

Speaking for Ourselves

Masculinities and Femininities Amongst
Students at the University of Zimbabwe



Edited by Rudo B. Gaidzanwa

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Contents

List of Contributors	iv
Acknowledgements	v
CHAPTER ONE	
Masculinities and Femininities: An Introduction	1
<i>Rudo B. Gaidzanwa</i>	
CHAPTER TWO	
Producing Men and Women: Gender Stereotyping in Secondary Schooling in Zimbabwe	10
<i>Nyasha Kajawu</i>	
CHAPTER THREE	
Making Student Men at the University of Zimbabwe: Politics, Masculinity and Democracy	29
<i>Allen Gore</i>	
CHAPTER FOUR	
Masculinities and Resident Male Students at the University of Zimbabwe: Gender and Democracy Issues	48
<i>Tapiwa Chagonda</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE	
Femininities amongst Resident Female Students at the University of Zimbabwe	62
<i>Sitheni Ndlovu</i>	
CHAPTER SIX	
Female non-resident students: Femininities under stress	77
<i>Precious Somerai</i>	
CHAPTER SEVEN	
The Affirmative Action Policy in Student Admissions at the University of Zimbabwe	93
<i>Irvine Chivaura</i>	
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Masculinities and Femininities at the University of Zimbabwe: Student perspectives and Responses through the Affirmative Action Project	111
<i>Rudo Gaidzanwa</i>	

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Producing Men and Women: Gender Stereotyping During Secondary Schooling

NYASHA KAJAWU

Introduction

This discussion is concerned with the existence and maintenance of gender stereotypes in learning institutions in Zimbabwe. These stereotypes help to maintain practices, which foster gender imbalances. It examines the accepted norms that create forces, which militate against the achievement of good grades by girls. It also examines the factors that present limitations to their future aspirations in competitive fields of employment.

The problem of poor performance by girls is prevalent in most African education systems, but tends to possess contextual peculiarities, which vary from society to society. The chapter discusses the problem from a Zimbabwean point of view, examining factors that lead to girls performing badly in school. The discussion specifically examines existing anomalies that are left unchallenged within the learning environment and the education system and the extent to which some of the learning institutions disadvantage the girl pupil. It seeks to address the problem of what happens to girls within the school environment and how that may possibly affect their performance and retention levels.

Background

Institutions of learning in Zimbabwe primarily seek to promote learning environments in which democracy and human rights are impartially fostered. This is in line with education policies formulated by the Zimbabwean government at the attainment of independence in 1980. These policies sought to redress the social inequalities that had existed between different races and social classes during the colonial era. The post-independence education policies reflected the values endorsed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1984, (article 26), the 1989 Convention on The Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Summit For the Children and the 1990 World Conference for Education For All. These conventions and declarations contained recommendations aimed at improving the state of education in the Third World. In the quest to improve the education system inherited from the colonial system, the Zimbabwe government experienced much success. The government's massive education expansion placed emphasis on the neglected rural and urban non-white high-density areas in a bid to make education a reality to all

children. Changes included school fees being pegged at amounts affordable to all social classes and the building of many schools. Berridge (1993:5) notes that enrolment levels of black children rose from 800 000, to over two million. However there exist gender stereotypes which need to be redressed, and areas regarding gender equity are still a cause for concern.

Experiences in schools indicate that specific gender behaviours are manufactured reinforced and maintained and are subsequently carried over into institutions of higher learning. By implication, the school as a system is responsible for producing “men” and “women” in terms of gender behaviours, future aspirations, and levels of academic achievement of pupils.

The Zimbabwean government recognises the problem of gender disparities in the education system, which manifest themselves in forms of numerical imbalances between the sexes, with regards to equal access for both males and females to educational facilities, resources and opportunities. The Commission Of Inquiry Into Education And Training Report (1999:173) notes that:

Zimbabwe, from the laws of the country, upholds equality in the enjoyment of rights by both men and women, including participation in education.”

It also attempts to resolve the problem of existing differences in levels of academic performance, which results in girls performing worse than boys and influences policies to correct some of the existing anomalies. (*Ibid.* 1999:199)

The schools of thought supporting the argument that certain stereotypes are manufactured by the education system find their roots in feminist and socialisation theories, which describe relations between men and women with regards to their positions in society. Feminist theories are based on an ideology that opposes sexism by supporting gender equality. Radical feminism defines gender inequalities in terms of societal differentials, which in turn impact on all other spheres such as political and economic positions of women. Marxist feminist theories perceive inequalities as emanating from capitalist and class structures. In this discussion the arguments from these theories will be used to support the view that girls and boys are treated differently from birth and their gender specific roles infringe on all aspects of their lives, including their education and career aspirations. These theories argue that boys are trained to be strong and determined in anticipation of their roles as household heads and breadwinners. In contrast girls are discouraged from aspiring for academic and professional success because these are traditionally regarded as male aspirations. Instead, girls are encouraged to be weak and emotional and are channeled into focusing on domestic skills and increasing their chances of acquiring suitable well-to-do spouses.

