasize the socially transformative roles and intrinsic importance of formal education, I argue that in terms of promoting gender equality in education as matter of social justice, the human capital approach is the least supportive, and the human rights and human capabilities alternatives most supportive (Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2006; Unterhalter 2007).

3. Research Instruments and Analytic Framework

Field research was completed in The Gambia between January and May 2007. The study methods included: in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty-five government officials, civil society representatives and development partners engaged in partnerships with government agencies; participant observation at relevant high-level and other public meetings and workshops; and document and archival data collection and analysis. With the goal of gathering a range of perspectives and understandings concerning girls’ education from central and regional government officials and civil society organizations (CSOs), interviews and observation activities were completed in two rural and one urban region of the country.

Drawing on the work of Brock, McGee & Gaventa (2004), I used the concepts of produced and constructed knowledge to organize the data generated through the textual analysis of donor, government and non-governmental policy documents, and the ethnographic instruments my study employed. I argued that the politics of gender equality in education knowledge and action are revealed at the nexus of produced and constructed knowledge and the policy solutions/actions that particular
knowledge generates and supports. Produced knowledge refers to knowledge as it is presented in formal donor and government statements, agreements, and policies. Produced knowledge is not value-neutral because it is created by particular actors for particular purposes (Brock et al. 2004).

I used the concept of constructed knowledge with a dual purpose. On the one hand, I used it to refer to the ways in which policy actors interpret, perceive, and discuss their perspectives on girls’ and/or gender and education issues. On the other hand, the concept of constructed knowledge also helps describe the process of my own sense-making as I organized and analyzed the documentary, interview, and observation data and wrote up my findings. That is, I explicitly recognize that the story I told is one based on my own interpretation of both the content and tone of policy documents and the perspectives and experiences of different policy actors.

4. Thematic Summary of Study Findings
The following two sections discuss the study’s key findings across two thematic categories: “policy talk” and “policy action” (see Tyack & Cuban 1995 for a detailed conceptualization of these concepts).

4.1 Policy talk
With respect to the nature of gender equality in education policy orientations, I found that the language, form, and content of policy documents and the policy discourses and meanings constructed by policy actors generally aligned with dominant human capital ideology and discourse as transmitted through the policy and practices of the international development regime. However, the ethnographic component of the study, including things I was told and things that I heard or saw during the course of interviews and observations at public events, suggested that beneath the veneer of consensus concerning the importance of girls’ education lay significant tensions and emergent questions concerning the orientation and direction of the policy programming concerning gender equality in education.

In trying to understand relations of power in policy processes concerning gender equality in the field of education in The Gambia, I argue that attention needs to be paid to the power of externally mediated aid processes.
Specifically, I argue that national education policy processes in The Gambia have been shaped by international policy frameworks such as Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and particularly as an effect of their associated regulatory mechanisms, including most notably grant-making proposals and assessment processes for endorsement under the Education For All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI), as well as bilateral, multilateral, and international financial institution lending arrangements (see Unterhalter 2007).

Specifically, I argued that the study findings reveal the power of national actors to control and direct the nature and scope of gender and education policy discourse and action, despite the sector being highly dependent on donor aid and therefore pressured to align national policies with the language and priorities of the development aid community. It is clear that Gambian policy actors understand that as a condition for aid, it is necessary to speak the language and reflect the priorities of donors when it comes to developing national policy documents and aid proposals; however, it appears to also be recognized that there remains much latitude in terms of how key concepts such as gender equality, gender equity, gender mainstreaming, and women’s empowerment can and are defined at the national and sub-national levels.

My analysis revealed tensions in the way the concepts of “gender” and “equity” were understood and used by different policy actors in The Gambia. While feminist ideals of transformation informed my conceptualization of “gender equity”, this often appeared to be at odds with the practical ways that policy actors in The Gambia understood and used the language of “gender” and “equity”. “Gender” was frequently equated with biologically-rooted and essentialized differences between men and women, which, in turn appeared to contribute to a depoliticization of the gender agenda in the country. The preference for using gender synonymously with sex difference appeared, at times, rooted in a reluctance on the part of policy actors in The Gambia to embrace and pursue notions of equity rooted in feminist ideals of transformation, which, in the Gambian context, were perceived to threaten the status quo that upholds distinct roles and social expectations for men and women.
With respect to the politics of gender equality in education policy knowledge, the analysis revealed that a great deal of effort has been put into depoliticizing the notion of gender equality and the principles of educational equity. In looking at the language and framing of gender issues in education across government, non-government, and development partner texts, I identified patterns of ideas and discourse that in my interpretation mirrored those of donors, particularly with respect to the emphasis placed on the social and economic benefits of girls’ education as per the human capital approach. While the intrinsic and empowerment purposes of education were included at times in the discourse of policy actors and texts, when references were made to individual benefits, these tended to focus on the economic dimension, relating income wealth to “empowerment”. Ultimately, I suggest that the depoliticization of girls’ education and gender equity has largely been accomplished and maintained through the work of dominant human capital assumptions and assertions concerning girls’ education as important for national development, particularly defined in terms of economic growth, an orientation prevalent since the Jomtien Conference on Education for All in 1990 and the highly influential study by Lockheed & Verspoor on the returns to primary education in developing countries (1990).

