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GENDER DISPARITY IN EDUCATION – AN ERITREAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:
Gender disparities in education raise many questions for governments and civil societies. There are many factors that contribute to the gender gap in education. In Eritrea, gender disparities persist in the enrolment rates between boys and girls at all levels. Gender inequality has become a major issue in Eritrea in the recent years. This paper discusses educational development in the country. It identifies and analyses various factors that cause gender inequality in education. Further, it also provides some policy implications to solve the gender related problems in the country.

Key words: Gender, Education, Eritrea, Education for All, Inequality, Dakar Framework, *Warsay Yikeallo*.

I] INTRODUCTION:

Education For All (EFA) will require more than simply an increase in the financial allocation for schooling. It will require a broad mobilization of social institutions, communication media and family resources. Both the economic and intrinsic benefits of meeting basic learning needs will have to identified and estimated and this information will need to receive the widest possible dissemination. Individual and political will support EFA will be the ultimate determinant of the success of this initiative (Douglas, 1992:9).

Almost after one year the declaration of Education For All (EFA) at Jometien, Thailand in March 1990, Eritrea got its independence at May 24 1991 after thirty years freedom struggle. It is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered in the North and West by Sudan, in the South by Ethiopia and Djibouti and in the East by the Red Sea. It has an estimated population of about 4 million. Since its independence, the country has been undertaking number of developmental programs in rebuilding its war damaged economy particularly education sector. Education is as natural a right as the right to breathe. However, Eritrea pledged to achieve the universalisation of primary education and to increase the national literacy rate.

Gender Inequality at Global Level:

The UNESCO Education For All (EFA) report on the elimination of gender disparities in enrolments raises many questions for governments and civil societies in Eritrea and other

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developing countries (Douglas, 1992). It is reported that 57 per cent of the estimated 104 million children in the 5-10 years age group who are out of school worldwide are believed to be girls. The enrolment of girls in many countries is only three-fourths that of boys. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and ensuring gender equality by 2015(Rena, 2005[a]:8). The report cautions that the 2015 deadline for achieving 50 per cent improvement in adult literacy and universal primary education may remain a dream for one-third of the world's population. The 164 national governments that adopted the Dakar Framework of Action at the World Education Forum in Senegal in 2000 committed themselves to putting in place policies to facilitate these goals. The international community also held out the assurance that resources would not be a constraint. But the EFA report notes that aid flows have been disappointingly low in recent years. Paradoxically, this comes at a time when the accent on primary education has been high on the agenda of many developing countries. The gender inequality is indeed prevalent in many developing countries like Eritrea. However, the persistence of this gender inequality in the arena of children's education must not be treated as inevitable.

Further, according to Global Crisis Solution Center, some two-thirds of the 130 million children in the world currently not in school are girls. This means that about 86.7 million girls are out of school. UNICEF report indicates that the number of girls out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa rose over the last decade from 20 million in 1990 to 24 million in 2002. This explicitly shows that almost 28 percent of all the girls in the world out of school are found only in Sub-Saharan Africa. This alarming issue certainly influences Eritrea too.

To be sure, the Educational Reform Policy in Eritrea in 2003 is an endorsement of Eritrea's commitment to the Dakar Framework: it entrenches school education as a fundamental right. The demand for pre-school education and alternative avenues of child rearing has expanded vastly in recent years and the corresponding need for streamlining these services is just being recognized (Rena, 2005[a]:8). Girls and women's access to education is not a privilege; rather it is a fundamental right. Eritrea guarantees this right to all its citizens, regardless of gender and ethnicity. It is in this conviction that the Government endeavors to make education accessible to its citizens. Although, Government of Eritrea has made primary education compulsory, however, it must closely monitor the implementation of the program to be able to realize tangible results even in the short term. Civil society institutions need constantly to reinforce the moral and legal duty cast on parents to ensure quality education of their wards. Besides, International bodies must do their best in support of the idea of Education For All in Eritrea.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the educational development in post-independent Eritrea and importance in gender equality in education; Section 3 describes the gender disparity in Eritrean education, girls' education and education in Sawa; and Section 4 provides conclusions of the paper.

II] EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ERITREA:

The educational system in Eritrea shows all the symptoms of prolonged neglect under conditions of colonialism and war. At the time of independence in 1991, 84 per cent of the existing 190 schools were rated to be in serious disrepair (Rena, 2005[b]). The remaining 16 per cent were far from providing a satisfactory learning environment. Disparity in the geographical distribution of schools was sharply marked. For instance, the number of secondary schools and students in the highlands was much higher than those in the lowland areas of Eritrea (Ministry of Education, 1996; Petros H., 2000:129). Today, more than 1,100 government and non-government schools are functioning; however, most of these schools need lot of improvement, expansion and/or replacement.

It is observed that since independence, the government of Eritrea has built so many new schools and renovated the existing schools all over the country, making it possible for many of the Eritrea's children to get an access and opportunity to attend Elementary education. Besides, there are more junior and secondary schools (including the recent Adiqueh Secondary School in near Adigudat) are established in different parts of the country and the existing institutions are developed and improved. On the tertiary level indeed, many training colleges and institutes in various fields are established in the year 2004-2005. They are for example, Eritrea Institute of Technology – Mai Nefhi, College of Nursing and Health Technology-Asmara, Orotto Medical School-Asmara, College of Marine Sciences and Engineering - Massawa, College of Agriculture – Hamalmalo, College of Business and Economics – Hal hale, etc. (Rena, 2005[a:] 8).

Further, during the 34th and 35th graduation ceremony, for the first time in the history of University of Asmara to graduate about 2,000 students that comprises 1,767 in degree and 167 in diploma from the years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. It is to be noted that currently, the University of Asmara is providing its academic programs in 43 departments encompassed in nine colleges namely, the College of Agriculture, Faculty of Arts, College of Business and Economics, Faculty of Law, College of Sciences, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering, College of Health Sciences, and College of Social Sciences. In addition, starting from last September, the University has started a post-graduate program in selected fields of study and University is now concentrating on research and Masters' programs. Additionally, new courses have been introduced and efforts are underway to raise the standard and quality of education in the country (Eritrea Profile, 2005:2).

Gender Equality in Education:

Gender equality in education is the participation of both female and male students in all levels of education, as equal citizens and at free will where both genders enjoy the social, political, economic and cultural benefits. The realisation of equality between female and male students in education is dependent on the establishment of social, political, economic and cultural framework that allows both genders to choose various educational courses regardless of their gender and without being bound by rigid cultural and religious beliefs as well as stereotyped gender roles. While education for everyone remains a major

concern in Eritrea, keeping girls in school and supporting their success and continuation into secondary and higher education are overriding challenges.

Today's girls are considered tomorrow's women. Caring for today's girls is by far caring for future mothers. It is also strongly felt that female education should be given emphasis since education is not only a means of increasing women's economic productivity but also improves their children's health, learning and simultaneously lowers the fertility thus helping to decrease the high growth rate of population in the country.

Indeed, in the wake of independence, Eritrea has been showing great progress in increasing school enrolment for both male and female students. In the academic year1991-92, for example, 206,414 students were enrolled across all levels in the country. It is reported that in the first semester of the academic year 2003-04, the number rose to 567,883. However, in spite of the steady progress in increasing school enrolment, there still remains a gender inequality. In various reports of the Ministry of Education (MOE), it is observed that the number of enrolled girls has increased by about 249 percent in between 1991-92 to 2003-04. While the number of boys increased by 298 percent in the same period. This indicates that enrolment rates of girls across all levels (elementary, middle and secondary levels) have remained lower than boys for the last twelve years.

Under normal conditions, the number of males and females is more or less the same. This is more pronounced when it comes to the school age children. Nonetheless, it is observed that more boys are enrolled in schools than girls. Hence, it is imperative to raise a question Why such a gender disparity in school enrolment? And thus take a look at the issue with concern.

Girls' enrolment varies greatly from region to region and even within a region. With the exception of Maekel region, where female enrolment is the highest, the other regions exhibit different patterns of female enrolments that change little over time, according to statistical sources of the MOE. In some regions, the female enrolment rates are comparatively higher at elementary schools, but drop sharply at middle and secondary schools.

The curriculum of the new education system must promote education that equally values both female and male students and is based on the task of creating gender equality in education as well as increase the general public awareness. Public awareness and educational campaigns to promote gender equality in education as well as in the workplace should be continuously carried out nationwide to correct the general public particularly that of parents' understanding of stereotyped gender roles and make gender equality take root in the minds of the Eritrean people in line with the policies of the Government of Eritrea that clearly stipulates equal opportunities in education and employment in order to achieve social justice.

