



Gender Deconstruction on the Margins: A Historical Analysis of South Africa's Post-Colonial Gender Policies in Education

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality in sub-Saharan Africa has historically been pronounced in all spheres of life. To plug that, educationists have tried to engage with local contexts to bring girls into the education system. In light of this worrisome trend, this paper assessed the extent to which policies and measures framed and circulated by the South African government in the post-independence era have addressed gender imbalances in the education sector in line with the notion that girls' education has been promoted by policymakers as a kind of an antidote to the manifold socio-economic problems. The researchers gathered and performed close textual readings of official government policy documents and journal articles from 1994 to date. The research found that the history of educational reforms depicts that gender deconstruction is still on the margins as evidenced by the women's limited access to education and the genderisation of the school, its curriculum and practices among others. The article thus advanced the argument that although remarkable strides have so far been made towards the enactment of policies that enhance the education of the girl child in post-colonial states, much work still needs to be done to create a better world for all regardless of gender. This study offers insights on how to navigate future educational reforms that seek to deconstruct the marginalisation of girls in education and the gendered culture of educational institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Girls' education has been widely promoted as the answer to a wide range of problems.¹ However, prior to political independence in 1994, black women in South Africa had limited access to educational opportunities because they were racially segregated alongside their male counterparts and on the other side the Africans believed that women played second fiddle to men.² On the attainment of nationhood, several policies were crafted and implemented to challenge the status quo and address gender inequality in all sectors. Despite the known efforts by the South African government in the post-independence era to address gender equality, the extent to which the policies and measures framed and circulated have addressed gender imbalances in the education sector remains underexplored. Recent studies have begun to unravel the complex interplay between

¹ Elaine Unterhalter, "An Answer to Everything? Four Framings of Girls' Schooling and Gender Equality in Education," *Comparative Education* 59, no. 2 (April 3, 2023): 145–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2023.2202374>.

² Beatrice M'mboga Akala, "Affirmative Action for Gender Justice in South African and Kenyan Education Systems," *Africa Education Review* 16, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18146627.2017.1406807>.

policies and women's education.³ However, the specific impact of these measures and policies in education per se remains a significant gap in our understanding of the extent to which gender mainstreaming in South Africa has been achieved. In light of this gap, this study aims to investigate the extent to which post-colonial educational reforms in South Africa have addressed gender equality in education. By uncovering new connections between post-colonial educational reforms, policies, and gender equality, the study could inform more gender mainstreaming strategies, enhance our ability to protect vulnerable women and contribute to the global effort to combat gender inequality in education. The study seeks to:

1. Interrogate the intersectionality between post-colonial educational reforms and access to education
2. Explore persistent barriers that impede girls' access to educational opportunities
3. Establish the extent to which gender deconstruction has been achieved in South African schools.

The study, after this introduction, first traces the historical origins of the need to disrupt gender inequalities from colonial times and cites some policies that South Africa worked on immediately after the attainment of nationhood in 1994. The next section unpacks the theory that couch this study followed by the methods used to generate data. Thereafter, it presents the findings and discussions by reviewing existing gender policies and showing the extent to which these have been implemented. Finally, the study draws some implications and proffers some concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender deconstruction

Gender describes the socially constructed roles that societies assign to men and women. Gender is therefore a term that refers to socially and culturally constructed attributes associated with being female or male.⁴ Gender seen this way is a cultural indicator that is crucial in defining societal roles. As such, many communities not only classify persons as female or male based on biological characteristics but also assign distinct values to each and prescribe their respective responsibilities and behaviours. Thus, gender not only refers to sex in a biological sense but also correlates sex with distinct roles and behaviours that society expects of women and men. Gender is thus a social construct that can be dismantled. In light of this submission, gender deconstruction refers to the process of removing socially and culturally generated disparities associated with being male or female.

Education and gender inequality during colonial times

Education has been a central institution in the installation and legitimation of gender binaries and racialized differences in colonial and postcolonial eras.⁵ The attainment of nationhood in South Africa in 1994 was fraught with the urgent need to embark on postcolonial educational reforms. Subsequently, a raft of policies were quickly crafted to try and redress the imbalances inherited at independence. Despite that urgency, the postcolonial education reforms like in any other African country faced severe challenges on all three fronts of the quantitative expansion, quality, and equality dimensions.⁶ The most worrisome issue in the educational reforms is the equality dimension in which gender equality remains an unfinished agenda. Yet, achieving gender equality is a fundamental human right recognized in both international and local law.⁷ However, its application remains elusive, and women continue to face significant barriers in the education sector.