The power of religious beliefs and understandings in relation to gender emerged as a further theme in the study. Specifically, the findings suggested that there are some important tensions between secular and faith-based ideas, discourses, and practices in relation to girls’ education and/or gender and education policy spaces and processes. In the context of what I called the “gender equality-gender equity debate”, the same central concepts and “key words” underpinning the global promotion of girls’ education were interpreted and strategically used in quite different ways and for quite different purposes by policy agents in The Gambia (see Steiner-Khamsi 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe 2006).

The main factor influencing the “gender equality/gender equity” terminological debate in the country seemed to be a particular interpretation of Islamic law that establishes different and distinct “original roles” for men and women and the idea that the principle of sameness implied by the concept of gender equality was not compatible with this notion of different but complementary gender roles to be played by men and women in a
Muslim society (Jah 2007). In this regard, I found that government officials were among those most adamant that girls’ education policy was shaped by “equity” imperatives and not “equality”, which I interpreted to imply an emphasis on difference in the construction of knowledge concerning the educational needs of girls and boys, rooted in a particular faith-based understanding of “natural” and/or divinely prescribed gender roles.

A further theme in the study connected with knowledge and power concerns NGO advocacy for girls’ education in support of women’s advancement and empowerment. Here, women’s rights advocacy appeared to be shaped by both bottom-up and top-down pressures. It was clear that gender activism by and with women in The Gambia has and continues to have an impact on formal policy processes, both at the level of talk and action; however, towards gaining traction and voice in gender equality in education policy processes, women-focused organizations have found it particularly useful to use instrumentalist arguments based on the social and economic returns to Gambian society assumed to be made possible through investments in girls’ education. While formally adopting rights-based approaches and discourse, it was apparent that women’s advocates in The Gambia had to choose their words and strategies with care so as to manage antifeminist politics and maintain the movement momentum. For some non-governmental and governmental feminist advocates in The Gambia, focusing on the economic benefits of gender equity in education was a purposeful strategy for gaining access to and credibility within national policy spaces and local programming contexts; however, other policy actors, mainly government officials and politicians, seemed to place an emphasis on girls’ education for national development as a form of resistance to more transformative understandings of the intrinsic value of gender equity in and through education, as called for in human rights and human capabilities approaches.

4.2 Policy action
The study findings highlighted tensions concerning the importance of maintaining girl-focused policy interventions. My analysis suggested there was a dominant preference in The Gambia for policy solutions that would benefit both boys and girls (e.g., expanding physical schooling infrastructure). For
example, “less radical” interventions, such as those that focused on providing financial support and nutrition services to girls, were emphasized as being particularly important and appropriate in the Gambian context. Moreover, recent education sector reforms emphasizing cost-recovery, the privatization of education service delivery, particularly at the post-primary levels, and the formalization of the madrassa system appear to conflict with the dominant policy perspective that poverty is the major cause of gender-based educational inequalities in terms of access, retention, performance and outcomes.

While the socio-cultural and economic barriers to gender equality in education were widely understood and acknowledged in policy documents and in the discourse of policy actors, the research I conducted found some dissonance between the gender analysis represented in the produced knowledge of policy and aid program documents, and the forms of policy intervention developed and implemented to address barriers to educational equity. For example, rather than working to challenge, disrupt and change the social, economic, and cultural norms and practices that are framed in policy documents as reproducing women’s subordinate position vis-à-vis men in the country, the Mothers’ Club initiative for girls’ education relies directly on the unpaid labour of women in the maintenance and day-to-day functioning of schools. In another example, the provision of education scholarships as a means of promoting equity in education, while helpful in addressing poverty-related barriers to education equality, does not directly challenge gendered power relations and social practices that constrain gender equality in and beyond formal schooling.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study stands out for the critical stance it takes with respect to the global marketing of girls’ education as a “magic bullet” for economic growth and development. It reveals that such an approach, driven by human capital theory, can contribute to the marginalization of more transformative

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1 Madrassa constitute one type of Muslim education institutions. For a snapshot of these schools in The Gambia, see http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=136
perspectives that emphasize the intrinsic importance of education and frame schools as instruments of social change and justice.