III] GENDER DISPARITY IN ERITREAN EDUCATION:

Eritrea has about 4 million population where females constitute 50 per cent or possibly even slightly more. It is reported that, only about 50 per cent of six to eleven year old children are attending elementary schools (1st to 5th grade), only about 40 per cent of the 12 to 14 year olds are attending junior (6th to 8th grade) and only about 25 per cent of the 15 to 18 year olds are attending secondary schools (9th to 12th grade). Gender inequality has become a major issue in the recent years (see tables –1 and 2).

In Eritrean education, disparities persist in enrolment rates between boys and girls at primary, secondary and higher levels. According to the Ministry of Education statistics in 2002, for example, in nursery or kindergartens, there were 47.4 per cent girls and 52.6 per cent boys; in the elementary schools, there were 44.3 per cent girls and 55.7 per cent boys; in the middle schools, there were 40 per cent girls and 60 per cent boys; in the secondary schools, there were 33 per cent girls and 66.6 per cent boys and in vocational and technical schools, there were 15.4 per cent girls and 84.6 per cent boys.

Additionally, Asmara Commercial College (which is located in the Red Sea School campus), graduated a total of 672 students between 1996 and 2004. Of these 206 are females and constitute 30 per cent in total. Halhale College, which is a branch of the University of Asmara, graduated 434 students in 2003. Of these 80 are females and constitute 18 per cent. The Teachers Training Institute (TTI) has trained 3,637 between 1991 and 2003. Of these 637 are females and constitute 18 per cent. Finally, it is reported that female students' population in the University of Asmara was 14 per cent in 2002. The similar trend is been observed in the technical and vocational education (see tables – 3 and 4).

It is also to be noted that the students' population has significantly increased by about 250 per cent between 1991 and 2003 but the increase in female to male students ratio is not proportional. The gap between male and female students has gone up from just 4 per cent in 1991 to 33 percent in 2003.

Further, according to the Eritrea Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) in 2002, Only 16 per cent of women above the age of 15 are employed compared to 69 per cent of men; 52 per cent of women are illiterate compared to 39 per cent of men and 89 per cent of women have undergone female circumcision. However, it is observed that the gender inequality is very high in the country.

Girl's Education – The issues:

According to the Ministry of Education report there are 51 per cent of total population is literate, 59 per cent males and 44 per cent females are literate in urban areas and 47 per cent males and 29 per cent females are literate in rural areas of Eritrea. However, female enrollment in Eritrean schools, from primary through secondary levels, has actually decreased in the past 14 years (1991-2005) in comparison with the male counterparts (see

tables –1 and 2). As they get older, girls drop out at an accelerating rate, score lower marks than boys, and those who remain must often repeat classes.

It is observed that 38 per cent of girls leaving school due to marriages. Another 10 per cent leave to stay home and care for siblings or work in the home. These girls are not dropping out of their own choice or because of academic failure, but their parents are deciding that further education is not necessary for their future roles. Besides, Eritrea faces generations of tradition that reinforce the belief in early marriage and keeping women in the home. The same traditions disregard beating wife and female genital mutilation – all of which deny basic individual human rights to women. It is therefore; the parents have to be influenced, in order to improve the situation.

Education in Sawa:

It is observed that for the last ten years (1994-2004), the GOE has invested so much money and resources to develop Sawa and transform it from military training center to educational center. Of course, the government's intention may be to provide the opportunities to both the male and female students and subsequently develop the country's human resources and safeguard Eritrea's sovereignty.

It should be noted that the high schools in Eritrea have not made enough preparation to cope with the new curriculum that was introduced in the academic year 2002-2003. Prior to this new curriculum, students were learning four years i.e. 8-11 in the secondary schools; it is now changed up to grade -XII. As a result of this the schools face certain challenges like: shortage of teachers and accommodating the grade-XII (additional section) students. Hence, the Ministry of Education decided that Warsay Yikeallo Secondary School (WYSS) at Sawa[1] is suitable and the best place for this grade –XII program. As part of the educational policy, all the students who completed grade-XI in their respective schools should go to WYSS to take their grade –XII course. It was also believed that students would get more time and can concentrate on their studies without the burden and distraction of thinking about their living conditions when they were with their families.