Pfumojena Secondary School

This chapter is based on a study conducted at Pfumojena Secondary School (pseudonym), a peri-urban school, just outside Harare in Zimbabwe. The study showed that gender stereotypes, or systems that emphasizes differences based on

sex roles, can be covertly reinforced and maintained by institutions of learning and have a significant effect on the way students perceive and play the role of student. Findings to be discussed in this chapter show that cultural norms and practices, and gender role training heavily influence the way boys and girls are treated and socialised, and in the way opportunities are presented to them, depending on their sex. Inequalities manifest themselves in dimensions related to student activities, and the manner in which offences such as sexual harassment are treated, contributes to the setting of social norms. Activities such as participation in class discussions and contributions towards the learning process indicate that boys and girls inhabit drastically differing spheres of school life. The chapter illustrates that there is a need to include mechanisms that promote the right to equal treatment of both sexes within the learning environment, and to remove obstacles that hamper the achievement of this priority.

Data collection for this study sought to yield findings from a manageable population, to investigate the problem of gender disparities in the country's education system. The study was based on a class of 45 students and this was due to the time and financial constraints, relating to the process of the study. Data were collected through interviews, class discussions and participatory observation while I took a temporary job as a history teacher between January and March of 1998 when the class was in Form Two, the second year of secondary school in Zimbabwe. The study was reviewed between January and March of 2000 when the class was in Form 4, the fourth year of secondary school. Emphasis was placed on explanatory and illustrative information, rather than statistical data. The methods employed to collect data sought to elicit a broad spectrum of information from pupils within their school during different activities.

The group interacted with the researcher three times a week in lessons, as well as during extra curriculum activities of sport, clubs and general work activities of school cleaning and maintenance. A total of seven teachers were interviewed, namely the Headmistress, a male and female teacher from the Arts department, another pair from the Science and Mathematics department a female teacher from the Domestic Sciences department and a male teacher who taught Building and Agriculture. On some of the more sensitive issues, the researcher had to rely on informants who were willing to talk or verify issues, confidentially.

The population that was selected has some characteristics, which may limit the extent to which the research findings can be generalised. The study was based on a semi-urban population, some of whose problems are not peculiar to children attending the former group "A" schools, that is, schools formerly designated white schools during the colonial era and schools where the children have affluent backgrounds. The problems noted here also do not quite reflect the problems of children learning in a rural setting, where children are more disadvantaged and school resources are even more scarce than in peri-urban areas.

Gender imbalances in education

A lot of research has been conducted on girls in the school system in Africa. Scholars generally agree that gender imbalances exist in the learning environment. Lind, (1994), Musara (1996), Wamahui (1997). While problems of gender disparities are noted, marginalisation on the basis of sex is largely a phenomenon determined by social class. The case of Pfumojena School suggests that imbalances are more pronounced in working class settings, which, in the Zimbabwean context, encompass the semi-urban, rural and high-density areas. The study showed that gender dimensions are heavily canvassed by cultural and traditional practices. Poverty also plays a determinant role in prioritising who becomes a recipient of an education, when guardians or parents struggle to eke out a living. When cultural norms are to be upheld, the gender of the school-going child is important in determining how that family will make decisions about culture and the fate of that child. Upholding cultural norms may sometimes generate conflict for parents, the child and the school especially with regards to the position of the woman in society.

The status of parents or guardian affects the opportunities presented to girls. While the chances of children of high status parents are generally equal, children of lower status parents may not access school equally and boys in such families are much more likely than girls to go to school, with financial factors being cited as the most important consideration. Even where girls attained better grades, boys are more likely to be awarded the chance to go to school. This is mainly due to the fact that girls are expected to marry and leave home, while boys are expected to continuously contribute towards the financial and material support of their families. Also encompassed here is the assumption that boys grow up to be breadwinners of their households.

Gender training and gender roles

Experiences of pupils show that specific gender behaviours are manufactured, reinforced and maintained by the school environment in a number of ways. One way is through gender training, which emanates from socialisation agents within the home environment.

An analysis of sex role and gender training shows children are socialised differently. Gender roles, by definition, are roles that are culturally or situationally determined and are therefore prescribed by society. Girls in peasant and working class families in Zimbabwe are generally trained in domestic duties from very young ages. By the time they are adolescents, they are expected to fully participate in household chores of general housekeeping, cleaning, cooking, looking after siblings and are sometimes called upon to participate in informal trading activities and vending. This is, at times, done at the expense of their schoolwork. Domesticity is especially encouraged in anticipation of the girls later running their own households at marriage.

In the study carried out at Pfumojena Secondary School, girls noted heavy domestic duties as a cause of poor performance. The girls under study, submitted that the times stipulated for housework typically fell in the mornings before a girl leaves for school and in the afternoon on returning. Household activities sometimes progressed well into the late afternoon and usually ended after the evening meal had been eaten. Most of the area surrounding the school is not yet electrified; thus pupils rely on the use of candles to do their homework. The lighting is poor and they often felt too tired to do any extra reading. Boys, on the other hand, are not expected to participate in household chores and have the option of playing, if not studying.

