

Full Length Research Paper

Gender equity in education: An analysis of perceptions of Masvingo urban female students, parents and teachers towards the maternity leave policy for high school girls in Zimbabwe

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The study examined the perceptions of Masvingo urban female students, parents and teachers towards the maternity leave policy for high school girls in Zimbabwe. A qualitative paradigm and the descriptive survey method were adopted. The qualitative paradigm was selected because the issue under study yields soft data. A descriptive survey was suitable for a relatively large sample. The paradigm lends itself to the use of in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires which were the two instruments used to collect data from sixty-eight purposively sampled respondents from a population of forty-eight teachers and two hundred and twenty students from thirteen high schools. Collected data were presented in narrative form and qualitatively analysed. The main findings revealed that most parents, students and teachers were against the policy whilst a few were in favour although parents and teachers wanted it to be amended and reduced to a mere disciplinary document which is known to administrators only. It is recommended that Ministry authorities should consult stakeholders before introducing policies which are sensitive in nature.

Key words: Gender equity, teenage, teenage pregnancy, maternity leave, female.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In traditional and modern Zimbabwe, gender equity in education, socially, economically, politically and in other dimensions has not been fully achieved except in a partial way in some spheres of life. This owes to perceptions predicated on culture with regard to the statuses and position of the boy and girl based on gender differences. In the universe of this study, gender equity means that "males and females have equal opportunities in terms of social and cultural developments" (Sahin, 2010). The implication is that males and females will benefit equally in these dimensions rather than continuing with approaches which are men-centred. Most governments in developing countries including Zimbabwe recognise the principle that education is a fundamental

human right (UNGEI, 2009; Watkins, 2000). Studies reveal that boys are treated differently from girls, but thanks to the fight for women's rights worldwide, inequalities in education have been reduced considerably in recent decades and Zimbabwe, in particular is no exception to this development (Kapungu, 2007:6; Watkins, 2000).

The teenage girl in Zimbabwe has of late received considerable attention from government and non-governmental organisations covering virtually all facets of life economically, politically and socially but more so in education (Nziramasanga, 1999). The World Bank is a partner and one of many players in the international drive to improve gender equality and empower girls and

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women. World Bank activities focus on assisting countries' own efforts to advance gender equality. Through its lending and non-lending activities, the Bank has helped to improve the lives of girls in client countries. Zimbabwe is a signatory to several conventions and has also introduced a plethora of laws which seek to improve the plight of women (UNESCO Monitoring Report, 2003/4) for instance, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Summit for Children and the 1990 World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand. Zimbabwe also signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence (1991) and the Global Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration (1995) and introduced gender sensitive legislation such as the Sexual Offences Act in 2001 (FAO, 2012; Saito, 2011). These were put in place to promote gender equality and protect women's rights. Above all, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development was mandated to oversee the development of gender programmes and facilitate gender mainstreaming. The impression which emerges is that the legal framework is favourable but this is not matched by action on the ground in many spheres of life moreso in education.

Gross enrolment rates for girls in most developing countries went up from fifty-two percent to ninety four percent in 2005. However, the rate of girl dropouts is still worrisome (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNIGEI), 2010). The Zimbabwean situation as of 2005 was that there was gender equity in terms of enrolment but the completion rate was still a cause for concern owing to family poverty and teenage pregnancy. Girls especially at secondary school level are affected by teenage pregnancy. Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey [ZDHS] (2011) revealed that six percent of women are sexually active by fifteen years. They are at a stage where they experiment with sex and most of them are caught in the wrong net, hence the increase in the dropout rate (Country Analysis Report for Zimbabwe, 2010; Watkins, 2000). With the prevalence of HIV and AIDS, young people between the ages of 15 and 24 make up approximately half of all new infections, with girls and young women being particularly vulnerable (UNICEF, 2008). Thus gender disparities due to many causes such as HIV/AIDS still remain throughout the education system since the completion rates of boys and girls are different. World Bank Education Statistics (2008) noted that girls have higher dropout numbers and the reasons for this situation such as pregnancy and the need to care for the family are unique to girls.