According to authorities of the *Warsay Yikeallo* Secondary School (WYSS) – Sawa started its work in 2002; it is able to train more than 13,000 students. It is observed that in the first batch (2002-2003), 5,131 out of which 21 per cent were females. These students were in the process of carrying out their national service nationwide when they were selected to enrol the 12th grade classes in Sawa. In second batch (2003-2004), there were 8,400 students. It was reported that, on the 1st of July 2004, out of the 8,400 students who took the 12th grade Eritrean Secondary Education Certificate Examinations (ESECE) national examination in Sawa (between 2nd and 5th July 2004) girls were 22 per cent. In other words, 1848 girls and 6,552 boys attended 12th grade classes in Sawa during the academic year 2003-2004. Some of these students are now pursuing their studies at the Eritrea Institute of Technology -Mai-Nefhi and other colleges in the country.

It has also been reported that the third batch about 10,000 students have arrived Sawa to pursue their 12th grade studies in the academic year 2004-2005 but the number of students that appeared for the matriculation on 4-8 July 2005 was decreased to 6,454 out of which 17 per cent are girls (1120) students. The fourth batch has started this year (2005-2006) with about 6,000 students. The WYSS has 166 teachers, 144 classrooms and other facilities such as library, dormitory etc., the classrooms accommodate 40-50 students in a class.

It is to be noted that Eritrea has a serious problem of high dropouts of female students from secondary schools so as to avoid going to Sawa, where all 12th grade classes have been carried out since the introduction of the new education system in the academic year 2002-2003. Reports indicated that, although the number of students who passed the matriculation exam was 27 per cent both for the year 2003 and 2004, the GPA has shown improvement.

The Main Reasons for Gender Gap in Eritrea:

There are many factors that contribute to the gender gap in Eritrean education. Studies show that girls are put to work, helping their mothers fetch water and firewood, mainly in the rural areas; work load at home (domestic chores) such as caring for younger children, sweeping and cooking. These are social problems associated with the economy of the families.

Another constraint is school distance. Lack of transportation facilities for students is a problem. Children in the rural areas face difficulties to travel long distances to schools, which cause tiredness and absenteeism. It is to be noted that in some of the areas the students walk (one-way) 10-18 Km to reach their schools. This is worse when students are needed at home for work. And, no doubt, girls are prone to such burdens. A related issue is a matter of safety for girls on their way to school or home.

Moreover, a mix of traditional mores (i.e. norms and beliefs), crippling poverty, lack of parental interest, support and encouragement, and pastoral or nomadic lifestyles of some of the students are among the main factors inhibiting greater female participation in the school system.

Many other factors conspire against girls' education as well as, most notably, the practice of early marriage, though in this regard there is an improving trend. Lack of sanitary system and availability of clean water in schools can also pose a sense of discomfort.

In addition, war and conflict over the years have been contributing to regional and gender imbalances as regards access to education. War has shuttered many schools and has caused the destruction of infrastructure besides causing displacement particularly in the border areas. This has aggravated the situation in the country.

Steps to be taken to Improve Girls' Participation in the Schools:

1] Remedial tuition and make-up work. Where it is not possible to change the school calendar or daily schedule, schools and individual teachers should offer make-up classes to help girls/or boys keep up with other students.

2] Need for flexibility from the school. Once a calendar and schedule have been set, flexibility from the school is also important to help children carry out their domestic and farming responsibilities.

3] Visit girls who are absent. Teachers can encourage a girl to attend school by visiting her family when she has been absent by setting up new plans with her parents for her make-up work and for her regular attendance.

4] The girls' responsibilities. Since girls' time is limited because of home responsibilities, they need to use their time in school as efficiently as possible.

5] The family's responsibilities. Parents need to assign household tasks to girls and boys so that they have equal workloads.

IV] CONCLUSION:

It is observed that the persistent denial of equal opportunity of education to the half of the Eritrea's population due to religious, traditional and cultural beliefs and attitudes. Cultural stigmas promote negative attitudes and habits in men and women that pass from the generation-to-generation and family to the work place. Furthermore, it is not compatible to the policy of the GOE that clearly stipulates equal opportunities of education and employment to both men and women.