More recent evidence shows that the right to education forms part of second-generation rights which focus on equality and equity.⁸ Gender equality means that girls and women have equal learning opportunities with their male counterparts.⁹ In this study, the term equality is generally taken to refer to equal treatment and opportunities for everyone whereas equity points to the fact that not everyone starts at the same place. Premised

³ Mulatedzi Calvin Rambuuda, "The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Girls in the Selected Secondary Schools in Limpopo, South Africa," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478) 12, no. 5 (2023): 295–305; Unterhalter, "An Answer to Everything? Four Framings of Girls' Schooling and Gender Equality in Education."

⁴ Rachel Moyo and Sphesihle Khanyile, "Disrupting Nature? A Critical Analysis of the Genderless Toilet Drive Represented in South African Newspapers," *Simulacra* 6, no. 1 (June 22, 2023): 137–52, <https://doi.org/10.21107/sml.v6i1.19894>.

⁵ Barbara Crossouard and Máiréad Dunne, "Gender and Education in Postcolonial Contexts," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1583>.

⁶ C.C. Wolhuter, "Education in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Annual Review of Comparative and International Education* 2018, ed. A.W. Wiseman, vol. 37 (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 225–42.

⁷ Marina Elefante et al., "Accelerating Gender Equality Through Reforming Legal Frameworks," 2023.

⁸ Anne Becker, Ina Ter Avest, and Cornelia Roux, "Conversations in Place-Space-Time: Human Rights Education in South Africa and the Netherlands," *Conversations in Place-Space-Time: Human Rights Education in South Africa and the Netherlands* 47 (2023): 1–223, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3628089>.

⁹ J. Rarieya, N. Sanger, and B. Moolman, *Gender Inequalities in Education in South Africa* (Pretoria, South Africa: Human Science Research Council, 2014).

on the idea that both males and females are human beings implies that they must all, as citizens, enjoy the right to education and life to learning as declared in 1948 and enshrined in Article 26 which states that :

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all based on merit.¹⁰

Either through commission or omission of that declaration, evidence from studies reports that women struggled to access education during the colonial era in South Africa.¹¹ As argued by Becker and Roux South Africa has a unique history of colonialism and apartheid which had as a consequence, extreme forms of dehumanisation.¹² In concurrence, David also reports that education under the purview of the colonial system did not improve black women's position in society because very few women managed to rise above their patriarchal disadvantage to venture into education.¹³ Rather, they were exposed to nurturing and home-keeping roles. As such, that alienated women more and heightened inequalities in all spheres of their lives.¹⁴ Against that background, South Africa began in 1994 to reassert, elevate and redress the positions of the previously disenfranchised women, as equal citizens using educational policies, legislation, gender frameworks, gender laws and other government interventions. Thus, South Africa anchored gender reforms in post-1994 educational policies. For example, the Education White Paper 3; Higher Education Act; National Plan for Higher Education; and Draft Green Paper (DHET 2012).¹⁵ That was a plausible intention whose locus was to preserve the right to education, including its equal enjoyment by every girl, as universally recognized and guaranteed in many international and regional legal instruments. Although more girls are in school in South Africa than ever before, several studies report that many girls are still discriminated against based on availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability which all stakeholders must respect, protect and fulfil.¹⁶ The question that is posed in this study is why the South African education system has not yet delivered equitable access and learning for all girls, despite high-level government commitment and intervention. To address that question, the study uses the subaltern theory to unpack the educational reforms that South Africa undertook and check their fidelity implementation against what the girl child experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is framed from the subaltern theory, a postcolonial genre¹⁷ that was advanced by Spivak in her famous essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*¹⁸ The theory is applicable in this study as it questions the contested terrains in schools that seek to perpetuate gender inequalities in education though it is commonly agreed that education is a great equaliser.¹⁹ At the core of the subaltern theory is a devoiced entity, the subaltern defined, with Gramsci, by systematic exclusion from the hegemonic structure of society.²⁰ The theory seeks to undo the hegemony, a process through which the elite classes leverage cultural institutions to solidify their power and entrench the dominant narrative, resulting in the silencing of the marginalised.²¹ This study is inspired by the subaltern's thoughts to deconstruct South Africa's historiography on educational reforms and related policies on gender and rewrite the history from below, positioning the women by narrating history from their perspectives.²² This

¹⁰ United Nations (UN) and UNHCR, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations (UN), 1948.

¹¹ Akala, "Affirmative Action for Gender Justice in South African and Kenyan Education Systems."