The study focused on the “why” and “how” of gender equity in education policy and action, as represented in formal policy and project documents and in the perceptions and discourses of different policy actors “on the ground” in The Gambia – a country with a long history of policy interventions in support of women’s advancement. The findings speak to the challenges and opportunities facing feminist activism – at the international, national and local levels – in education and beyond, in terms of vision, representation, and practice. At the same time, the findings support the need for more substantive and sustained engagement by feminists in formal education advocacy and policy development within the context of the Education for All and the Millennium Development Goal movements. Additionally, the study helped illuminate the complexities involved in translating normative principles such as “gender equality” and “gender equity” into practical policy solutions. This is important particularly given the power and transnational reach of anti-feminist politics and the, as yet, rather vague and imprecise conceptualizations of such principles in global policy frameworks.

Ultimately, I suggest that while The Gambia has achieved significant success in terms of girls’ access to education, particularly at the level of basic education (grades 1–9), there are important challenges to the future of girls’ education policy and practice in the country. These include economic and political pressures, the ever-present risk of government cooptation of feminist organizations, the dominance of “Western” feminist concepts and language in global policy frameworks, as well as the influence of particular conservative interpretations of Islamic understandings of gender roles and relations.

I see this study as serving to highlight an important set of new questions concerning the role of gender, civil society, religion, and education policy in processes of social change. For example, cross-cultural comparison of gender equality in education policy knowledge and action is necessary. Such research could investigate how different governments and constellations of civil society actors frame and engage in girls’ education and other gender-related policy programming. Key questions could be asked concerning how
women's activists engage in formal policy processes to shape discourse and practice in ways that reflect nationally and locally-based needs and priorities, in relation to global policy frameworks and regulatory mechanisms (i.e., EFA-FTI, MDGs, UNESCO’s Global Monitoring Report).

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References


APPENDIX: The Gender Equality Monument in The Gambia

This picture was taken during my field research in The Gambia in 2007. The monument shown is called “Gender Equality”. The monument depicts a man and a woman rowing together, an imagery that aligns with a common discourse I observed concerning the need for men and women to work as partners, not as adversaries, as was seemingly understood to be the case with “Western feminism”. The fact that the monument is called “Gender Equality” is particularly interesting in the context of the study because it contrasts starkly with the forceful push of high-ranking government officials for using the language of “gender equity” and expressly not “gender equality” when discussing gender and education policy goals.

Toward explaining this tension, I suggest that the monument’s placement is important: it is located in a high-traffic tourist zone as well as near the offices of the lead in-country multilateral UNICEF and other foreign embassies. As the study findings suggested, The Gambia has been highly receptive to aid in support of gender equality in education policy initiatives, even while consensus concerning the national gender agenda appears fragile once the surface of policy is scratched.
About the Author

Caroline Manion holds a PhD from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, specializing in comparative, international, and development education (CIDE). In 2011-2013, Caroline was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Montreal, working with Dr Patrice Brodeur, Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism, and Globalization. Caroline is currently an instructor at OISE in the CIDE collaborative degree program. Her research interests include development ethics, education aid, policy borrowing, global governance, feminist transnationalism, post-colonial theory, spirituality and religion, and education for social transformation. Caroline has research experience in West and East Africa, as well as Canada. Her work has been published in the Journal of Theory and Research in Education, the Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, the Canadian Journal of Education and the Canadian Journal of Development Studies, in addition to chapters published in Globalisation, international education policy, and local policy formation (C. Brown, ed., 2014); Globalization and education: Integration and contestation across cultures (N.P. Stromquist & K. Monkman, eds., 2014); The Structure and Agency of Women’s Education (M.A. Maslak, ed.,2008); and Recapturing the Personal: Essays on Education and Embodied Knowledge in Comparative Perspective (I. Epstein, ed., 2007). Email: Carly.Manion@utoronto.ca