Heavy domestic demands have been noted as a cause of the poor performance of girls at school. In addition, domestic duties are perceived as female work thus few or no demands are made on boys by parents in respect of domestic work. Pfumojena Secondary School, however, requires pupils of both sexes participate in school cleaning activities. When questioned by the researcher, of the 25 boys in the study, only 5 admitted to participating in household activities and only 3 said they could cook. Children of both sexes however, made submissions about participating in subsistence farming, an activity that most families in the area still practise for sustenance. A noticeable number tended to be absent after a wet spell during the rainy seasons, offering excuses of having gone to their family fields. Girls, in addition to working in family fields, also have duties of maintaining the family kitchen gardens.

Cooking in the area where the school is located, is generally carried out with the use of paraffin stoves but in some families, cooking is carried out on wood fires. The girls are responsible, as in rural Zimbabwe, for collecting the firewood used for everyday cooking.

In the area, children of both sexes participate in subsistence farming, an activity most families practice for sustenance. As noted earlier, a noticeable number of children tend to be absent from school after a wet spell during the rainy season, offering the excuse of having gone to the fields. While there exists the recognition of the importance of attaining an education, parents have no access to other labour, and thus rely heavily on the unpaid labour provided by their family members.

In essence, gender role-training places emphasis on roles upheld by society, making other responsibilities such as school, secondary concerns. Femininity is defined by a girl's ability to housekeep and not on her academic intelligence. Venturing into arenas perceived as male domains or those that may conflict with domestic demands is overtly discouraged. The girls cited older women as being instruments of patriarchy in their lives.

As one girl noted:

"You are not discouraged to pass, but are constantly reminded of what respectable and decent women do and do not do. For example, women are not supposed to voice their opinions in public because it is not proper."

Domestic work is almost always designated as women's work and is not considered as a hindrance to the participation of girls in school. However, when translated into

the school environment, gender training can have a negative impact on the pupil, and this is manifested by the poor academic achievement by the female sex. Because they are female and are culturally not expected to be high achievers, women are not given as much encouragement to achieve as boys. Boys are expected to become breadwinners or household heads as adults and are therefore given a lot of encouragement to excel in their performance at school.

Girls are, from an early age, socialised into playing with dolls, kitchen utensils, dressing-up, using make-up accessories, while boys play with cars and learn how to construct wire-cars, and make wooden carved gadgets at an early age. Naomi Wesstein cited in Boocock (1972) remarks:

.... In the light, of social expectations about women, it is not surprising that women end up where society expects them to.

Where women often end up is usually way below the achievement levels of their male counterparts because being socialised into accepting their domestic roles means not having ambitions that infringe into territories considered as "male domains". In general, girls are perceived as less able, weaker and more emotional than boys, and are seen as nurturers. Made and Matambanadzo (1996:88) remark that:

Culture is a problem. It does not allow women to express themselves. They have to shut up and listen to men. Women are treated as minors... It is better to educate a boy than a girl...The attitude is that a girl will go, they do not feel obliged to do anything for her.

Thus not much encouragement is given for girls to achieve high goals, and there is a certain degree of reluctance to facilitate the furthering of girls' education.

Parental attitudes

As mentioned above, cultural beliefs dictate the requirements of femininity, namely, that a girl possesses strong domestic capabilities. The study found out that it is also under the guise of culture that some parents do not encourage furthering of education for girls. A girl in the group said although she would like to proceed with school after completing her 'O' levels, she was unlikely to do so because her father was of the opinion that educated women are promiscuous and they make difficult wives. The findings of the documentary *Mwanasikana*, a UNICEF and Ministry of Education production on educating the girl child, echo these sentiments. The AIDS scourge also appears to affect the retention of girls in school, as they usually are the ones to drop out of school to help look after ill family members or orphans.

Traditional beliefs show a preference for sons over daughters and they tend to belittle the female sex. Common idioms and everyday language attest this bias. For example, a woman showing success and intelligence is complimented by the saying,

"Mukadzi uyu murume chaiye". (This woman is, indeed, a man.)

Similarly, a man showing weakness or failure, is censured through the saying

"Uyu murume mukadzi zvake" (This man is just a woman.)

This implies that the roles played by women are insignificant unless they are outstanding or akin to those played by men. The contexts in which feminine attributes are used scornfully suggest the low esteem in which women are held. It may therefore be concluded that efforts by girls to do well do not receive the recognition they deserve. There is a general consensus among scholars that school curricula contain sex stereotypes, which tend to favour males. Levine and Havighurst (1984:526) claim that reading texts for pupils show men in various professional positions while women occupy the domestic spheres, or jobs traditionally ascribed as female and are largely dependants of a male guardian, a husband or father. This has been cited as a contributor to the low or the lack of motivation and high educational aspirations of girls.