Indeed, inequality retards the advancement of women as well as the progress and development of a nation. The emancipation of women and the achievement of equality between men and women are essential to Eritrea's development and the transformation of its citizens. The elimination of discrimination against women is a social, political and moral imperative that must ultimately reshape existing economic, social and cultural arrangements. Promoting the entry of greater numbers of women into education and training as well as positions of prominence and authority is of paramount importance in the country.

Recent investments in infrastructure and aiming at long-term outcome have improved the access to education. That's why the girls' enrolment rate has increased by about 249 percent in the last 12 years. The Government has built more schools at all levels and thus enrolment increased many folds. The number of schools rose by 209 percent in 2003. That is meant to alleviate the burden of school distance and transportation, and thereby narrowing the gender gap in education.

However, this issue is not the sole duty of the Government. It is the responsibility of every citizen, parents, as well as the community and different institutions particularly the private sector to play due role in alleviating the problems specifically hindering girls from schooling.

It is observed that during Eritrea's liberation struggle for independence, 30 per cent of the EPLF Army were women. In recognition of their immense contribution during the struggle, the GOE has rightly reserved 30 per cent of the seats in the local and national elections for women, by the same token its imperative that at least 30 per cent of higher education places and subsequently employment including top civil servant jobs have to be filled in by competent women and the obstacles for girls in higher education have to be removed. Additionally, the Ministry of Education should take on panel some of the emerging issues in gender inequality in education of Eritrea and provide the basis for an action plan that could minimize the gender inequality and make all the difference to the future of Eritrea's children.

Notes:

[1] Sawa is a massive military training center in Eritrea, but in the year 2002-2003, it was transformed into an Educational Center (*Warsai Yikealo Secondary School*), which provides educational training to more than 8,000 students of grade XII every year.

Table – 1 Gross Enrolment and Ratio: Secondary Level During The Period 1991/92 –2002/03.

Year	Population 14 -17 Years Age			Enrolment in Secondary Level			Gross Enrolment Ratio %		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1991/92	210,515	110,133	100,382	27,627	14,281	13,346	13.1	12.9	13.3
1992/93	217,998	114,293	103,705	31,531	17,141	14,390	14.4	15.1	13.8
1993/94	225,344	118,144	107,200	32,756	19,432	13,324	14.5	16.4	12.4
1994/95	232,603	121,753	110,850	36,728	22,097	14,631	15.7	18.1	13.2
1995/96	239,805	125,167	114,638	39,188	23,713	15,475	16.3	18.9	13.5
1996/97	246,964	128,427	118,537	40,594	24,262	16,332	16.4	18.8	13.7
1997/98	253,097	131,066	122,031	41,615	25,198	16,417	16.4	19.2	13.4
1998/99	268,460	138,652	129,808	47,533	29,777	17,756	17.1	21.4	13.6
1999/00	272,871	139,459	133,412	59,626	37,533	22,093	21.8	26.9	16.5
2000/01	282,140	144,338	137,802	63,951	40,355	23,596	22.7	27.9	17.1
2001/02	292,355	149,903	142,452	70,183	45,129	25,054	24.1	30.1	17.5
2002/03	-	-	-	68,857	45,870	22,987	-	-	-

Source: Ministry of Education, The State of Eritrea Various Statistical Bulletins.

Note the statistics above with regards to the gap between female and male students between 1991 and 2003 this is discussed in chapter on gender equality in education.

Table - 2 Elementary, Middle and Secondary level- Teaching Staff –Gender level and by region 2001-2002.

Table- 4: Graduates of TVET at Advanced Institutions of Eritrea by Gender During the Period 1991/92 to 2003/04.

Year	Number of Graduates		
	Male	Female	Total
1991/92	0	0	0
1992/93	0	0	0
1993/94	0	0	0
1994/95	0	0	0
1995/96	0	0	0
1996/97	39	16	55
1997/98	0	0	0
1998/99	98	46	144
1999/00	139	58	197
2000/01	55	20	75
2001/02	87	20	107
2002/03	165	67	232
2003/04	160	32	192
2004/05	0	0	0
Total	**743**	**259**	**1002**

Source: Dept of Technical and Vocational Education – Various Reports.
Note: There are two colleges at Advanced level- they are: Asmara Technical Institute and Asmara Commercial College, both these colleges did not produce any graduates during the academic year 2004/05 due to the government policy.

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