

Can We Really Attain Gender Equality in Education?

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Abstract:

Background: Gender inequality has been a topic of concern for decades, as historically societies have perceived the role of a woman to differ from that of a male. Despite the seemingly attainable SDG four and five set by the UN to be achieved by the year 2030, the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has affected social, political, and economic factors thereby impinging upon the SDG attainment. The closure of educational institutions relied on a rapid transition from face-to-face education to remote learning utilizing online methods of teaching students. This digression has questioned if gender equality can be attained in education post-pandemic. Hence, this study aims to determine if gender equality in education can be attained post- pandemic. There is an endeavor to identifying challenges and provide recommendations to attain gender equality in education within the new normal world.

Materials and Methods: A systematic literature review is carried out via a thorough literature search using published and grey literature sources. Manual and electronic literature sources are searched using a well-planned process where literary sources are searched, identified, extracted, analyzed, and interpreted. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are devised, and primary literature sources are selected.

Results: Results have revealed the following challenges pertaining to the attainment of gender equality in education that are being discussed in this study: Financial constraints, culture and traditions, area of residence and societal mindsets, marriage and violence, self-motivation.

Conclusion: This study has deduced that gender equality can be achieved in education, however there is a need for substantial commitment and collaboration to ensure equality can be attained in a timely manner. New goals need to be devised and implemented to ensure educational institutions work with students and external employers to provide equal opportunities to men and women. Simultaneously, educating societies on the importance of educating females for the betterment of family life and societal development is imperative. However, women need to ensure they have a goal they would like to achieve and cultivate self-motivation and self-belief to implement and achieve their set goals. It is only by working together that gender equality can be achieved post-pandemic in the fastest manner.

Key Word: Covid-19, Education, Gender equality, SDG

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I. Introduction

Gender inequality has been a topic of concern for decades, as societies perceived the role of a woman to differ from that of a male. Historically women were deemed as homemakers, child bearers and ethical keepers of the home and in society [1]. In contrast, males consumed the role of financial providers and protectors of the family while dealing external affairs. Over time in many parts of the world, progression has been made as women right's policies were implemented through which they exercised their rights to vote. Simultaneously, women started to work outside their homes in employment positions earning a wage [2]. Often male children were given priority over the female offspring within families; thus, the privileges of education were initially given to the male children opposed to their female counterparts because families expected males to provide for them in the future. The girls were given training on duties around the house and homemaking duties, however in contemporary life, education is a fundamental right to each child despite gender societal status. It has been highlighted that educated girls "saves lives and builds stronger families, communities and economies. An educated female population increases a country's productivity and fuels economic growth" [3]. Society has witnessed the vital contribution educated individuals can make to ensure economic, political, and societal growth and stability. Nevertheless, despite vast efforts made to ensure the educational equalities, many disparities are still evident particularly in developing countries and rural areas. Progression made to achieve gender equality following the guidance provided by the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This was also disrupted due to the covid-19 pandemic which has created a global upheaval affecting social, economic, and political factors [4]

The SDGs comprise of seventeen goals which have been devised to ensure “dignity, peace and prosperity for people and the planet” [5]. The two SDG’s concerning this study include SDG 4 is ‘Quality Education’ and SDG 5 ‘Gender equality and empower all women and girls’. SDG 4 is vital as it focuses on the importance to education entitlement, inclusivity and encouraging lifelong learning, while SDG 5 provides women and girls with “equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large” [6]. A nation comprising of well-educated individuals that have been subject to quality education, facilitates individuals belonging to lower-socioeconomic backgrounds to break the poverty cycle that they experience. Women will have the tools to ensure they develop a sustainable and healthy way of living. In addition, individuals will learn about diverse cultures and relationships, through which innovative solutions can be devised to ensure peace, tolerance and unity is cultivated strengthening societies. To ensure quality education goals are attained by the year 2030 the UN have developed the following targets:

4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and Goal-4 effective learning outcomes

4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university

4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship

4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development

4.A Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

4.B By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

4.C By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states” [7].