Levine and Havighurst contend that:

All the central figures in stories dealing with ingenuity, creativity, bravery, perseverance, achievement adventurousness, curiosity, autonomy, and self respect were men.

There, however, is a significant move by educationists in encouraging the use of books that have less gender bias and more positive female characters, as well as encouraging the use of work by women writers.

Traditional beliefs appear to play a significant role in the socialisation of the children, and they are the basis of some practices that marginalise the girl-child. These include justifications of early marriages. Pupils widely believed that girls are less likely to secure a suitable marriage partner after passing a certain age, usually the mid twenties or if they possess certain educational qualifications. Teachers agreed with this view, arguing that parents are less likely to allow girls to proceed far with their education, as the parents are not willing to encourage ideas that may delay their marriages. The school experiences a noticeable level of girls who drop out of school because of pregnancy. There is, thus, a prevailing belief that girls are likely to get pregnant thus investing in their education is a waste. The practice of early marriage is especially prevalent in some religious sects such as the Vapostori.

Puberty

During their teens, girls generally start paying attention to their physical appearance and are conscious of their looks. They try to be vivacious and attractive and desire to wear good clothes. A commendable level of neatness is notable amongst the senior girls at Pfumojena. Female underachievement is also notable at this point in puberty. A lot of physiological changes take place in both sexes and interest in school is said to generally decline.

“Girls begin to pay more attention to their physical appearances. They therefore pay more attention to beautifying themselves, instead of concentrating on school,”

remarked one female teacher.

To counter this problem, the school does not allow the keeping of long hair, chemical treatments such as perms and relaxers or hair plaiting. It is also very strict in maintaining the stipulated dress code of specified parts of uniform, such as the types of shoes worn.

The effects of puberty in pupils of both sexes are concretely displayed by the sudden awareness of their new levels of physical maturity. There seems to be a general decrease in levels of participation in class-based oral activities, as pupils grow older and advance into other forms, presumably because active participation is associated with immaturity. Boys are confronted with the dilemmas of trying to prove they know more than girls do, while girls do not want to be laughed at, if they give wrong answers. Puberty occurs at a time when pupils are experimenting with relationships with members of the opposite sex. There is therefore a conscious effort to maintain certain images, and class discussions appear to present opportunities for embarrassment, especially where one displays ignorance. It is therefore common that pupils pretend to understand things taught.

One female teacher felt that puberty was problematic in that, girls were alarmed by the sudden physical and emotional changes in their bodies. With very little support from adults, in the form of explanations of what was taking place, they became confused and lost self-confidence.

The influence of teachers in the learning process

Teachers were generally concerned by the low level of participation of parents in the education of their children. They noted that some parents showed very little interest, not bothering to attend school fixtures such as open days or school consultations, in which they received feedback on the progress of their children. This, they said, had a bearing on the performance of children because parents and teachers could not meet to discuss possible problems.

Teachers can be cited as being a contributing factor towards the poor performance of girls. Students in the study claimed that teachers aggravate the poor performance of girls by discouraging their active participation. Girls argued that teachers sometimes allow the domination of boys in class discussions. This gives less opportunity to girls to develop their confidence levels and fosters a degree of complacency. It was also argued that teachers sometimes aggravate the poor performance of girls by discouraging the active participation of girls. Some girls argued that teachers ridiculed them. Ridicule can be through comments by teachers such as:

"You are trying too hard, do you think you are a man?"

"Why are you so manly? You won't get a boyfriend that way!"

As a result, the girls tended to shy away from active class participation. Gaidzanwa (1997:285) concurs with this view, noting that among female university students:

"Most of them were wary of expressing opinions which could be construed as 'extreme' or 'feminist' since such opinions were not likely to endear women to potential marriage partners."

Thus this aspect of maintaining feminine attributes seems tightly embedded in the cultures of different institutions. Another prevailing opinion amongst teachers in general was that girls fail because of their preoccupation with boyfriends. The logic behind this claim is that girls are very emotional and get carried away by an infatuation, whereas boys can clear their minds and focus on their schoolwork, when called upon to do so. The authenticity of this claim is, however, uncertain.

Teachers are solely responsible for imparting academic knowledge and skills to pupils and therefore play an important role in their academic development. It may be argued that teachers, to a great extent, influence a pupil's reception to learning although other factors such as intellectual capabilities come into play. For example, liking one's teacher may influence a pupil's active participation and high achievement levels because the teacher fosters keenness for learning in them. Similarly, fearing or disliking a teacher could result in a pupil doing badly in the subject or subjects taught by that teacher.

Do teachers therefore view themselves as contributing towards the problem of poor performance of girls? The answer, according to this study, is, to a great extent, negative. During the study, teachers when questioned on why they thought girls perform worse than boys, were quick to blame the home, biological characteristics, cultural practices, and interests in boyfriends as causal factors.

However, it must be noted that there has not been a significant shift from the teaching methods used during the colonial period in Zimbabwe. The basic instruction modes are still authoritarian teaching methods of monologue, talk-and-chalk method, note memorization and repetitious learning. These methods appear to impact negatively on the recipients.

