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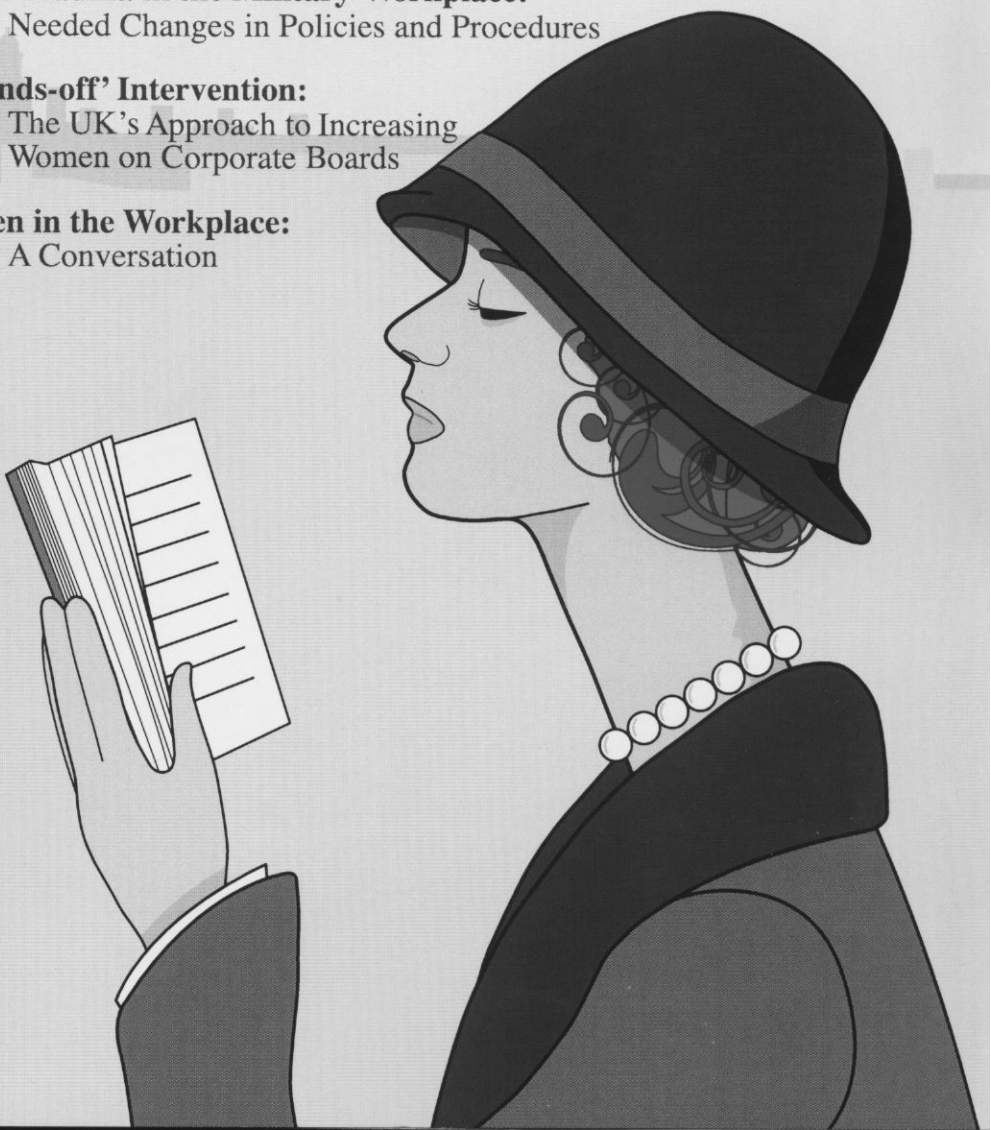

An Examination of Women's Educational Access in the Global South

By William Simmons

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ABSTRACT

Education for women is central to employment opportunities and self-efficacy across cultures. Access to education, as mandated by international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, has become a worldwide priority. However, this mission is misguided and ultimately neglects the cultural nuances that govern the relationships among and within nations. Utilizing the learning sciences and transnational feminist theory, this paper argues that current hegemonic policies are ineffective in addressing educational advancement for women and girls in the Global South.

