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Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

Gender equality in education in Benin: summary of case study

Lea Gaba-Afouda
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Benin has signed the International Declaration on Education for All (EFA) and has ratified various conventions related to discrimination against women. Girls education has subsequently become a priority for the country and a national policy for access and equity in education has been defined, with a particular focus on reducing disparities between boys' and girls' enrolment and opportunities in education. In 1991, 327,081 boys were enrolled in school as compared to 163,048 girls. The literacy rate is presently 24% for women compared to 47.5% for men. Three principal causes create obstacles related to girls education: economic and material; (school constitutes an expense that many poor families cannot afford), sociocultural beliefs and practices (it is not felt necessary for girls to be educated in school); and limitations within the education system itself which are not suited to the needs, expectations and problems of the population: inflexibility of school timetables, shortage of teachers in rural areas, etc. which lead to high levels of failure among girls.

Different reforms in recent years have attempted to correct this problem, particularly the reform in primary education which seeks to reduce disparities between girls' and boys' access to and performance in education. Since the academic year 1993-1994 there has been a move to increase and improve girls schooling, with a National Network for the Education of Girls (RNPSF) being established. Gender stereotypes are being progressively eliminated from textbooks and other teaching learning materials. Pre-service and inservice teacher education seek to include measures to introduce the concept of gender equity.

In spite of these efforts, norms and beliefs in Beninois society continue to be strongly influenced by the cultural view that women are subordinate to men.

Educational policy in Benin

Since the Jomtien Conference, the Government of Benin has decided to make Education for All a developmental priority. Educational policy focuses on the importance of values in education (intellectual, social, moral and cultural). In 1996, a specific policy stance was adopted related to access and equity in education with the intention of "reducing the disparities between gender and ensuring access of girls and women to education and improving the quality of education which they receive as well as reducing the obstacles they face in participating in education".

Content of curriculum and trends in student choices.

Nothing is indicated in the content of the primary level curriculum to suggest gender inequalities. In the secondary curriculum only a small number of girls follow traditionally "masculine" options such as maths and sciences, and are vastly outnumbered by boys. This trend may be similarly observed in higher education. In 2001-2002 of a total of 1006 students enrolled at the Centre Polytechnique Universitaire, only 203 were female. In the Faculty of Technical Sciences, of 2003 students enrolled, 242 were female.

In technical vocational education boys and girls alike are expected to follow all subjects, with previously optional subjects such as sewing, home economics and drawing now taught to all students.

School hours are long and inflexible, favouring boys over girls due to the socio-economic practice where girls are expected to do large amounts of work in the home.

Teaching methods also tend to favour boys. Most teachers are male and consciously or unconsciously perpetuate and reinforce gender stereotypes and unequal treatment of girls. New teaching approaches advocate participation of all students but this has not yet been seen to have much effect on the motivation and participation of girls in reality. In general, the content of curriculum is not particularly gender sensitive.

HIV/AIDS

Education for HIV/AIDS has been introduced into the school curriculum from the fifth year of primary school. The areas of focus are: knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases; knowledge of HIV/AIDS and its means of transmission and effects; prevention of HIV and promotion of social well-being; community solidarity with people living with HIV/AIDS. There is no specific focus put on gender issues in this curriculum.

Textbooks and other teaching-learning materials

As mentioned, these have been revised in an effort to eliminate gender stereotypes in terms of text and images. However, there is a large proportion of male textbook writers/designers compared to women. Of the 35 writers/designers for primary education, 9 are women. At secondary level, of 75 writers overall, there are only 19 women.

Teachers and teacher education

In the academic year 2001-2002 there was a total of 16,728 male teachers compared to 4138 female teachers at primary level. The percentage of women teachers at this level is 24%. At the secondary level, there are 6349 male teachers compared to 894 female teachers. There is a greater number of women in government schools than in private schools. In state schools they are most numerous in the science subjects. There are 522 women teachers in private schools compared to 3899 men. Here they are mainly in temporary posts and principally teach biology. Male teachers dominate in maths and physics. There are also few female teachers in the area of foreign language teaching.

The ratio of female to male teacher educators is very low. For example, in the academic year 1998-99 of a total of 137 primary student teachers beginning their training (of which only 10 were women) there was a total of 37 trainers of which only 2 were women. The content and methods of teacher education are not specifically gender sensitive and there is no special policy to encourage greater female participation.

School environment

Schools are mixed throughout Benin although there are a number of single sex school confessional schools. In the context of the educational reform, a minimum of facilities is demanded in all schools in an attempt to improve quality. Toilets in school are separated. There is no systematic provision of health or counselling services in schools.

There are legal texts which stipulate that sexual abuse of students by teachers or fellow students (teenage pregnancy, rape etc.) should be punished. However, these are not rigorously applied and are inadequate in protecting girls rights. A revision of these texts is presently underway.

Representation of women in decision making

The ratio of women to men at decision making levels in the education system is low. Within the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education there are 4 women in a total of 14 and one female director out of a total of 6 overall.

Monitoring and evaluation

There is no system of monitoring and evaluating gender policies in Benin.