When asked if teachers affected their performance in any way, the pupils pointed out that they sometimes performed badly in subjects whose teachers they considered strict or frightening because they were afraid to ask about things they would not have understood. There was also an indication that some teachers did not react very well to being asked questions. Receiving corporal punishment on grounds of academic failure only made the problem worse because it did not necessarily guarantee students' comprehension, but resulted in them sometimes using unscrupulous methods to get the work done.

There, however, should be mechanisms to prevent teachers from abusing their power to chastise as this has a significant bearing on pupils' attitude towards learning and their overall performance. According to an official from the Ministry of Education, corporal punishment is legally enforceable, but only to boys and the

offenses justifying this type of punishment should be offenses that would otherwise call for suspension, under the provisions of the school rules. When administered, this kind of punishment must first be approved by the ministry and be carried out in a matter not humiliating to the pupil, that is, away from fellow pupils. An entry of the punishment is supposed to be made into the school logbook.

Corporal punishment of pupils is a practice that is common at Pfumojena School, and is normally carried out for offenses such as noise making and failure in class exercises, as well as absconding from assigned school duties.

In light of the academic differences of boys and girls, do teachers treat boys and girls differently? Teachers felt their treatment of pupils of both sexes was impartial. The general consensus was that boys were more active and thus were more of a pleasure to teach. In the manual subjects for example, they felt girls seemed "aloof" and were more concerned with preserving physical cleanliness. It was also felt that general levels of oral participation by girls were poor. It can thus be concluded that teachers do treat boys and girls differently.

It is difficult to explain why educators who should be dispelling gender biases should reinforce them. Perhaps, different treatment of boys and girls emanates from the fact that teachers come from a generation that is older, and one, which embraces cultural values in which these gender biases are perpetuated.

There is a recognition that gender disparities exist in the education system, but levels of gender sensitivity differ considerably. At present, gender issues seem to be received with some skepticism, partly because issues related to the exploitation and unfair treatment of women have been regarded as normal and they continue to be viewed so in accordance with cultural and traditional practices. Some teachers made comments to me about the study, such as:

"Why the interest in girls only? Do boys not fail as well?"

"These feminist issues do not work. Remember we are in Africa."

Others were, however, more sympathetic to the cause of girls and submitted to attempting to change their methods of teaching and to suit the needs of girls.

"There is a need to review some teaching methods to modes that are more girl friendly. This includes dispelling notions that girls are useless, passive and lazy. Educators should focus more on trying to understand why they (girls) present negative attitudes towards learning."

suggested one teacher.

The headmistress was in concurrence with this view. She noted that:

"A revamp of teaching systems may be considered. In some countries such as Malawi the separation of boys and girls in mathematics and science has been employed and is said to have raised the confidence levels of girls. Perhaps a similar mechanism can be employed in subjects where girls feel perturbed by the presence of boys. The adoption of girl-friendly teaching methods, such as

slowing the pace or removing harsh forms of punishment, may also encourage girls to perform better.”

Some teachers were more tentative about the practicability of gender equity.

“It is all very well that girls are encouraged to take up subjects of metal work, building, and woodwork, what have you. But at the end of the day, how many people are willing to employ them? How many of them will be able to become self-employed?”

one teacher asked, rhetorically.

The impact of socialisation

Many assumptions are made about male and female differences in school performance. The assumption that girls are less intelligent than boys because of biological factors are well entrenched in societal beliefs and the study reaffirms this. Many boys, when asked why they thought girls perform worse than boys gave responses such as:

“...Because they are girls”
 “Girls are not as clever as boys”,
 “Girls are too emotional “,
 “Girls are created like that”.

These beliefs may be drawn from psychological differences found between boys and girls. Boys and girls show distinct differences in emotional levels, with girls seemingly more emotional than boys. Teachers were of the opinion that emotions make girls weaker than boys in that they appear to tire more easily and seem less able to handle pressure and scolding.

“There is a tendency by girls to sulk when scolded. Unlike boys, girls are put off by stern correction and stop to pay attention altogether,” (*sic*)

explained a male teacher.

Children are taught at an early age that boys do not cry, boys have to be men and never show weakness, while it is perfectly acceptable for girls to cry, complain or tire. It was noted that some teachers enforce disciplinary measures differently for the two sexes with many teachers being more lenient with girls although this is not a rule for all teachers. Consequently playfulness and laziness seemed more common amongst the girls. This may also possibly explain their poor performance.

Boys attributed the poor performance by girls, to biological factors whereas a decline in interest in learning manifesting itself in boys is attributed to external factors, such as the influence of peers. Boys’ poor performance is not blamed on their emotions but rather, in their proneness to mischief, as displayed by indulging in activities of drinking, smoking and sometimes, in the abuse of drugs or consumption of illegal substances.