¹² Becker, Ter Avest, and Roux, "Conversations Place-Space-Time Hum. Rights Educ. South Africa Netherlands."

¹³ Miriam E David, "Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education?," *Education Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2015): 10–25.

¹⁴ Crossouard and Dunne, "Gender and Education in Postcolonial Contexts."

¹⁵ Department of Education, *Education White Paper 3* (Pretoria: A programme for the transformation of higher education by S. M. E. Bengu, MP Minister of Education., 1997); DoE (Department of Education), *Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997)* (Pretoria: DoE, 1997); DoE (Department of Education), *National Plan for Higher Education* (Pretoria: DoE, 2001).

¹⁶ B M Akala, "Challenging Gender Equality in South African Transformation Policies—a Case of the White Paper: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32, no. 3 (2018): 226–48; Becker, Ter Avest, and Roux, "Conversations Place-Space-Time Hum. Rights Educ. South Africa Netherlands"; Rammbuda, "The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Girls in the Selected Secondary Schools in Limpopo, South Africa."

¹⁷ Huda Tufail and Asmat A. Sheikh, "Feminist Analysis of Tagore's Selected Short Stories: A Subaltern Study," *International Journal of Linguistics and Culture* 1, no. 1 (June 30, 2020): 67–82, <https://doi.org/10.52700/ijlc.v1i1.11>.

¹⁸ G. C. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. R Guha and G. C. Spivak (Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–34.

¹⁹ A. Darder, *Freire and Education* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014).

²⁰ A. Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); Silvia Masiero, "Decolonising Critical Information Systems Research: A Subaltern Approach," *Information Systems Journal* 33, no. 2 (March 8, 2023): 299–323, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12401>.

²¹ Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*; R. Guha and G. C. Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

²² Guha and G. C. Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*.

is because the subaltern theory emerges in opposition to mainstream narrations of India's history, which the collective sees as oppressive of the role of peasant insurgents in the transition to colonialism.²³ The study gleaned insights from the theory to challenge structural, taken-for-granted assumptions on gender, and arrived at conclusions that reveal the cognitive fallacies of the assumptions that women are marginalised. As such, this study explores the position of women in South Africa during the time the country was shaking the constraints of colonialisation in the context of education. The researchers propose from the theory, a socially and geographically connotated narration of the history of education from below, in a bid to decolonise the education system to promote gender mainstreaming. This is meant to empower the women who were and are still systematically excluded from the hegemonic structure of the education system. The Subaltern theory advocates writing history from below, thus contributing to making the everyday stories of women an important part of the history of postcolonial education reforms in South Africa.²⁴

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a postcolonial perspective as an entry point to the proliferating literature on gender equality policies and their enactment in South Africa from 1994 to 2023. Through a literature review of postcolonial South Africa on gender parity, the study argued that gender equality discourses tend to show that gender deconstruction is still on the margins and a pipe dream. To adequately explore, document and understand the South African women's positions on postcolonial education policies and practices, the study employed historiographic methods. It followed Navarro, Kohl, Cetron and Markel who aver that historians do not first develop a hypothesis to be tested, but rather piece together an interpretive picture of an event after gathering, considering, and contextualizing fragmentary information from diverse textual history sources.²⁵ The study relied on the fact that historians have long utilised these methods to document and better understand past events, actions, and public policies.²⁶ The researchers studied collected and analysed a wide variety of publicly available documents and scholarly publications related to gender postcolonial policies embedded in educational reforms. The study relied on documents since they are passive data sources that could be read and reviewed numerous times without changing as a result of the researcher's influence.²⁷ The aim was to look at the true past to inform the future policies in educational reforms and the practices in the African context given that writing history in education without considering the position of the marginalized women is incomplete. The data generated were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's model which consists of six steps.²⁸ The first step was familiarisation with the generated data, which entailed the researcher transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the data, and making notes about any new themes that emerged which were relevant to the research question. The second phase involved creating initial codes by systematising the coding of noteworthy data aspects across the full data collection and compiling information pertinent to each code. The third phase was to look for themes, which involved grouping codes into possible themes and compiling all the information pertinent to each such topic. The fourth stage of the process involved reviewing topics after splitting up large themes and merging specific themes. The researchers eliminated the themes that had no bearing on the research subject. Thereafter, they named and defined topics in stage five. That stage of naming and defining was a continuous process of refining the emergent themes. Finally, the research report was generated in stage six. The themed findings are presented below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Three themes came out: postcolonial educational reforms and access to education; barriers to girls' access to educational opportunities; and gender deconstruction in schools. The arguments are anchored on three threads following Unterhalter which are:

Firstly, interventions to secure girls' access, progression and attainment at school. Secondly, institution building to support girls' education as part of the development of policy and practice for gender equality

²³ Masiero, "Decolonising Critical Information Systems Research: A Subaltern Approach."

