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GENDER AND POLICY RESEARCH: A CONTESTED TERRAIN

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION TO THE GENDERING POLICY-ENGAGED
EDUCATION RESEARCH IN AFRICA, NAIROBI, KENYA. MARCH 18 2021

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Introduction

The gender and research policy nexus are a highly contested terrains globally on the basis of gender itself, politics, culture, economics, and one's location in our developing societies in particular. According to Gumisai Mutume (2005):

“For many African women, the Beijing platform and the various international instruments their governments have signed have yet to translate into positive changes in their daily lives. They remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with poor access to land, credit, health, and education. While some of the agreements that African governments have ratified enshrine property and inheritance rights, in most countries' women are denied those very rights”.

The poverty and plight of women in Africa has been well documented especially by research from multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, The World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the bilateral organizations such as CIDA, SIDA, NORAD, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and for us in Africa by the African Union and its various agencies. At a national level there is a lot of policy research that focuses on the plight of women and the girl child. A lot of research that has examined the plight of women and the girl child has also been done in most countries in Africa by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), civil society and governments themselves.

A brief on the essence of ideological and epistemological contestations

Ideologically and epistemologically, this form of gendered education policy-oriented research from such organizations, or governments, and even our universities has been heavily influenced by positivism; the ideological, racial, gender, and epistemological predilections of the knower or researcher who in most cases was a man and at the beginning, always coming from the global north. The situation has now changed, and I want to join others in accentuating the role of women in policy-oriented research.

This is why for me “gendering policy-engaged research in education” or indeed any other human, social, physical or natural science field is a contested terrain because for a long time, policy research in education did not accentuate or privilege issues related to women

or the girl child. This was due largely to the ideological, ontological, epistemological, and theoretical constructs that were used by various researchers. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1967) argued in their classic and seminal work: *The Social Construction of Reality*, “our social world is negotiated, organized, and constructed by our interpretations of what is happening around us”.

The policy research from us, our institutions, and most donor agencies has been accompanied by implicit or explicit arguments for social justice and social change. As argued by Kurana Chanana (2006:269):

“The gendered impact of such changes deserves attention if the goal of social change and gender equity is to be achieved. Effectively, the study of gender is the study of inequality and social difference”.

The family and educational institutions from primary to the tertiary level are key sites for social reproduction which “communicate the binary opposition of femininity and masculinity”. This in my view is partly the origin of a gendered policy-engaged education research in Africa. This is not to obfuscate the view that, they are also sites of contestations on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, language, political affiliation and even regionalism. Our education institutions, government departments and civil society are heavily implicated in this process which is also reflected in educational policies across the continent. This is not to mystify the existence of oppositional discourses in and outside our education institutions and the educational policy research environment in particular.

The need for critical researchers

What is required are critical researchers who approach a gendered education policy research nexus, and praxis from a critical perspective in terms of their knowledge base and trajectory. Therefore, as opined by Saleem Badaat, (2006:90)

“Critical researchers are actors who frame their knowledge production using critical theoretical discourses”.

Ideology critique is central to critical reflection as far as a gendered and engaged education policy research agenda and discourse practice on the African continent is concerned. Hence reflexivity in our work as education policy researchers is critical so that we do not reproduce policy-oriented research that continues to perpetuate the inequalities in our societies especially those based on gender. Critical reflection as argued by Brookfield (2000:131):

“Focuses on making explicit and analyzing that which was previously implicit and uncritically accepted”.

This aspect in my view talks to education policy research that seems to perpetuate gender inequalities in our societies. The role of a critical researcher and organic intellectual must be different and oppositional to the dominant discourses. According to Peter Mayo (2013:52) critical researchers in a gendered educational policy engaged research endeavour and project:

“Must recognize that being a migrant constitutes only one aspect of the persons multiple subjectivities and the culture of origin intersects with a variety of other cultures that emerge from other aspects of the person’s identity, namely cultures related to gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion; the term multiculturalism”.

What is being argued for is that, education policy researchers whose focus is on eliminating gender disparities must see themselves as organic intellectuals *a la* Gramsci who are located in an African, regional, and global context. Therefore, they must be sensitive to issue of power, gender, race, and class that seem to be the basis of a gendered education research policy praxis which marginalizes certain groups in our societies especially girls and women. As Giroux cogently argues, (1988:105).

“The complexity of human behavior cannot be reduced to merely identifying the determinants, whether they be economic modes of production or systems of textual signification”.

Hence the need to develop gendered education research policies that reverse these stereotypes of girls and women as inferior to boys and, or men. This is one of the best ways to develop and proffer a counter hegemonic discourse to a gendered education policy research agenda on the continent which continues to reproduce inequalities based

on gender. Social science policy-oriented research if approached from a perspective that is transformative epistemologically can help in solving the issues of gender discrimination that emerge in the context of social transformation on the African continent.

The quest for a critical and emancipatory perspective to a gendered educational policy research agenda

Critical education policy researchers are concerned with how science enters the public debate and not just the policy research realm that is of concern in this virtual seminar. To achieve this oppositional discourse, engaged education policy researchers in Africa must be organic intellectuals and researchers who are concerned with issues of gender and social inclusion of marginalized groups in our societies. They must reflexively take a step back in the research process and question their epistemological predilections and positions which undergird their research methodologies; how they frame the research agenda; the type of questions they ask; methodologies of data collection; frameworks for data analysis; and eventually how data is interpreted and used to frame a gendered education policy for the benefit of our societies as a whole especially girls and women.