Assumptions about biological factors in school performance

Biological explanations have also been used to explain differences found in physical strength. Referring to females as the weaker sex is an accepted figure of speech that essentially means “woman”. The teacher who instructed manual subjects commented that girls performed worse than boys in manual subjects, because women were physically weaker than men and were therefore not wholly suited for the traditionally male technical subjects such as agriculture, metal work, building and woodwork.

“Girls find it difficult to handle manual work involved. Boys can do better in the physically challenging subjects because they have the physical strength. Girls are also more preoccupied with preserving their physical cleanliness.”

she argued.

When asked to comment on why girls manage to do physically demanding domestic activities such as carrying water and firewood, she answered,

“It is only natural”.

Embedded here, is the assumption that domestic work comes naturally and should not be considered as manual work like building, agriculture and metalwork. Because girls are considered physically weaker, they are encouraged to devote their attention to being nurturers and to work in the domestic sphere.

The influence of biological factors on the performance of pupils may not be entirely ruled out, but biological factors as explained by popular beliefs, appear to be shaped by social expectations. In other words, girls do not perform poorly because they are girls, but because it is entrenched into their beliefs that girls always fail. From observation, it may be argued that girls perceive themselves as others perceive them. If the society they live in, views the performance of girls in negative terms, they incorporate these negative views into their self conceptions and exclude themselves from a vast range of spheres which they consider as being only suited for men. The idea of social expectations shaping the performance of girls is unfortunate in that Forms 3 and 4 are an important stage in secondary education. In Forms 3 and 4, every pupil in the class attempts to gain a high pass, which determines qualification for post-secondary school training.

Scarcity of resources

Lack of active participation by female students is not always voluntary. A prevailing problem is that of inadequate reading material in many schools in Zimbabwe. At the school in question, recommended texts are only available in small numbers and pupils have to share them. Sometimes, as many as eight students share one copy of a prescribed book. This resource scarcity forces students to rely on heavy networking to complete schoolwork. It appears some students are more resourceful than others and there is a great reluctance to share material with pupils who are considered an academic threat. While the subject departments offer indiscriminate access to books

to pupils of both sexes, girls are disadvantaged by mobility restrictions, which stipulate girls have to be at home by five o'clock to help with pre-dinner and dinner chores. Girls cannot wait for their turn to use the books. Some opt to leave school early for safety reasons as most have to commute home to the neighbouring suburbs of Tafara, Mabvuku and Hatfield, or even further to areas such as Ruwa, Mbare, Glenview, Glen Norah and Budiriro.

In view of the fact that the school is male dominated, punishing mechanisms are used to curtail the active participation of girls. These take forms of refusing to share scarce reading materials with intelligent girls, such that circulation of good books only takes place in closed boys' circles. There were also reports of boys flatly refusing to accept bright girls into their study groups, in which pupils often get together to hold discussions or to do homework. There is also a tendency of curbing girls from active class participation by laughing at their contributions, especially if their answers are wrong or shallow.

Gendered domestic work outside school

As already highlighted, excessive domestic duties at home impact negatively on the performance of girls as this leaves little time or energy for school demands, especially for homework. There, however, have been documented cases of teachers making female pupils perform domestic chores in their staff residences. Pupils in this study said they were not affected by this practice as it had long been banned. However, the pupils pointed out they were, on occasion, called upon to work in teacher's personal maize plots. Girls, in particular, said they did not welcome this as it only added to the lists of domestic demands they had to meet, especially during the rainy seasons when they helped with cultivation of their family plots. Consequently, schoolwork is viewed as burdensome and was often placed as the lowest priority, because the domestic duties at school and at home often carry immediate consequences if not attended to.

Education policies may penalise such incidents of student abuse, especially where teachers transgress the school limits by extending domestic duties into their personal residences and make girls perform chores of housekeeping and laundry. These practices of making their pupils "little wives" often result in their sexual abuse.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment has been noted as a possible factor influencing the poor performance of girls. In this context, sexual harassment refers to any prejudices perpetuated on the grounds of one's sex, as well as unwanted sexual advances. By all considerations, sexual harassment is one of the threats to the security and safety of girls in their learning environment. Sexual harassment's finds its source in teachers, male pupils and the wider male population. Its forms vary from snide remarks stating their inferiority: "Girls are useless and stupid" to labels classifying them according to physical attributes - who is ugly and who is beautiful. There is

also a prevalence of teasing on matters pertaining to menstruation. Another notable problem is that of teachers who propose love to their pupils.

The girls in this study raised the question of snide remarks pertaining to intellect as a matter of concern. As previously mentioned, teachers pointed out that oral participation by girls during class left a lot to be desired. The girls themselves reacted to this by pointing out that boys often laughed when the girls gave wrong answers or when they told teachers that they had not understood things taught. Thus silence spared girls from embarrassment and ugly labels.

The issue of menstruation is handled with a lot of insensitivity. Girls reported that the accidental spotting of their uniforms is often met with a lot of teasing which goes on for a long time after the initial incident. Mood swings or intolerance of bad jokes are met with sarcasm such as:

“What is your problem? Are you menstruating today?”