Similarly, the UN have devised SDG 5: ‘Gender equality and empower all women and girls’. “Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” [6]. The following nine targets have been devised with the aim of eliminating gender inequalities by 2030:

5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

5.A Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws

5.B Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women

5.C Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels” [8].

Despite the seemingly attainable goals four and five set by the UN to be achieved by the year 2030, the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has affected social, political and economic factors thereby impinging upon the SDG attainment. The closure of educational institutions relied on a rapid transition from face-to-face education to remote learning utilising online methods of teaching students [9]. This digression has questioned if gender equality can be attained in education post-pandemic. Hence, this study aims to determine if gender equality in education can be attained post- pandemic. There is an endeavour to identifying challenges and provide recommendations to attain gender equality in education within the new normal world.

II. Material And Methods

A systematic literature review is carried out via a thorough literature search using published and grey literature sources. Manual and electronic literature sources are searched using the following: Google scholar, Scopus, JSTOR and Springer. Literature sources searched include journal articles, books, magazines, and trusted articles. The following research questions have been devised:

- What is gender inequality in education?
- What challenges do females incur when trying to educate themselves?
- How has the covid-19 pandemic impinged upon gender equality in education?
- What are the current SDGs that have been devised to progress quality education and gender equality?
- What steps can be taken to eradicate inequalities in education in the new normal world?

Inclusion criteria:

This study follows a well-planned process where literary sources are searched, identified, extracted, analyzed, and interpreted. A preliminary keyword search is carried out using the following words: Education, Students, Education, Educators, Covid-19, SDGs, Women, Females, Gender inequality, New normal. As numerous literature sources are identified it is necessary to extract the relevant literary sources answering the research questions, hence the following exclusion criteria has been developed.

Exclusion criteria:

- Literature irrelevant to quality education are excluded
- Literature focusing only on gender equality are omitted
- Literature written in languages other than English are overlooked
- Literature pertaining to COVID-19 unrelated to quality education and gender equality are disregarded
- Literature which does not deliver adequate technical information regarding their approach are not used

Procedure methodology

In total, forty-three literature sources have been identified and extracted for further investigation. Upon further analysis of the abstracts two are duplicated and not used. Further analysis of the abstracts and introductions resulted in two literary sources being excluded which has left thirty-nine literature sources. Due to a lack of implementation details another literary source is removed. In total thirty-eight literature sources have been selected through the process and utilized as primary literature sources.

III. Result and Discussion

Results have revealed the following challenges pertaining to the attainment of gender equality in education that are being discussed in this study: Financial constraints, culture and traditions, area of residence and societal mindsets, marriage and violence, self-motivation.

Financial constraints

The economic effects of the covid-19 pandemic have resulted in numerous redundancies, furlough, and inability to find financial stability [10]. This has resulted in the inability to pay tuition fees impacting the progression of student education which has led to numerous individuals ceasing their education or deferring their year [11]. The transition from face-to-face education to remote learning using technological platforms was sudden and required students to have access to appropriate hardware and software to continue learning. In addition, an essential element of continuing education relied on access to sufficient internet connectivity without which attaining knowledge became impossible [12]. Although the world is learning to cope with instability occurring through the pandemic, national and international governing body restrictions are being lifted, the progression made to achieve good quality student education is significantly lower than pre-pandemic. The inability for students to recommence education physically at their educational institutions has occurred due to the lack of financial resources and additional family responsibilities that have occurred during the period of lockdown. This is more dominant for students belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds where financial resources are extremely restricted, thereby capable female students have been required to leave their education to conduct manual or domestic labor to feed themselves [13].

