Girls, gender and intersecting inequalities in education: A reflection from case studies in South Africa and Kenya

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Aim: This paper examines engagements with global and national government policy on gender and education in Kenya and South Africa showing how work has primarily focussed on interventions for gender parity and that a challenge remains to develop an engagement with intersecting inequalities.

Participants: Researchers at universities in UK, South Africa and Kenya have used quasi-action research design to engage participants in ten case study sites (five in each country) in reflective discussion of policy on gender, education and poverty reduction initiatives.

Methodology: Case study research in South Africa and Kenya using interviews, document analysis, focus group discussions and observations collected over two years in the national Ministry/Department of Education, a provincial department of education, a school, an NGO based in the capital city engaging with the global MDG agenda, and an NGO working in a rural location.

Limitations: In an attempt both to provide an overview of literature on poverty, gender, girls and intersecting inequalities since UNGEI was launched in 2000, and to report on the findings from a research project, the paper is not able to go into either area in great depth. Limitations associated with the research component include difficulties for some participants to explore the issues, share documents or work with certain research methods.

Analysis: The first part of the paper discusses the ways in which gender, girls and education have been written about in work on various forms of social division, notably literature on poverty, race, ethnicity, class, location, disability and age. It argues that analyses of intersectionality, not generally used in work on international development, is particularly useful in considering the ways in which inequalities form and are formed by each other, so that, for example, multi-dimensional aspects of poverty that go beyond income and include relational dimensions of denigration, exclusion and limited time for leisure will shape girls' engagements with schooling, while at the same time the structures of schooling are shaped by intersecting inequalities relating, for example, to location, race or availability of food. In this literature too little attention is given to understanding poor girls' interactions concerning schooling.

In assessing some of the achievements worldwide in expanding access to schooling for girls, it is evident the largest challenges remain in relation to areas of intersecting inequalities associated with gender, poverty, disability, location and racial or ethnic divisions. Detailed

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discussion of enrolment and progression patterns in South Africa and Kenya show that, despite education policies that particularly emphasised gender equality and education for all there are huge challenges in securing provision of learning and teaching in all areas of the country and for all children.

Data from the research study highlight how, despite the significance of intersecting inequalities in relation to the delivery and experience of schooling, government departments dealing with education, health, social development and women’s affairs do not co-ordinate their work and that, outside the national department, gender and education policy is not shared, discussed or acted on with strategic understanding of how change in gendered relations of education might come about. Initiatives on girls or gender take the form of limited interventions and the establishment of an institutional space to address intersecting inequalities has either not begun or remains preliminary. What forms of participation exist for policy discussion are controlled or regulated, making engagements with power difficult and undermining a politics of accountability. A very few sites appear to be emerging in schools in South Africa and Kenya associated with clubs organised inside and outside school by governments and NGOs where girls are encouraged to reflect on disabling conditions in their lives and strategise for change. However the overarching focus associated with EFA, the MDGs and national education policy in both countries is on parity of enrolments or test scores, an approach that is gender neutral. This overlooks the significance of intersecting inequalities, the ways in which schools teach particular gendered relations, the importance of institutionalising equality, and the potential of a politics associated with wide ownership, accountability, debate and redress of gender injustices.