The relationship between academic failure and teenage pregnancy is quite strong since the latter affects the educational achievement of girls as well as that of their children (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Why it Matters?* 2009). High teen birthrates are of great concern because teen mothers and babies face

increased risks to their health especially in this era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and their opportunities to build a future are diminished. Only forty percent of teenagers who have children before the age of fifteen go on to graduate from high school compared to seventy five percent of teens from similar social and economic backgrounds who do not give birth until the ages of twenty or twenty one (Country Analysis Report for Zimbabwe, 2010; Watkins, 2000). Thus, parenthood is a leading cause of school dropout among teen girls. With education cut short and disturbed, teenage mothers may lack job skills making it difficult for them to land good jobs and some end up dependent on other family members or on public assistance. This leads them to live in poverty (UNICEF, 2009). UNGEI (2010) affirms that gender equity is smart economics which aims at poverty reduction. There are several compelling benefits associated with girls' education, which include the reduction of child and maternal mortality, improvement of child nutrition and health, lower fertility rates, enhancement of women's domestic roles and their political participation, improvement of economic productivity and growth, and protection of girls from HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation.

IRIN (2012) states that Education, Sport, Arts and Culture Minister of Zimbabwe, said over fifty percent of young girls meant to go to secondary education were being forced to drop out because of various reasons, chief among these being early pregnancy, unavailability of funds and societal preference to educate the boy child at the expense of the girl child. Reference has been made above to the increased risk of girls becoming pregnant while still enrolled in school (Hanchett, 2008; Rao, 2004). While there are barriers to gender equity as the above picture reflects, there is need for a policy environment which addresses the education needs of girls, a gender sensitive school environment and a home and community environment which is adequately supportive (Finsterbuseh, 2009; Offorma, 2009; Watkins, 2000). As pointed out elsewhere, the legislation environment is girl-friendly but perhaps not so in terms of Education Policy.

Prior to 1996, a girl who fell pregnant at school in Zimbabwe attracted expulsion with no possibility of re-admission into the mainstream school system after giving birth. She could, however, further her education through the informal education system. According to the Secretary's Circular Minute Number 35 of October 1999, girl pregnancy at secondary school level became a misconduct and disciplinary issue punishable by exclusion from school. However, the girl could regain entry elsewhere after giving birth and taking care of the child. This caused the girl child to lag behind in school which led IRIN (2012) to consider falling pregnant at school as a disgrace to the family. Consequently, the girl would suffer at home and at school because the Zimbabwean culture is conservative with regard to pregnancy at school. The situation is worsened by the Zimbabwean national culture

in which there exists a 'son syndrome' or first dollar to the male child which entails giving preferences to sons over daughters and placing value on the male child as compared to the female child (Gaidzwanwa, 2012:2). It is not surprising that the Nziramasanga Commission (1999) which looked into the entire education system discovered that a high percentage of dropouts in schools were of girls and most of them due to pregnancy. The commission expressed great concern about the ill-treatment the teenage girl was given by the school administration and education authorities.

In August 2010, the government amended the disciplinary code and granted maternity leave for girls up to three months instead of automatic exclusion for girls who fell pregnant as a result of consensual sex. If the pregnancy resulted from rape, the Head of the concerned school would discuss with the parents to transfer the child to some other school and arrange for professional counselling. After giving birth, the student would gain re-entry into the mainstream school system. It was hoped this would improve the completion rate for the teenage girl although she would finish later than her counterparts. A male student who made a girl pregnant would qualify for paternity. The reasoning was that paternity leave would inculcate a sense of responsibility for the actions of the boys who had been exempted for a long time. This research does not focus on the male student but the female student who is adversely affected by the disciplinary code. Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 make up approximately half of all new infections, with girls and young women being particularly vulnerable.

The policy on maternity leave was rescinded and revised in September 2010 after pressure from parents, religious and traditional leaders who felt the move would increase promiscuity among students. The Minister of Education, Sport and Culture made the clarification that students might be suspended, excluded or expelled from school. However, an exception was made to female students who fell pregnant. Pregnant girls would be allowed to continue learning depending on the circumstances of each individual case. There seems to be some vagueness in the revised policy but essentially, the position does not differ in substance from the policy as announced in August 2010 with regard to the girl child.