INTRODUCTION

Access to education is widely accepted as a central factor for entry into the workforce and the acquisition of some measure of stability and personal efficacy. This rhetoric is the same in the United States and the rest of the world; global access to education has become a top priority of the World Bank and the United Nations (UN). Even so, the surge toward globalized educational models lacks the essential theoretical support needed to avoid the promulgation of Western hegemonic ideologies that neglect the conceptual implications of operating in a multinational mode. To address the disparity between the educational needs of women internationally and the problematic attempts to secure educational access for all, this paper takes a dual approach, utilizing both feminist theory and the emerging field of constructionist learning sciences. With the entry of post-structural critique, the paper ultimately asks unanswerable questions about the nature of women's rights in a transnational context. By no means is this an exhaustive study; it is at its core an appeal for further dialogue within and among cultures across the world.

GLOBAL MISSTEPS

> Women are taking the lead and making a huge contribution to defining the international agenda in terms of human rights, macroeconomics, conflict/peace, and sustainable development. We have a valuable and unique perspective on these issues as women and as human beings. We recognize that feminism in one country is not sustainable—we need feminism on a global scale. (Women in Development Europe 1995 quoted in Moghadam 2005, 1)

The quote above illustrates a fundamental disparity in discussions of women and education in a non-Western context, since the particular brand of feminism that has emerged in the United States and in Western Europe does not take into account the contributions and ideals of women in the Global South. In this way, the totalizing Western narrative of feminism could be seen as a silencing force that imposes irrelevant ideals on other populations without accounting for local needs and resources, an unfortunate fact that also applies to education reform. Access to education is severely limited for many women and girls in the Global South, which is compounded by incidents of violence and abuse that preclude them from taking part in their schooling. The international community has certainly taken notice. International bodies', such as the World Bank and the UN, prioritization of education points to an urgency to achieve education for all on a global scale, as well as to a realization of its benefits for countries in both the North and the South (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank 2012; United Nations 2012). The rhetoric of global education is decidedly gendered, or, more precisely, sexed, as its divisions are based on biological sex in UN and World Bank proclamations, thereby tying women to a myth of unity through oppression. This resounding focus is certainly necessary inasmuch as women face gendered walls that prevent schooling, something that the UN has attempted to contend with, albeit in a manner that is ultimately problematic:

> Gender inequality persists and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work and economic assets, and participation in government. Violence against women continues to undermine efforts to reach all goals. Further progress to 2015 and beyond will largely depend on success on these interrelated challenges. (UN 2012, 5)

Despite the thought and good intentions that have gone into the Millennium Development Goals, the UN 2012 report lacks nuance; it notes with great aplomb that there is finally gender parity in primary school enrollment, despite the setbacks outlined above. The UN report states that "the ratio between the enrolment rate of girls and that of boys grew from 91 percent in 1999 to 97 percent in 2010 for all developing regions. The gender parity index value of 97 percent falls within the plus-or-minus three-point margin of 100 percent, the accepted measure for parity" (UN 2012, 4). What exactly defines "gender parity," and is it the same in every context and in every non-Western culture?