²⁴ Mohan Jyoti Dutta, "Culturally Centering Social Change Communication: Subaltern Critiques of, Resistance to, and Re-Imagination of Development," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 13, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 87–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1446440>.

²⁵ J. Alexander Navarro et al., "A Tale of Many Cities: A Contemporary Historical Study of the Implementation of School Closures during the 2009 PA(H1N1) Influenza Pandemic: Table 1," *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 41, no. 3 (June 2016): 393–421, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-3523958>.

²⁶ Virginia Berridge and John Stewart, "History: A Social Science Neglected by Other Social Sciences (and Why It Should Not Be)," *Contemporary Social Science* 7, no. 1 (2012): 39–54.

²⁷ R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 5th Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018).

²⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (August 8, 2019): 589–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

and women's rights in and through education, and, thirdly, interactions around feminist advocacy and activism for transformative politics, where girls' education and feminist praxis might be one site of engagement, linked with many others.²⁹

The researchers argue in these themes that while policy is important, its execution is more important. As backed by Elefante et al.'s contention, even if laws are reformed, inadequate implementation and weak enforcement of laws can block women from the full realisation of their educational rights.³⁰

Post-Colonial Educational Reforms And Access To Education

The role of education as a possible catalyst to catapult women out of the domestic sphere into the labour market provides a plausible justification for why gender reforms in educational policies were enacted in South Africa. From document analysis, it was evident that South Africa became a signatory to and has ratified several regional and international protocols, treaties, conventions and other instruments protecting and promoting gender equality in general, and the empowerment of women and girls in particular. For example, Becker and Roux aver that the protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Rights of Women 2003;³¹ United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) 1948;³² and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are some of the frameworks that abhor any form of discrimination advanced against any human being on the grounds of race, sex, gender or creed that South Africa showed commitment to.³³ The alluded protocols and treaties were indeed helpful in allowing the girl child access to education because the frameworks hated discrimination based on gender. This is to say every child whether a boy or a girl was allowed to attend schools wherever they were in South Africa from 1994. What is not clear is whether the implantation of the policies was religiously followed by the implementation because evidence from studies replicate that a report released by the South African Commission for Gender Equality in 2015 indicated that discrimination on the grounds of gender persists and that unsatisfactory transformation has occurred at management, staff, and student levels.³⁴ In concurrence, David complains about the slow progress of gender transformation in South African higher education institutions.³⁵ The studies thus show a significant disconnect between policy and women's access in the education sector, despite international policies, and treaties aimed at mitigating gender inequality. Using the subaltern theory, women despite the policies enacted, were still marginalised and therefore need to be emancipated from discrimination that looks omnipresent.

It was also a finding of this study that domestic efforts were made that included the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 106 of 1996) which provides the direction for educational reform and curriculum transformation in South Africa's education system. As observed by Becker and Roux when South Africa became a constitutional democracy in 1994, the human rights of all South Africans received protection in the Bill of Rights.³⁶ The Constitution and Bill of Rights, with the values of freedom, dignity and equality, became the core premise of education. That is evidenced by the preamble of the South African Constitution, Article 1[a)] which describes South African society as "a democratic and open society" and includes the aims of improving "the quality of life of all citizens" and freeing "the potential of each person." Of interest to the South African Constitution was the recognition by the new government that education for all citizens, including women, was a basic human right. While the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, as well as the South African Schools Act of 1996, provide the framework for bringing about equality in society and school, de Lange, Mitchell & Bhana claim that it appears difficult to implement such legislation, given the context of a country that contains such diversity in terms of who the people are, where they come from and where they live.³⁷ However, what is important to note is that the founding provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, unambiguously provide for a democratic state grounded on, *inter alia*, the value of 'non-sexism because Section 29 of the Constitution warranties the rights to basic and further education. Seen this way, the Constitution of South Africa serves as a compass for engendering gender equality in the country because, from

²⁹ Unterhalter, "An Answer to Everything? Four Framings of Girls' Schooling and Gender Equality in Education," 146.

³⁰ Elefante et al., "Accelerating Gender Equality Through Reforming Legal Frameworks."

³¹ Becker, Ter Avest, and Roux, "Conversations Place-Space-Time Hum. Rights Educ. South Africa Netherlands."