Morris Mutisi in his *Manica Post* Column of 24 September 2010 (a Zimbabwean Weekly Newspaper) reported that he conducted group interviews with high school female students to determine their views and perceptions on the policy in August and September 2010. He established that the majority of the girls were against the policy as they felt that it encouraged promiscuity at a time when girls were supposed to be serious with their school work. However, very few supported the policy as they thought it brought about gender equity. It is significant to note that Mutisi did not interview parents to establish their perceptions and this segment of society merits consideration in an enquiry of this nature.

Mufuka (2010) in the column "A Letter from America" in the *Financial Gazette* on the site (<http://www.google.com>) says that to give a female student maternity leave is to assume erroneously that she is an employee and yet she will be under the guardianship of her parents. Mufuka (2010) further says that the policy celebrates negativity and moral looseness. In a way, the policy imitates the "world" by which he means the United States of America and Europe who have such policies in some of their schools. The columnist is opposed to the policy as he feels that its implications were not well appreciated. It is significant to note that Mufuka (2010) did not carry out research as such but simply made critical observations on the policy. There is real need to engage the real people affected such as female students which this research sought to do.

In a related study by Chiweshe (2010) the policy, a mixed picture emerged though he did not reveal the exact character of his respondents. He established that child protection activists supported it since the policy advocated for gender equality. Zimbabwean culture influences perceptions towards girl pregnancy and it is significant to note that child protection activists viewed the policy professionally without regard to cultural considerations. It is not surprising because most of the child protection agencies in Zimbabwe are donor-funded and tend to dance to the tune of their Western donors.

Chiweshe (2010) also established that other conservative groups (probably church and traditional leaders) considered it taboo and unmentionable in African culture to allow girls to get pregnant let alone introduce policies which promote it. The Zimbabwean culture has norms and values with regard to marriage. These cultural values and norms such as that early marriage is a taboo influence perceptions people have towards the pregnancy of the teenage girl. The process is reduplicated at school which is a site for secondary socialization which perpetuates traits of primary socialization. Chiweshe (2010) further observes that the policy promotes promiscuity and engenders a permissive climate at a time when children are experimenting with sex. The policy also removes the consequences of irresponsible behaviour on the part of the student. Furthermore, it fails to address the stigma the girls experience at the hands of teachers and fellow students. Girls are liable to become victims of un-principled teachers and adults at school who may want to take advantage of their situation.

Mutisi (2010), Chiweshe (2010) and Mufuka (2010) did not focus on the impact of the policy on the academic performance of female students during pregnancy. There is a real need to delve into this area. It is against this background that the research seeks to establish the perceptions of female students and parents towards the maternity leave policy. Also, it aims to determine the implications of the policy on the academic performance of the female students. Lastly, solutions will be proffered to address the problems.

METHODOLOGY

The research used the descriptive design which falls under the qualitative paradigm. Sidhu (2003) and Upadhy and Singh (2010) suggests that the design is used to gather data from a relatively large sample. The design was adopted owing to the need to describe existing conditions and the attendant advantages of measuring attitudes, perceptions and orientations prevalent among a relatively large sample of parents and students on the maternity policy. The descriptive design was employed because the study of human behavior which requires a close examination of feelings, emotions and attitudes lends itself to this paradigm (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011).

The targeted population was thirteen school heads, forty-eight teachers who were teaching Form Three to upper sixth and two hundred and twenty female students. Six schools which were easily accessed were the chosen sample and parents of the selected students automatically became the sample and among the thirty parents, twenty who were willing to participate became part of the sample. The qualitative paradigm is amenable to the use of the interviews and the questionnaires which were the two instruments used to collect data from sixty-eight purposely sampled respondents which involved twelve teachers and six school heads and thirty students from six schools and also twenty parents who were forthcoming. Neuman (2006) suggests that purposive sampling is appropriate to select unique cases that are especially informative. Respondents who participated in the study were selected by the researchers and were those who were forthcoming and willing to give information. Ethical issues were considered in order to protect the rights of the participants. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010) researchers should be aware of the ethical responsibilities and legal constraints that accompany the gathering and reporting of information so as to protect the rights and welfare of the participants involved in the research study.