Before one even arrives at gender issues, there is firstly a substantial difference between access and quality, especially when local resources and needs are incompatible with Western educational interventions, which must be further scrutinized (Colclough, Kingdon, and Patrinos 2009, 1–5). The problem of intellectual and educational imperialism is especially apparent in the lack of concern for education

in the vernacular by Western educators, an impenetrable detriment to both female and male students. The central oversight of local needs at a very basic level is compounded by the inability of globalized reforms to maintain and attract qualified teachers to sustain any improvements in educational access. The best intentions, therefore, are not ultimately useful in many contexts. It follows that there is an underdeveloped understanding of the cultural specificity of education on the part of international bodies that seek to graft Western systems of knowledge onto the Global South. One such cultural factor that has yet to be fully discussed is Western constructions of gender that do not acknowledge transnational feminist principles and display a concomitant lack of awareness of tensions that exist in feminist discourse generally. An examination of transnational feminism is central to any discussion of education for women and girls in the Global South since reforms based on totalizing notions of patriarchy and femininity are problematic and limited in scope. Nonetheless, it is true that women in many parts of the world have limited options based on their gender, and violence remains an important factor that cannot be overlooked for the sake of cultural relativism. Women's education can be discussed using two lenses provided by the learning sciences and feminism—though in very different ways—which create a conceptual rupture; and it is from this conceptual rupture that essential questions arise. I begin my investigation with an overview of a multifaceted view of gender-cognizant education that connects theories of individuals with theories of cultures. I then discuss what gender theory has to offer as well as its limitations, to better understand the discourses that shape a Western understanding of patriarchy and its relationship to the world.

THE ROLE OF THE LEARNING SCIENCES

How do we address educational inequities without resorting to the extremes of cultural imperialism or cultural relativism? Of course, the line that must be walked is a thin one. I contend that a transnational feminist approach can be effective in forming collaborations in local contexts based on the fundamental agency of women, rather than prescribing Western reforms that adhere to monolithic understandings of both education and gender relations. The ways in which research is conducted with respect to individuals and societies is integrally important to the pursuit of productive partnerships across the world. The research methods that one uses, whether for psychological, sociological, or critical theory, carry both positive and negative implications that must be examined before implementation, especially when working with a global mindset. Psychology and the learning sciences have a tendency to fall into essentialism, though their contribution is necessary in understanding educational outcomes at a quantitative level. Similarly, sociology and critical theory fall short in their reliance on highly subjective concepts and a refusal to acknowledge the biological factors in human development. In both cases, there is a neglect of non-Western perspectives with regard to educational access and reform. The strengths of both camps can be harnessed to raise productive questions that clarify necessary steps to increase the quality and availability of education for women around the world.

The learning sciences offer an important way forward in understanding the uncertainties and multiplicities inherent in any discussion of identity and education. It is necessary to note that a social constructionist view of education works hand-in-hand with sociological

understandings of education. To be sure, "a sociocultural approach advances understanding of the ecological niche of human development by attending to the contributions of social and cultural experiences to psychological growth" (Gauvain 2005, 11–12). In this way, psychological and sociological perspectives work together to offer a wide-ranging, though perhaps not comprehensive, view of youth development. It is this understanding of education that begets the constructionist view of knowledge; "constructionism focuses on the connected nature of knowledge with its personal and social dimensions. This combination of individual and social aspects in learning is at the heart of many discussions in the learning sciences" (Kafai 2006, 36). More specifically, a constructionist approach necessitates an acknowledgement of education's position within the public sphere, a view that bridges the individual self and the environment that shapes it. Indeed, "because learning is viewed as a social activity, the centrality and responsibilities of different participants in the activities, as well as how they are viewed and treated by others, affects what and how they learn" (Collins and Bielaczyc 1999, 131). This becomes especially important when working with different cultures that have historically mediated contexts of their own with respect to education and issues of gender and sexuality.

These themes are especially strong in the literature on literacy, which holds that the emergence of reading skills is based on a wide range of interdependent factors at the cognitive level. In the most basic visual encounters with the written word, "sentence comprehension requires both an orthographic processor to recognize letter strings and a meaning processor to access word meanings," a process that is surely subjective in its multiple foundations and sources (Byrnes 2008, 165–66). It is this subjectivity, the interplay between learning and environmental factors, which forms the basis of a constructionist educational model. Moreover, "there is only one memory system, which stores episodic traces, and that abstract knowledge as such does not have to be stored but can be derived from the pool of traces of specific experiences at the time of retrieval," meaning that the significance given to words is contingent on individual experiences that involve complicated and multidirectional processes (Hintzman 1986, 411; this fact is echoed in Byrnes 2008, 166). At their core, the acquisition, processing, and articulation of language are based on the mingling of objective and subjective factors that are reliant on a mutual recognition of the presence, both physically and psychologically, of another person; without the recognition of one's relationship to another, the transfer of meaning and education is incomplete (O'Connell and Kowal 2008, 189–92). Therefore, literacy, as a single example, can be seen as a product of psychological bases and psychosocial shaping that are highly contingent on individual circumstances and their interaction with outside forces.