³² United Nations (UN) and UNDHR, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

³³ CEDAW. (1981). Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

³⁴ Akala, "Affirmative Action for Gender Justice in South African and Kenyan Education Systems."

³⁵ David, "Women and Gender Equality in Higher Education?"

³⁶ Becker, Ter Avest, and Roux, "Conversations Place-Space-Time Hum. Rights Educ. South Africa Netherlands"; *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (Government Gazette, 1996), Chpt 2.

³⁷ Naydene De Lange, Claudia Mitchell, and Deevia Bhana, "Voices of Women Teachers about Gender Inequalities and Gender-Based Violence in Rural South Africa," *Gender and Education* 24, no. 5 (2012): 499–514.

it, several policies have been enacted to facilitate gender equality and equity in education. This supports the subaltern theory that backs the girl child who is the devalued entity in this context and must challenge the systematic exclusion from the hegemonic structure of society.³⁸

Another move, more specific to education, was the production of several policy documents that strove to promote the access of girls to education. For example, the post-1994 transformative policies include the Education White Paper 3;³⁹ the Higher Education Act;⁴⁰ the National Plan for Higher Education;⁴¹ and the Draft Green Paper.⁴² The documents gleaned established that the South African Government has clearly articulated gender policies reinforced by well-articulated principles, goals and objectives. For example, the overarching South African Schools Act (1996) and the Employment of Educators Act (1998) are key contributors to facilitating gender equality in schools.⁴³ The former, derived from the country's Constitution, emphasises the right to education for all and as such outlaws the entrenchment of gender inequalities in schools. The Employment of Educators Act (1998), on the other hand, addresses the issue of sexual abuse of learners by teachers by making it unlawful to employ a teacher who has been engaged in sexual abuse of a learner.⁴⁴

In summary, the areas beleaguered by these policies were mostly related to the variables that were employed to divide and marginalise the women in South Africa. Using the subaltern lens, the finding presented above indicates a commitment by the South African Government to give space in the education landscape to the less privileged, at least at the policy level. The policies enacted sought to undo the hegemony, a process through which the powerful classes leverage cultural institutions to solidify their power and entrench the dominant narrative, resulting in the silencing of the marginalised.⁴⁵ As supported by Elefante et al, a legal environment that supports women's education participation is the foundation of more equal societies and more prosperous economies.⁴⁶ Nevertheless what remains a stumbling block is that the policies enacted were silent on critical issues that inhibit full participation by girls in the education system. For example, South Africa Human Rights Commission (2017) reports that 9.4 per cent of those who prematurely left school, cited family commitments such as marriage, raising children, or pregnancy as the reason for doing so. Additionally, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) in 2019 reported that even though the nation had managed to progress in attaining the goals of gender equality and transformation through numerous legislative and policy frameworks, the enactment of these policy and legislative frameworks, including enabling relevant state organisations to promote gender equality and equity, had been delicate. This explains why this study argues that good policies without proper implementation have the same effects as having no policy at all. Again, it contends that equal access does not necessarily mean that there are equal opportunities in all areas of education for women. The girl child continues to face persistent barriers to educational opportunities which is the focus of the next section.

Barriers to Girls' Access to Educational Opportunities

From document analysis, it emerged that the girls' access to education is blocked by circumstances within the schools which statistics also show.⁴⁷ For example, for the period 2009 to 2018, males consistently showed higher literacy rates than their female counterparts.⁴⁸ Examples of some barriers noted were that classes were too large or that there were too many learners, the fees were too high and there were insufficient books.⁴⁹ One such barrier that is worth mentioning is the issue of teenage pregnancy which prevents the girl child from attending school. While the Department of Education in South Africa introduced legislation that accommodates the inclusion of pregnant girls to continue with schooling, pregnancy still acts as a social gender-specific obstacle that hinders access to education for girls.⁵⁰ Evidence available from reviewed documents reveals that in South Africa, legislation forbids schools from excluding pregnant girls, but only about one in three return after childbirth.⁵¹

³⁸ Masiero, "Decolonising Critical Information Systems Research: A Subaltern Approach."

³⁹ Department of Education, *Education White Paper 3*.

⁴⁰ DoE (Department of Education), *Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997)*.

⁴¹ DoE (Department of Education), *National Plan for Higher Education*.

⁴² Akala, "Affirmative Action for Gender Justice in South African and Kenyan Education Systems."

⁴³ Rarieya, N. Sanger, and B. Moolman, *Gender Inequalities in Education in South Africa*.