What we are arguing for is an insertion of a multi, intra, and transdisciplinary approaches to gendered education policy research. This stance helps us to locate our education policy research agendas in several disciplines. This is one of the best ways in which we, as organic intellectuals involved in gendered educational policy research can be involved in ideology critique and unmask the subaltern racial, political, economic, and ideological interests that underlie the ostensibly “neutral and objective” formulations of science, politics, economics, culture and even the research process itself as cogently argued by Willis (2007:48).

We have to acknowledge that, our knowledge base, our ideological and philosophical predilections influence the manner in which we conduct education policy research and even interpret our results of the research process. Our approaches are never ahistorical,

apolitical and neutral as positivism would have us believe in the primacy of objectivism which posits that “social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach or influence” as noted by Bryman (2012:32). We need to consider adopting a postmodern and interpretative approach to gendered educational policy research because its project is a move away from a “method centeredness to a discursive practice”. As cogently argued by Willis, et. al. (2007: 56):

The research process is not a mapping of some objective social reality; research involves a co-constitution of the objects investigated, with a negotiation and interaction with the very objects studied.”

They argue for the adoption of narrative, and hermeneutical research approaches that deconstruct hegemonic discourse practices that are embedded in the so called “objective” science germane to positivism. This is where feminist approaches to gendered educational policy research are essential in this project because they are reflexive in their methodology, and analysis and interpretation of research results. It helps the researcher and policy makers to understand and unmask the hidden ideologies and prejudices that undergird research that is generally termed as “objective” and neutral. As such, our education policy research must result in an emancipation of oppressed groups of people especially girls, women, the urban, and rural poor; and those that are physically and mentally challenged. This is the primacy of a critical emancipatory action research agenda germane to the Freirean transformative and emancipatory research agenda whose objective is to “contribute towards the transformation of communities and deepen ones insights into the politics of knowledge” as argued by Mayo (2013:54) when he discusses the primacy of the Freirean pedagogy of praxis.

If applied to a gendered education policy research, then the research process and method that we are arguing for “involves a recourse to theory but which entails an authentic notion of dialogue in which the subject of inquiry is the focus of collective co-investigation” as opined by Mayo (2013:73). In my view, we must always involve and locate in the center the so called subject of a gendered policy research especially in our

African context where women and girls have been marginalized and oppressed for a long time by research that was supposedly neutral and objective.

The quest of a de-colonial epistemic research agenda

I am arguing for a gendered education policy research agenda that we co-construct with participants. It must be emancipatory and transformative so that we continually “*question technocratic, positivistic and linear typologies of research use, and proposed to move towards more participative, context-sensitive and iterative models*” as argued by Solinis and Baya-Laffite (2011:106). I do not think that we can achieve this objective if we do not engage in what Ramon Grosfoguel (2007) and our own Zimbabwean social scientist Sabelo Gatsheni Ndlovu regard as an “epistemic decolonial turn”. This is a quest by social scientists from the global south to “epistemologically transcend, decolonize the western canon and epistemology” as advocated for by Grosfoguel (2007:211).

The de-colonial epistemic project is concerned with the “de-colonisation of knowledge (which) requires us to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the global south thinking from and with the subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies” as argued by Grosfoguel (2007:212). According to the de-colonial epistemic project and thought, we (as Africans) must move away from the Western canon of thought and the reproduction of domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge. His argument which we agree with, is for the insertion of a radical de-colonial critical theory in our social science and in particular a gendered education policy research project that has the power towards the emancipation of oppressed and the poor from the global south especially women and girls and those in our *favelas, Kiberas*, and rural areas.

Conclusion

We cannot conclude this discussion without refereeing to the deleterious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our societies and education in particular-which includes gendered education policy research. Before the next normal “arrives”, we must re-think

the way we think about higher education in general and gendered education policy research in particular. As argued by Boggs *et al* (2021:1-7), we must transform higher education for the long term to anticipate the advent of the next “normal”. We need to develop data-driven organizational base lines, create a sense of urgency for bold action and develop research and operating models for the next post COVID-19 new normal. Since we are concerned with knowledge generation, I am arguing for a more nuanced understanding, promotion, and thinking about the nature, form and orientation of knowledge that undergirds our gendered education policy research on the African continent.

As organic intellectuals, we must re-configure and transform our research methodologies to suit the new normal and base our questions on the needs of our societies. We can no longer ignore the digitally enabled productivity gains that have been ushered into our lives by the Fourth Industrial revolution. As Achille Mbembe (2015:vii) argues in his book *On the Post Colony*:

“... we must be attentive to the multiplicity of holes that constantly eat away at power. Penetrate it, drain it, dry up its flows without this necessarily resulting in any enhancement of life potential”.

This in my view is one way in which Franz Fanon’s “*Wretched of the Earth*” can reclaim and appropriate the gendered education policy research in our institutions and countries. Colleagues, as argued by Homi K. Bhaba (1994: 251):

“The post-colonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive liberal sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay sexuality and gender and over determine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for assimilating minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed”.

This for me is a project that all organic intellectuals must be involved in so that we reclaim the gendered educational research discourse practices.

I would like to end with a provocative poignant quote from Sabelo J. Gatsheni Ndlovu:

- **“Coloniality, as other scholars have correctly termed it, is a death project. Decolonization is what I call a theory of life.”**

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