One such circumstance is gender in youth development. The connection between literacy and biological sex and the concomitant stereotypes are certainly debatable from a learning sciences standpoint, as well as from the perspective of gender studies, a concept elaborated on as I move into feminist theory (Hyde and Linn 1988, 64; Halpern and Tan 2001, 392–97). Indeed, the interaction of gender and education cannot be assessed from a purely biological or social perspective as if the two variables could be considered independently (Halpern and Tan 2001, 395). It is here that the argument transitions from a cognitive one to a sociocultural one; the combination of these two perspectives, as well as the uncertainties inherent in the categorization of knowledge in purely one camp or the other, calls for a re-evaluation

of the lens through which educators assess gender differences, especially in a global context in which "sex," "gender," and "education" may have radically different meanings and contexts.

SEX, GENDER, AND SOCIETY

As researchers focus on strictly biological differences in an effort to produce prescriptions for educating women and girls, Western feminists, anthropologists, and philosophers have attempted to problematize reforms based on gender by calling into question contemporary notions of sex and sexuality. Judith Butler's critique is perhaps the most vehement; in her analysis, gender and sex both can be considered with a social lens. Butler states, "If we accept the body as a cultural situation, then the notion of a natural body, and, indeed, a natural 'sex,' seem increasingly suspect," meaning that the body is so forcefully inscribed within societal norms that it is a "material reality that has already been located and defined within a social context" (Butler 1987, 133, 143). Butler argues that the sexed body is a constructed marker or bearer of social codes; indeed, even as the body comes into existence, it is shaped by a variety of discourses that govern its operations. Some have made the point that the evolution of culture itself has precluded the very articulation of femininity at its most basic level, leading ultimately to the viability of one gender, the masculine, which emerges as the dominant cultural force in the tradition of Western post-structural critique. What, exactly, is the nature of this "cultural situation" of which Butler speaks? There is little doubt that it stems from a deeply Western understanding of gender relations that is meant to apply equally in different cultures, though non-Western cultures are implicated in the production of Eurocentric, especially French, feminist discourse. For example, the work of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and the analyses that follow it concretize the conceptual subjugation of women in the form of kinship systems and incest taboos that exist in both capitalist and pre-capitalist societies; however, this sentiment, though foundational, falls into the trap of assuming that patriarchy is the pre-condition of culture and is thus pre-cultural and universal. A focus on the structures of society that create gender imbalances is central to feminist theory, but it follows that this process can only be carried out within and among the bounds of specific cultures. As transnational critics point out, there is no universal patriarchy and, by extension, no international fixes for education.

It is clear that modern feminist theory takes on a universalizing tone without acknowledging its Western-centric roots. The literary theorist and philosopher Gayatri Spivak argues that the primacy of French and American intellectuals in the production of knowledge points to an urge to position Europe as the Subject and the condescending construction of the "Third World" as an unknowable Other that serves as a reinforcement of the Western subject (Spivak 1988). Similarly, Chandra Mohanty points out the difficulty in finding a solution, as "there are no simple ways of representing these diverse struggles and histories," a fact that stems from the "intersecting progressive discourses (e.g., white feminist, third world nationalist, socialist) … [and] politically regressive racist, imperialist, sexual discourses of slavery, colonialism and contemporary capitalism" that inhabit a postcolonial world (Mohanty 1991, 4). It is in the creation of a universal patriarchy or feminine oppression that Western scholarship assumes to know and take on the multifaceted struggles and successes of women in the Global South (Mohanty 2003, 20–21). This tendency is manifest in several interlocking ways, beginning with the assumption of the "Third World Woman," a product of the Western cultural consciousness, being always in opposition to the Western woman, inasmuch as the former's exclusion from modernity has disallowed her freedom over her body and sexual practices (Mohanty 2003, 22). This produces a feeling of separateness between Western and Global feminism. The former is purportedly based on self-directed reforms and a Western illusion of "correct" gender cognizance, while the latter appears to be in need of outside intervention from the "enlightened" bearers of sexual and educational knowledge.