⁴⁴ Rarieya, N. Sanger, and B. Moolman, *Gender Inequalities in Education in South Africa*.

⁴⁵ Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*; Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography."

⁴⁶ Elefante et al., "Accelerating Gender Equality Through Reforming Legal Frameworks."

⁴⁷ Iwando Mdeleleni, Lindokuhle Mandyoli, and Jose Frantz, "Tenacity Of Gender Inequality In South Africa: A Higher Education Perspective," *Policy & Practice: A Development Education Review*, no. 33 (2021).

⁴⁸ Statistics South Africa, "Gender Series Report VI: Education and Gender, 2009-2018," *Statistics South Africa* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2020).

⁴⁹ Statistics South Africa, "Gender Series Report VI: Education and Gender, 2009-2018."

⁵⁰ Mdeleleni, Mandyoli, and Frantz, "Tenacity Of Gender Inequality In South Africa: A Higher Education Perspective."

⁵¹ Statistics South Africa, "Gender Series Report VI: Education and Gender, 2009-2018."

Those who do return often face negative attitudes and practices from teachers and peers. This position is consistent with the subaltern theory which argues that marginalized women are systematically excluded from the hegemonic structure of the education system.

Research supports that gender inequalities remain in South African schools and in all parts of academia because females remain excluded, sidelined, discriminated against and victimised all over.⁵² Further analysis reveals that girls are more likely to suffer violence from teachers than their male counterparts. The study contends that South Africa has focused on getting equal numbers of boys and girls in school though they will never achieve this unless they tackle the roots of imbalance: social barriers and entrenched discriminatory social norms as supported by the subaltern theory. What is also missing in the legal frameworks enacted by the postcolonial South African government to promote gender parity in schools are regulations that have to do with the writing of the textbooks that reflect gender parity to put both sexes on equal footing. As reported by VVOB at a policy level, there need to be targeted measures in place to ensure that all children are given a gender-equal and gender-neutral education.⁵³ Gleaned documents reveal that children are often separated in terms of learning or development, for instance, in sports and extramural activities, where girls are seen having their own games which are different from the boys.

Gender Deconstruction in South African Schools

It further emerged from reviewed documents that gender deconstruction remains on the margins in South African schools because gender inequities in everyday South African life filter into the classroom in multiple and interconnected ways such as through teachers' attitudes towards gender; curricula in general and specifically; gender and sexual violence against girls; and learner vulnerability to unplanned parenthood.⁵⁴ According to several research works, girls not only experience unequal barriers to education but also confront gender-specific obstacles in schools.⁵⁵ This implies that promoting girls' right to education goes beyond simply ensuring access. It goes further to also ensure that female students are safe at school and benefit equally from the opportunities that education should give.

However, such chances are limited due to poverty, which has proven to be a major determinant of whether a girl can access and complete her education. According to the literature, impoverished families do not have the financial means to pay for education and related costs such as textbooks, uniforms, school supplies and transportation.⁵⁶ Aside from the influence of poverty on access to education, gender inequalities in school infrastructure, curriculum content, gender staffing, and teacher behaviour create additional impediments to education for female students, affecting the quality of their education. According to Rammuda, following Chitsamatanga and Rembe, the pervasive gender-based violence in and around South African schools jeopardises all learners' access to a high-quality, inclusive and equitable education, as well as their capacity to become empowered and change their lives.⁵⁷ In light of this, structural barriers and entrenched discriminatory social norms such as early marriage and early motherhood, gender-based violence, traditional seclusion practices, the favouring of boys in families' education investment, and the gendered division of household labour all contribute to gender inequality. Such conditions must be changed in accordance with the concepts of subaltern theory, which argues for confronting systemic oppression within the school system. Document analysis reveals that institutional impediments to female education exist in South African schools. For example, between April 2020 and March 2021, the Gauteng Health Department recorded 23, 226 pregnancies of girls between the ages of 10 and 19 while the Western Cape Health Department recorded 11, 303 pregnancies of girls in the same age range.⁵⁸ These figures clearly show that girls are at a greater risk of becoming pregnant while still in school and may result in their failure to complete their education. In addition to structural barriers, a study by Crankshaw, Strauss, and Gumede discovered that 46% of girls with insufficient hygiene products were

⁵² Akala, "Challenging Gender Equality in South African Transformation Policies—a Case of the White Paper: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education"; Hassan Sadiq et al., "Academic Promotions at a South African University: Questions of Bias, Politics and Transformation," *Higher Education* 78 (2019): 423–42.

⁵³ VVOB, *Effectiveness of a Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Model in Early Childhood Education in South Africa*. (Brussels, Belgium: Education for Development, 2020).