The girls are at an age where such issues are greatly sensitive and they are therefore upset by their occurrence. It is alleged that teachers are aware of these happenings but they choose to ignore them or to actually join in the teasing. One male teacher remarked that girls were too timid and were unwilling to stand up for themselves. He felt that girls should learn to ignore the boys. The problem is presented as being that of girls being too shy rather than the oafish behaviour of boys. Such attitudes only contribute to the girls' lack of confidence and force them into obscurity in the school environment.

The problem of sexual harassment by male pupils was mentioned and included teasing and the passing of unpleasant remarks. It was suggested that male students sometimes demand sexual favours for services such as extra tuition, and assistance to girls with homework. Girls therefore felt they had very few options for extra tuition, as most were afraid of approaching their teachers. Very few girls said they could afford to pay tutors.

Proposals of love by male teachers have been noted to occur. The girls at Pfumojena were uneasy about talking about the issue for fear of victimisation. The boys however hinted on knowing of occurrences. The general acceptance of sexual advances by teachers occurs because there are fears that refusal will lead to being marked down. On the other hand; consent may lead to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. Faced with such a predicament, girls either give in to the pressures or opt to leave school if they are unable to transfer to another school. One teacher, however, felt the girls were not always coerced. He remarked:

“The problem is usually in temporary teachers. Some of these young girls are very flattered by advances by older men and even show off about it”.

The Report to the Secretary for Education (1995:15) submitted that the problem of sexual harassment by teachers was largely ignored because it seems a socially accepted part of gender relationships. The report explains:

The majority of teachers thought it best to ignore such complaints which they characterized as silly or harmless and typical of men.

Fellow teachers, especially female teachers, said they preferred to overlook the problem because they do not wish to bring conflict into their working environment. The mere fact that other teachers, especially female teachers, prefer to ignore the problem means that the problems go unpunished and are likely to occur continuously. This is unfortunate because, according to the law in Zimbabwe, a sexual relationship with a person under 16, whether consensual or not, should be regarded as statutory rape. In the school, the girls who are sometimes involved are often under the age of 16.

Teachers at Domboramwari disagreed with this view, noting that where such goings-on discovered, the problem was reported to authority. The school also runs a program they call "Education for life" in which students are instructed in social issues and in matters regarding their sexuality. This helps to foster general social awareness, recognising unwanted sexual advances as problems and to dispel the concept that sexual harassment is normal and part of the experience of being female. The pupils are also taught how relationships with older men can be detrimental to their health and to their future lives.

Female pupils said they were confronted with the problem of not knowing where to report such problems. The 'Education for Life' program encourages girls to speak out and encourages them to place confidence in their teachers because the topic of sex is still largely culturally taboo. The general consensus was that sex is not a topic that parents discussed with their children using direct references. It was felt by the pupils that they could not approach their parents and they might not have aunts or older sisters to take their complaints to. Teachers are thus expected to assume the important role of counselors.

Although there are people girls can take their problems to, there is a fear of getting into trouble with authority, or being accused of encouraging such advances. One girl explained,

"You are likely to be asked why you are singled out from all other pupils. It is assumed you must have a hand in encouraging it."

It is unfortunate that such beliefs are held by society in general. Some teachers, for example, blamed the girls for beautifying themselves in an effort to look attractive. It was felt that they were responsible for drawing attention to themselves in this way. In contrast, the girls felt that they might be attractive but this was not the problem as there were many pretty girls in the school. They felt that a girl was more likely to attract a teacher's attention because of her willingness to show off her knowledge and confidence through participating in class.

"When you talk and contribute in class discussion, he may suddenly notice you are not only clever, but are pretty too. It is therefore better to be quiet and be ignored."

Girls may therefore opt to be as obscure as possible so as not to draw attention to themselves. Thus participation in class is pitched at the minimal acceptable level.

“Sugar daddies” and older men in general have also been known to prey on schoolgirls because of the assumption that they are less likely to carry the HIV virus or other sexually transmitted diseases. The gifts and money they are offered draw the girls to these older men. Here, the factors of poverty and peer pressure may be responsible for the gullibility of young girls. One teacher suggested that bowing down to sexual pressures may be as a result of emotional, physical or intellectual insecurities, which go largely unnoticed or are, in some way, reinforced by the learning environment. It appears that in the problems of sexual harassment, justice often does not prevail because victims are often intimidated into silence by the perpetrators and consequently do not report the crimes. The crimes only come to light when a pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease are discovered.

The headmistress of the school that was studied recorded seven cases of school pregnancy in 1998 alone, noting that a few other girls did not turn up for school in the second and third terms. It was rumoured that the girls who did not return to school were pregnant. Wealthy and influential members of society are known to cover-up such offences by bribing the parents of the girls into silence. This bribery works because of the existence of poverty. Monetary compensation to parents of the girls in question, is regarded as less shameful than exposing the embarrassing scandal. Offenders sometimes hide behind cultural guises and offer to marry their victims. Child marriages and early pregnancies are noted to be amongst the main causes of the lower enrolment of girls in secondary school in Zimbabwe.