Western-centric reasoning is apparent in international policy. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) points out that educational access has improved with the implementation of Western educational reforms, though they are not explicitly named as such (UNESCO 2003, 17). What are the standards by which these gains are measured, and who decides when these prescriptions have been successfully implemented? What is more important is the lack of understanding of gender relations with respect to education in non-Western settings, which leads policymakers to look for ways to target the specific educational needs of non-Western women and girls without direct consultation and collaboration with local micro cultures (UNESCO 2003, 18). This task has yet to be properly undertaken, which leads to an imposition of foreign understandings of gender and sex in pursuit of a curricular model that is specific to female-bodied individuals, such as the inclusion of a gender-cognizant curriculum or the recruitment of female teachers, two reforms proposed by UNESCO that do not necessarily translate into equality (UNESCO 2003, 19).

It is important to point out that "texts do not simply represent dominant beliefs in some straightforward way, and if dominant cultures contain contradictions, fissures, and even elements of the culture of popular groups, then our readings of what knowledge is 'in' texts cannot be done by the application of a single formula" (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991, 13). It follows that curricular reforms and changes in the teaching environment are not sufficient for gender equality, especially when imposed from the outside, as the factors that mediate youth development are too numerous to adhere to simple formulas. From a conceptual standpoint, essentialist statements about gender issues across the world do not acknowledge the absence of a universal patriarchy or set of gender relations. This is not to say that women in both the Global North and the Global South do not face challenges, nor does it mean that policymakers should adopt a relativist standpoint that overlooks the gendered atrocities that take place every day in every part of the world. The central dilemma is how to reconcile reform movements with an understanding of both transnational feminism and an awareness of the biases inherent in the Western construction of gender relations, all while keeping in mind the cognitive and psychological foundations of learning.

A CALL TO ACTION

Preparatory research for UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2012 takes a different approach to address gender disparities in education, though it is only briefly mentioned. Arvil Adams argues in this report for skills development and vocational training, noting specifically that, although women face discrimination in many markets, "there are exceptions to this … [rule] in newer occupational specializations such as information technology where employment has not yet had time to form gender-specific patterns. Here access to technical and vocational skills for young women can make a differ-

ence to their employment opportunities" (Adams 2011, 7). This shifts the focus from developing an ambiguous set of skills as dictated by a Western educational model to an active preparation of students to enter the public sphere in their own culture. Still, this mindset might be tainted with capitalist ideals, especially considering the legacy of colonialism (Mohanty 1991, 3). Unfortunately, there is no stable vision for an equitable solution.

An essential starting point is to recognize both the complexity of the problem and the West's inscription within it, rather than naively seeing only a well-meaning cry for educational change. Indeed, Martha Kumsa sums up the central tenets of a global task: "I see Self and Other as inseparably intertwined relational processes. ... I can understand why some feminists could not see any other form of oppression but gender. I see why human rights activists so fiercely point away from themselves towards Others when it comes to human rights violations" (Kumsa 2012, 319). It is in the realization of this relational process that true reforms can be made, reforms that are set in motion by local communities in an effort to provide people what they want for themselves and their families. In understanding the West's particular notions of gender and education reform, policymakers can mediate the conceptual problems that accompany identity-based research and activism.

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