⁵⁴ Rarieya, N. Sanger, and B. Moolman, *Gender Inequalities in Education in South Africa*.

⁵⁵ A. Payne, C. Kreuser, and M. Mugerwa-Sekwabe, *Barriers to Accessing Education for Girl Learners in South Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: Legal Resource Centre, 2022); Rammuda, "The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Girls in the Selected Secondary Schools in Limpopo, South Africa."

⁵⁶ STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA, "Gender Series Report VI: Education and Gender, 2009-2018."

⁵⁷ Rammuda, "The Impact of Gender-Based Violence on Girls in the Selected Secondary Schools in Limpopo, South Africa"; B B Chitsamatanga and N S Rembe, "School Related Gender Based Violence as a Violation of Children's Rights to Education in South Africa: Manifestations, Consequences and Possible Solutions," *Journal of Human Ecology* 69, no. 1–3 (2020): 65–80.

⁵⁸ Payne, C. Kreuser, and M. Mugerwa-Sekwabe, *Barriers to Accessing Education for Girl Learners in South Africa*.

more likely to be reported missing from school over a three-month period than those with sufficient products (22.5%).⁵⁹

To provide more evidence that gender deconstruction is on the fringe, Statistic South Africa says that girls were more likely than boys to be victims of abuse by teachers against students. Complicating this grim reality is the fact that the rate of completion, and successful migration from post-graduate student to academic, and senior leadership roles remain unequally distributed across the gender spectrum (Akala, 2019).⁶⁰ To address some of these issues, South Africa's Department of Basic Education launched the Keeping Girls in School campaign in 2013, with Phase I lasting from October 2013 to March 2016, and Phase II continuing from April 2016 to March 2019. Phase I focused on increasing girls' intellectual, emotional, and social support in order to increase matriculation completion. Phase II aimed to minimise new HIV infections in girls, and teen pregnancy, and to increase the percentage of girls who stayed in school until they graduated. In addition, the department published the 'Draft National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools' in 2018. The policy outlines guiding principles to prevent and manage learner pregnancies, which include:

Access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), pregnancy prevention, and sexual and reproductive health services. It further envisages counselling, care, and support, and addresses issues of stigma, discrimination, and confidentiality surrounding learner pregnancies.⁶¹

To add to already existing policies, Moyo and Khanyile report that in late 2022, the South African media was inundated with a developing story about the leaked draft proposal allegedly written by the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) to abolish gender labels in school toilets and adopt gender neutrality across the board.⁶² The policy could be in response to research that has drawn attention to the importance of segregating toilets in schools because where toilets are not sex-segregated, girls often drop out of school, notably at the age of menstruation.⁶³ The policy could also be in response to research that has hypothesised the connection between a lack of access to female hygiene products, adequate water and sanitation facilities at school, and school attendance. The policy is still a work in progress and is yet to be adopted. It remains to be seen how effective it will be once it is finalised and adopted. The persistence of gender inequalities in South African schools indicates some difficulties in implementing the policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence availed in this paper raises questions about the efficiency of gender policies, both in education and in general. Admittedly, investing in girls' education has long been held up as an antidote to the manifold challenges in South Africa as evidenced by a plethora of policies and regulations enacted post-apartheid. Indeed there have been important developments in addressing the barriers to education for girl learners in South Africa. Despite these promised attempts, women still have less education than men in more than two-thirds of the country. The study agrees with Rarieya, et al. that schools continue to be the context for gender inequalities experienced by both boys and girls.⁶⁴ In light of this, post-colonial states in Africa need to think about how best policymakers can navigate the fundamental equality of individuals, equality of opportunity, equality of condition, and equality of outcome or results to push for the gender deconstruction agenda.⁶⁵ In educational institutions, school principals are urged to take the lead in ensuring that girls are not made to feel less than their male peers based on their sex or gender. Likewise, a more gender-equitable educational environment must be created to decimate instances of school-related gender-based violence which are further contributing factors to girl learners dropping out of school.

This paper's message to policymakers is that policies are failing to achieve their intended outcomes because there is a contradiction between intention and implementation. In the framework of this study, the researchers contend that schools are in the context of gender inequality, and thus there is a need to engage sufficiently with teachers who are policy implementers, beginning with policy formulation because policies fail

⁵⁹ Tamaryn L Crankshaw, Michael Strauss, and Bongwiwe Gumede, "Menstrual Health Management and Schooling Experience amongst Female Learners in Gauteng, South Africa: A Mixed Method Study," *Reproductive Health* 17, no. 1 (2020): 1–15.