The open-ended questionnaire was used because it gave the twelve teachers the room to express themselves freely and also to reach beyond the physical, deep within the minds or attitudes, feelings and reactions of men and women. The questionnaires were administered by the three co-authors and the interviews were conducted by the same researchers. Whatever was not captured through the written responses was accounted for through the structured interviews which facilitated face-to-face interaction between interviewers and interviewees. The interviews solicited the opinions of six Heads, six teachers and thirty students on the maternity leave policy. The interviews allowed great flexibility in the questioning process and the opportunity to probe for additional information through supplementary questions. Marshall and Rossman (2008) assert that questionnaires combined with interviews are done in order to have some checks and balances so as to improve on the validity and reliability of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented in narrative forms and qualitatively analysed. Marshall and Rossman (2008) and Best and Kahn (1993) affirm that qualitative data is best analysed in narrative form which gives room for the voice of the participants to be heard. Excerpts were also used in order to analyse data from the participants' point of view. The findings revealed that most parents, pupils and teachers were not in favour of the policy while very few supported it although they want it to be amended and reduced to just a disciplinary document which is known to the administrators only. The majority of the respondents

who opposed the document belonged to the older generation probably due to their conservative perceptions. The older generation belongs to an era in which getting pregnant even at tertiary level was a punishable offence (Gaidzwanwa, 2012; Organisation of Economic Corporation and Development [OECD], 2011). The younger generation of teachers and parents accepted the policy with some reservations and modifications; it may be that their perceptions were influenced by liberal views. Most Heads, teachers and parents accepted that the policy prior to this was too harsh to the girl child, hence the need to give the girl child another chance. Respondents said the document would be more useful when dealing with cases of rape or incest. Most of the respondents appreciated the idea that the girl child be treated with dignity by being afforded maternity leave, while the paternity leave also gives the boy child a chance to be punished. However, they were not interested in giving a scholar leave as if he or she was a worker. One middle-aged educated parent said "*leave is for workers and school girls and boys are just learners and dependents*". Most of the participants were clear in that the policy was against the Zimbabwean Legal Age of Majority Act (1982) which stipulates that anyone below eighteen years is still a child under the custody of parents. Thus the maternity leave policy is contrary to the law since it gives room for someone less than eighteen years to behave like an adult while they are still dependents. A good number of parents both educated and less educated said the policy is silent on the financial support needed by the girl during that period especially if the one who impregnated the girl is also a scholar.

Data also revealed that most school heads, teachers and parents admitted that the policy also counters the efforts of many international organizations which are focusing on keeping the girl child in school to reduce early pregnancies. www.worldbank.org/education/girls (2011) confirmed that it is estimated that one year of female schooling reduces fertility by ten percent. The effect is particularly pronounced for secondary schooling that has sexually active pupils. In Zimbabwe, the scholars are expected to stay in school up to university for about seventeen years from the first grade. These years are supposed to effectively utilize by the scholar so as to attain a good and well paying job. Education means inculcating in the children a sense of humanism and develops social, moral, aesthetic and spiritual attributes acceptable by the specific culture (Girl Child Network, 2011; Sandhya, 2004). One senior woman teacher said "*giving maternity leave to the scholar is exposing the child to the life of adults before the girl-child is ready and mature*". Women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer and healthier babies than women with no formal education. Aleman and Renn (2002) suggest that for women, education is essential to increase earnings, escape poverty, enhance

self-esteem and provide adequately for their families.

Since the World Conference of Education in Jomtien in 1990, the Bank's emphasis in the area of girls' education has increased and gender equality has been integrated as an important component of the Bank's poverty reduction mission. The Education for All Fast Track Initiative and the recent Education Sector Strategy Update has reinforced the World Bank's commitment to the Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals. All these initiatives focused on high completion rates of the girl child. Hence the policy is an unacceptable document to most stakeholders as it is retrogressive. One senior parent who was self-employed said *"even if these girls are educated, because of the burden they already have, they often ended up in lower-paying jobs with less opportunity for professional development"*. UNESCO (1997) suggests that increasing girls' access to education ensures the participation of women in all sectors of society.