Culture and traditions

Students residing with family or within a community are bound by actions governed by cultural and traditional views. When individuals are educated successfully then they have the skills and knowledge to overcome challenges and move with changing societies. It allows the preservation, development, and transmission of societal culture. Thus, there is an unbreakable relationship between education and culture [14]. Cultural awareness aids an individual to adjust to their natural social situations and personality development, social aspects, understanding freedom and tolerance. Generally, cultural, and traditional values are imparted to students through their family life, community exposure and their educational institutions [15]. Students are educated on a culture that has been evolving through learnings of past generations within a society that has been demonstrated through their actions, belief systems, morals, and habits. Individuals have the power to feel a sense of belonging and self-identity simultaneously have the ability to voice unjust societal norms contributing to positive change. Thereby continuing education and the generation of new ideas, values and attitudes is possible. It is important for individuals to learn cultural values and what is deemed normal so that societies can progress post-pandemic. Culture influences the way students participate in their educational endeavors. Although students learn to acquire knowledge independently cultural influences impact the way students partake within educational activities [16]. Throughout the pandemic students have been studying independently and

utilizing self-motivation to continue education, simultaneously develop critical thinking skills to overcome challenges [17]. Through education, individuals become aware of diversity in values, traditions, and societal norms as they are subject to information, knowledge and materials towards personality development and working with other people.

Area of residence and societal mindset

Within residences the onus has been placed on women to carry out unpaid domestic and care work within the home due to the covid-19 pandemic [18]. As a result of the increased unpaid workload, women have lost their employment positions or have been required not take additional employment opportunities to increase revenue. In fact, it has been highlighted that woman spend approximately two and a half times as many hours as their male counterparts on unpaid care work and domestic duties [19]. Many rural areas still cultivate the mindset that women should stay at home and men should go and work outside and earn the money otherwise they are not worthy of being a man as per societal mindsets. There has been a rise in negative mental health challenges due to the covid-19 pandemic amongst students [20]. There has been a rise in the number of students feeling lonely, anxious, and depressed due to uncertainties and rapid changes during the pandemic, worries regarding academic achievement including examinations, tuition fee payment and also disrupted routines are contributing factors. These feelings of instability and insecurity has led to increased consumption of alcohol and drugs intake [21]. In addition, the heightened stress levels can lead to “cardiovascular disease, the future manifestation of hypertension related to the individual ‘s response to stress, metabolic syndrome, obesity, emotional overeating, while stress fuels approximately 50% of depression” [13].

Student’s residing in remote geographical areas or rural areas have been subject to insufficient internet connectivity which has hindered the acquisition of education. Low bandwidth and insufficient network coverage has resulted in students being unable to participate in live interactive sessions with their educators and peers. In addition, the unstable connectivity resulted in a delay in assignments and assessments impinging upon grade attainment [4]. When students do not reach their desired grade, they feel disappointed and demotivated in continuing educating themselves, this is facilitated by societal mindsets that are required to motivate female students towards achieving their goals opposed to deterring them due to traditional thought processes or historic mindsets. When female students have been provided with positivity, encouragement, and quality education to progress towards attaining their educational goals, their qualifications will permit entry into good employment positions, challenge the gender pay gap and enter positions of power. Gradually, organisations are implementing legislations to ensure a decrease in the gender pay gap with equal pay audits, employing individuals in roles that non-gender specific providing equal opportunities. However, “according to the United Nations it will take one hundred and thirty years until gender equality is reached within positions of power” [13]. From September 2021 only twenty-six women over twenty-four countries that served as Heads of State of Government [22]. The diverse thinking that is generated by males and females together will ensure a faster recovery post-pandemic.

Marriage and violence

Students belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds and are of marriage age have been less likely to return to their educational institution to continue education due to the covid-19 pandemic According to the UNESDOC there is a probability that eleven million girls may not return back to school particularly girls aged between the ages of twelve and seventeen [23]. They have been immersed in domestic duties and subject to marriage responsibilities. Dependent on societal mindsets particularly in rural areas, women are traditionally perceived to look after the home, bare children and consume the role of ethical keepers as per historical contexts. Many cultures give preference to educating their male children in comparison to females, as they are traditionally perceived to stay with the family who will then contribute to generation of revenue and improved quality of life. Whereas the female student will get married and look after her in-laws and carry out associated household duties, thus females are deemed as a lower investment in some societies particularly within developing countries. There is a systemic subordination which automatically prioritizes male offspring over females. An entrenched patriarchy system not only prioritizes male offspring in comparison to females, but also restricts the utilization of sanitary facilities like access to clean water and toilet facilities. For students belonging to higher socio-economic backgrounds female students are usually well-educated and then have the power to educate their families, children and attain good positions of power through which income is generated and contribute to the overall quality of life. An educated female has the power to educate her family, future generations and impact the society that she resides in.