⁶⁰ Akala, "Affirmative Action for Gender Justice in South African and Kenyan Education Systems."

⁶¹ DBE, "Draft National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools," DBE., 2018, [https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/Draft Pregnancy Policy 2018.pdf](https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/Draft%20Pregnancy%20Policy%202018.pdf).

⁶² Moyo and Khanyile, "Disrupting Nature? A Critical Analysis of the Genderless Toilet Drive Represented in South African Newspapers."

⁶³ Crankshaw, Strauss, and Gumede, "Menstrual Health Management and Schooling Experience amongst Female Learners in Gauteng, South Africa: A Mixed Method Study."

⁶⁴ Rarieya, N. Sanger, and B. Moolman, *Gender Inequalities in Education in South Africa*.

⁶⁵ Shan Simmonds, "Teachers as Curriculum Leaders: Towards Promoting Gender Equity as a Democratic Ideal," *Educational Research for Social Change* 6, no. 2 (2017): 16–28, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2017/v6i2a2>.

due to a lack of consultation. Furthermore, due to their cultural backgrounds, teachers may have conservative opinions based on their cultural orientation, which may impede the implementation of gender legislation. Therefore, working with teachers will help to unravel perceived barriers and assist in the implementation of gender policies.

This study claims that enactment of policies is necessary but not sufficient to deal with gender inequalities. As such, the paper recommends that policies must be enacted, implemented and then monitored in schools where gender inequalities in education are evident. Nowhere in the studied documents are reports of monitoring of policies. The monitoring exercise must take a multi-sectorial approach where several government agencies are involved. For example, the Departments of Health, Home Affairs and Education can engage in this monitoring exercise and support each other. In some developing countries, school attendance is encouraged through school fee exemptions, feeding schemes, scholar transport and other forms of subsidies. As such the government has to make education progressively available and accessible by making these provisions available to girls. Drawing from the subaltern theory will empower the girl child who has been marginalized and neglected. Policies are also silent on how to deal with such issues as feeding schemes and scholar transport, especially for the girl who had been sidelined for a long time. To empower the girl child following the subaltern theory, such policies must be enacted by the government.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a commitment by the South African Government to address gender equality through gender mainstreaming, at least at the policy level. The documents gleaned established that South Africa has clearly enunciated gender policies supported by well-articulated principles, goals and objectives. Thus, as part of a wider education reform process, the early postcolonial South African government strove to make education the vehicle through which gender parity would be achieved. For South Africa, education based on equality was thought to be critical in the construction of a national imaginary, but this framing has reproduced rather than disrupted colonial and traditional gender norms. That is so because it has become apparent that educational reforms and the associated policies in South Africa from 1994 to 2023 which explained the position of girls and women in the education processes did not completely deconstruct the gendered aspect of education as important. There is still a dominant patriarchal influence on the texts of postcolonial reforms in education, which marginalises girls. The study concludes that gender deconstruction in education reforms is still on the margins as the position and experience of girls and women in education in the making of postcolonial South Africa is still subject to the domination of patriarchy. The girls' marginal access to schools, genderisation of subjects, and school practices could mean that the gender policies in education reforms were more of paper exercises concerning structure and content, but less practical as regards changing the terrain of the colonial structure of women receiving an education.

In this study of the microhistory of women that focused on their everyday school experiences, it was realized by the researchers that the history of education reforms had represented women, especially statistically, by hiding them in the general 'success' stories of elites and politicians. They thus concur with the subaltern history that supports the notion that postcolonial historians and educationalist scholars include many groups when writing history, while in the process exclude from history marginalised groups of girls and women. It was the nation-centred postcolonial historiography that was 'consciously oversimplified'.⁶⁶ Thus, the making of the egalitarian nation was in fact the continuation of the gendered South African nation where the women's education and experiences were marginalized. Approaching the study using historical methods to understand the position of women in education, contributes to bringing the otherwise forgotten history into the mainstream historical knowledge. Fanon advises that 'the African must refuse to be sealed away in the Tower of the Past'.⁶⁷ It is this idea that one can use to challenge modern African educators to come up with an education system that recognizes the girl child. In light of this, the study proposes that policymakers and implementers take into account the history of their countries. That will position them at an angle that will enable a true exploration of the concerns of the subalterns in their countries and then make use of these to suggest possible strategies to navigate educational reforms that deconstruct gender.

⁶⁶ R. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁶⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks, New York* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld A Division of Grove Press, 1963).

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