The teenage girl as a product of the Zimbabwean culture was also not in favour of the policy. Hanchett (2008) and Walker (2006) suggest that children want to be accepted and they pay attention to messages that tell them what is and is not acceptable to other people. The desire of most students is to please their parents, hence the reasons for not supporting the policy. Haralambos and Holborn (2008) state that beliefs and moral codes are passed on from one generation to the next and shared by the individuals who make up the society. The Zimbabwean moral code with regard to marriage is that the teenage girl should grow to maturity first and then follow the correct channels of marriage. Haralambos and Holborn (2008) further affirm that people create their culture and their culture shapes them. The girl and boy child are aware of their moral codes which govern them and as the future generation, they are trained to preserve them. It seemed that the perceptions of most participants were greatly influenced by the Zimbabwean culture which is against early marriages.

Most girls indicated that they were for the idea of taking care of their parents before marriage since it is part of the Zimbabwean culture that children are expected to take care of their parents after completing school. Zimbabweans have a saying which goes *mwana aita mwana wake* which translates to 'a child gives birth to her own child'. This simply implies that a parent should be an adult and not a child who is still a dependent. To many Zimbabweans, educating a child is an investment. Respondents who echoed that education is an investment were those parents from a poor background, less educated and did not have formal jobs. Education to them is a means of poverty reduction and prosperity. Hence being pregnant at school is a sign of mischief and brings shame to the family. One parent said that guardians send their children to school to learn and pass and not to manufacture babies.

The results also revealed that Heads and teachers

have experienced negative implications of the policy. School Heads and teachers who were degreed revealed that the teenage stage requires special attention which reduces the chances of more confusion. The policy may be misinterpreted by the teens as part of their human right to be pregnant and be given leave. Most of the participants said that most of the girls who are sexually active are arrogant. One experienced senior teacher said *"it is easy to notice a girl-child who is an expecting mother either by being very arrogant or being very shy"*. Those who are arrogant tend to challenge teachers; as a result they do not usually perform well. Arrogance may be as a result of frustration since they may be stigmatized by the other school children or by their parents. Those who are shy may improve academically as they, in most cases, concentrate on their books. Those who improve academically usually show signs of remorse.

The results further showed that although the teachers (mostly females) supported the idea of the pregnant girl to continue learning, there was concern about the maternal physiological changes such as nausea and general body weakness which may affect the learning process negatively. Worthington-Roberts and Williams (2000) suggest that pregnancy is an experience of a very short period of time but full of challenges which need a stress free environment. Most parents and students indicated that the two tasks (schooling and pregnancy) cannot be carried out at the same time. One female parent related the difficulties she experienced when she got pregnant at school. She emphasized that it is very difficult to cope with school demands and pregnancy especially at that tender age. The majority of female teachers expressed their concern about the fact that the uniforms have no provision for the physical changes which lead to a bulky chest and a distended abdomen. These physical changes cause the girl child to feel out of place and this leads the girl to drop out of school. The Zimbabwean schools have no provision for the demands of pregnancy in terms of activities and facilities; they expect them to behave and perform like any other children.

www.worldbank.org/education/girls (2011) states that gender disparities still remain in both primary enrolment and school completion rates in most developing countries. The Nziramasanga Commission (1999) confirmed that it is not just that Zimbabwean girls are less likely to be in school but are more likely to drop out of school due to problems unique to them such as early pregnancy or marriage. The high dropout rate has a great negative impact on achieving gender equity in education. One older educated parent said *"most parents feel more comfortable when their children are at school rather than being idle at home"*. Research reveals that early pregnancies increase high opportunities of contracting HIV and AIDS and mortality rate among teens. Most parents lost their children due to the AIDS pandemic; hence they say that sex is for adults and not children.

Thus, the policy encourages the girl child to drop out of school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Education is the right of every girl across the globe and a means to transform her life and the life of her community. Without education, girls are deprived of the opportunity to develop their full potential and take part in a productive and equal role in their families, societies and their country. The overall picture which emerged from this study is that the majority of the respondents did not support the maternity leave policy although a few supported it. The very few who supported it want it to be amended and reduced to just a disciplinary document which is known to the administrators only. It is recommended that Ministry authorities should consult stake-holders before introducing policies which are sensitive in nature. The importance of addressing issues of gender in education cannot be overemphasized considering that the majority of Africa's population depends on it. Future research could focus on the perceptions of boys on the paternity leave for them in the same policy.

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