The number of females encountering violent acts and subject to domestic violence cases have increased during the pandemic. Figures have stated that pre-pandemic approximately one out of three women globally or seven-hundred and thirty-six million females from fifteen years of age have been subject to sexual or physical violence, the perpetrator is usually an intimate partner. It is the right of every female

to live with dignity in addition to “contributing as equal partners in development in an environment free from violence and discrimination. And, well nurtured children with full opportunities for growth and development in a safe and protective environment” [24]. It is a human rights violation to subject any women or girl to violent acts [25]. Despite this knowledge, results have indicated that over the next ten years, approximately ten million females are at risk of child marriages over the next ten years on top of the estimated one-hundred million victims of child marriages pre-pandemic [26]. Reports generated from women working on the front line during the pandemic have highlighted an increase in violence cases and a heightened number of domestic violence cases [27]. The rise in violence against women cases overwhelmed shelters and helplines resulting in very little available essential support. The healthcare systems were trying to cope with the covid-19 global health burden with the vast number of individuals requiring urgent medical attention to survive [28].

Self-motivation

“Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors” [29] and “an energizing force that stimulates arousal, direction, and persistence of behaviour” [30]. It includes emotional, biological, cognitive and social factors that stimulate behavior that is vital within the workplace, particularly as employees work from home. It is “the force that drives you to do things” [31] and enables individuals to work towards their goals self-development, and personal fulfillment [32]. To achieve educational success, it is important for students to set long-term and short-term goals which can be achieved through self-motivation. By cultivating a desire to learn through self-motivation and self-belief, success can be achieved as more students will continue education and improved mental health challenges will be highlighted. Educators can facilitate student self-motivation by providing good communication channels through which emotions and expectations can be managed, thereby shaping behaviors [33]. During the educational process students can experience heightened stress levels which can result in mental health challenges, however stress is important at reduced levels to increase performance levels and cultivate the motivation towards success [34].

IV. Conclusion

This study has deduced that gender equality can be achieved in education however there is a need for substantial commitment and collaboration to ensure equality can be attained in a timely manner. New goals need to be devised and implemented to ensure educational institutions work with students and external employers to provide equal opportunities to men and women. Simultaneously, educating societies on the importance of educating females for the betterment of family life and societal development is imperative. There is no doubt that gender inequality in education and within society is still present globally, and it is prevalent amongst lower income communities where mindsets are still evolving towards gender equality. A shift in mindsets is imperative as society becomes more educated to the consequences of violent acts, forced marriages and the need for educated individuals to contribute to societal upliftment is vital. The unpaid domestic and care work needs to be shared between the genders opposed to holding females responsible to take on all responsibilities. Females should have equal rights to every service available including financial services that will help students to fund their education and start up business ventures post-education. Not only is there a need for gender equality in education, but there is also a requirement for societies to ensure social, economic, and political equality. As societies acquire well-educated individuals and eradicate gender bias, there will be a positive impact upon social, personal, and economic development simultaneously human capital will increase. It is essential to educate women equally to men in society despite their ethnicity, background, or geographical location. This can be achieved through collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organisations to work with local communities, educate individuals and raise awareness. In addition to providing women with adequate support both financially and facilitating confidence building. However, women need to ensure they have a goal they would like to achieve and cultivate self-motivation and self-belief to implement and achieve their set goals. It is only by working together that gender equality can be achieved post-pandemic in the fastest manner.

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