Performance by gender

The impact of the above-mentioned factors is significant. Since 1980, girls have consistently performed worse than boys in ordinary level examinations. Consequently, fewer girls than boys proceed to study at advanced levels. Fewer girls manage to gain the five passes, which are required for ‘A’ level entry. As in most parts of the world, girls are not high achievers in mathematics and science subjects, and are therefore quite under-represented in the subjects at ‘A’ level and tertiary education institutions. The table below shows marked differences in academic performance between boys and girls in Zimbabwe.

Various educational indicators assess the general position of pupils at national level. Educational performance indicators not only refer to pass rates but also examine levels of accessibility of education by pupils of different economic and social brackets as well as by different sexes. They also measure retention levels. These indicators show that there generally seems to be a bias towards the male sex, as illustrated below. The table shows a sample from a study undertaken by the Ministry of Education between 1983 and 1994 to assess the retention rates of school children from grade one to ‘A’ level. Although representing a comparatively small proportion of school going children, it shows the prevailing situation in Zimbabwe.

Table 1: 'O' level pass rates by sex 1994-1998

Subject	1994		1995		1997		1998	
	%M	%F	%M	%F	%M	%F	%M	%F
English	23.2	15.6	20.8	15.6	18.9	17.7	16.6	14.9
History	29.5	14.3	29.3	15.2	28	16.5	28	19.14
Geography	32	16.6	28.1	15	29	16.1	31.4	19.1
Mathematics	25.6	10.6	23.1	8.4	25.3	10.8	26.5	13.7
Agriculture	35.6	12.2	41.6	22.5	52.9	32.6	45.7	28.3
Biology	69	36.7	57.7	35.9	54.6	37.4	51.1	49.3
Pure Science	71.7	42.2	60.8	37.2	70.3	51.5	74.8	61.1
Combined Science	48.2	21.1	28.8	11.4	28.6	12.6	13.7	14.5

Source: Examinations Branch, Ministry of Education and Culture

Table 2: Survival rates for 1994- Grade one to Lower sixth form

Number	Grade 1	Grade 7	Form 1	Form 4	Lower 6
	1983	1989	1990	1993	1994
Girls	1 000	755	501	329	22
Boys	1 000	780	529	394	33
Difference	0	25	28	65	11

Source: Ministry of Education and Culture.

National figures show that girls are slightly under-represented in terms of initial access at form one and enrolment levels. It must, however, be noted that girls consist of a significantly smaller proportion due to their higher dropout rates. Gender differences and imbalances may however be far worse than indicated.

Another notable observation is that girls, particularly those in the study, did not have very far-reaching occupational or post secondary school aspirations as illustrated by their responses presented in the table below:

Table 3: Occupational aspirations of girls

Profession	Very good for women	Good for men	Good for both
Secretary	x		
Teacher		x	
Doctor			x
Managerial			x
Finance			x
Law			x
Banking		x	
Nursing	x		

The prevailing argument has so far been that girls are socialised into accepting their domestic roles and not having ambitions that infringe on the "male domain." One such infringing aspect is that of high achievement in school. Does this really mean that girls are encouraged to be dull and to perform poorly in school? The answer would largely be negative, but motivating factors seem to discourage girls' high achievement. In the Western context for example, pictures portraying achievement-oriented characteristics are usually physically unappealing. Girls who wear heavy glasses, ugly shoes, conservative clothes and unattractive hairstyles are usually presented as the 'brainy' ones. In the African context, the portrayal of a 'brainy' woman is that of a feminist who looks down upon cultural and traditional norms and is most likely to be immoral. Such a portrayal seems to discourage high achievement because it is alienating.

Other factors concerning the education of children that appear to affect their performance include parental attitudes. Findings from the study of Pfumojena School showed that a number of parents were not actively involved in helping their children with their homework. This was mainly due to the fact that most are unable to do so because they were not sufficiently educated to help with post-primary schoolwork subjects and demands. However, children of higher status parents said their parents were generally interested in their homework and often offered help, provided the children themselves made an effort to involve them.

Conclusion

An analysis of the findings presented above questions the prevalence of gender equality and the presence of gender democracy in the teaching and learning environments in schools. The study showed that administrators and policymakers note the problems of girls' poor performance in school, but not enough seems to be done to protect girls from unfair treatment and abuse. Problems affecting the performance of girls are not found only in their personal characteristics, but also in factors external to them and solutions to the problem must take cognisance of this. The shortcomings found in the education system are most likely results of the massification of education and are compounded by the harsh economic climate in which the country finds itself.

The problems affecting the performance of girls emanate from within both the learning environment and in social structures thus solutions need to be formulated from this point of view. Since Zimbabwe attained its independence, social attitudes towards educating girls and women may be changing but they are doing so slowly, especially amongst the poor. Significant strides are needed in raising the levels of access and retention of girls in schools. This may be considered a starting point in the problem of the poor participation of girls in school.

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