School Dropouts among Girls from Rural Areas

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Abstract

Women's growth and development are inevitably bound up with access to education. However, in Morocco, the current status of women's education is disappointing. In fact, the World Bank statistics of rural girls' school retention are at an alarming rate due to the social attitudes and cultural practices that devalue women. Morocco is no exception and it is among the countries where the number of illiterates is high despite all the efforts made by the government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to eradicate illiteracy and dropouts among girls from rural areas. Research related to this phenomenon failed to address the issues, its causes, repercussions, and recommendations. The present article is an attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the present-day situation of school dropouts in the Moroccan society in light of the Education for All goals (EFA). The manuscript seeks to outline the main reasons that make schooling difficult if not impossible and to suggest some recommendations that the Moroccan policymakers should carefully adopt to overcome all the barriers. The current paper goes further to understand the causes and effects of this scourge which delays the development of women, the family and society at large.

Keywords: school dropouts, rural girls, education, EFA goals, development

Introduction

Since its independence in 1956, Morocco has faced many educational challenges. Obstacles in education in the early periods were mainly linked to the unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural regions; the unfair geographical distribution of schools was the largest and most difficult obstacle to development. The

very first move towards development included introducing the first Royal Commission that modernizes the system and raises the quality of education. In 1985, the government took a number of reform measures to improve the educational opportunities by establishing new schools and offering training for teachers, especially in primary level. Some of these reforms introduced the National Literacy and Non-Formal Education Strategy adopted in 2004, Accessibility and Infrastructure Reform in 2005 and the Charter for Education and Training (CET) established between 2000/2006 and respectively aimed at accelerating the completion of primary education. The government developed projects that also responded to the requirements of the application of the Structural Adjustment Program that aimed at encouraging private education and vocational training. From 2000 to 2009, the Monarch established the Commission for Education and Training (COSEF) that was in charge of the creation of the first consensual project in an attempt to meet the expectations of the Moroccan citizens. Since then, education has been declared one of the national priorities. The Najah Emergency Plan, which covered the period between 2009/2012, was structured around four objectives: improving access to education at the primary level education and making it compulsory until the age of 15, improving the quality of education at the higher level, decentralizing the educational system, improving the quality of teaching, and providing the financial resources. Now, despite the efforts of the governments that followed the 2000-2009 period to improve the system, the crisis in education continues and persists. All the shortcomings and problems of the previous projects were up for debate and culminated in a working document: The Strategic Vision for the Moroccan School Reform of 2015-2030. This plan bases education policy on three important points, the first objective of the vision is to establish equality of educational opportunity, ensure attendance and fight abandonment. The new vision is expected to

create equal opportunities, build justice and quality education for both genders.

The government and five foreign organizations, the French Development Agency (FDA), the African Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank, the European Commission (EC) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), have all provided financial support for education reforms in Morocco (EIB). In 2010, the Moroccan government launched the Improving Training for Quality Advancement (ITQANE) in national education program in partnership with the USAID, its main objective was to provide high quality teaching and to hold students in schools. The strategy was drawn from the 2009-2012 Emergency Plan that aimed at achieving quality education but this time with more specific objective "success and retention of students in schools". Tayssir, a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program in education, was initiated years before by the government in collaboration with the World Bank in 2008. This program included a gender dimension and was planned to retain students in schools. Now, despite the succession of reforms Moroccan policy-makers do not have specific agendas for implementing successful educational reforms. Latest reforms that included the National Charter for Education and Training (implemented between 2000-2009), the Emergency Education Plan (2009-2012) and the Education Action Plan have all failed to address most of the critical issues in education.

Since independence to the present days, much has been going on, the efforts made to promote the quality of education are remarkable, however; ensuring retention of girls in schools has not yet been translated into practice. The World Declaration on Education for All that Morocco adopted in 1990, besides 150 governments, to boost efforts towards the realization of children's right to education and rights within education, is far from being established (UNICEF Report, 2016). Disparities and vulnerabilities are more prominent and unfinished agendas are said to exist mainly in

the primary cycle. Progress remains insufficient due to many obstacles that impede successful enrollment and retention in primary schools.

We relate the retention of girls in primary schools in this study to the wider agendas of social change and gender justice. According to the United Nations Population Fund (2019), formal education may be a vital entry point for achieving wider agendas for social justice. The equity/equality mechanisms that offer or limit the entry, retention and success of girls in formal education are often the same that shape their possibilities and perceptions outside the school system. Now, drawing on critical feminist theory the current study seeks an answer to a primary question: To what extent is Education for All (EFA) meeting its goals of girls' retention in primary schools in the rural areas of the Beni Mellal region? The study is approached from a qualitative perspective in order to put more emphasis on the quality of understanding social phenomena (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004).

Literature Review

There are major differences in education between formal and functional constructions of equality. The qualitative aspects of educational experience in terms of access, retention and performance include substantive concepts of equality or non-equality. Equality, as Farrell notes: "Deals with actual patterns in which something is distributed among members of a particular group" (2003: 154). What Farrell points out to seems very critical in this study; as his definition of what equality is directs our attention to educational inequalities (access or retention of girls and boys in schools) that might affect the quality of education of all. Feminists' discourse in education accord an important place for addressing gender equality that ultimately leads to 'gender justice'. The framework of gender justice as presented by feminists is useful in evaluating the ideological practices in education. It critically assesses the issues of gender

equality/equity to construct a transformative cultural gender justice that can go beyond the context of simple access to schooling (Fraser, 1997). Retention is more valued in feminist thinking; as girls receive more education, they have more opportunities. Feminist criticism is therefore the most adequate theory to apply in this current discussion that analyzes specific issues that may affect women and girls. Feminist critical theory as an approach poses concerns about the existence and influence of hegemonic patriarchy, and about the positions that women and men can assume in the stories of their lives. The feminist critical lens is chosen to unleash the suppressed voices deeply repressed within the larger system of social domination (Hall, 1989). Schools in this case are gender institutions dominated by an ideology that incorporate in a way or in another the so-called heteronormative masculinity as a basis for judging societal norms. Consequently, students will be socialized by definition into academic processes that are inevitably patriarchal and which emphasize the superiority of all values that are associated with men and masculinity over all the values that are associated with women and femininity (Martinez Aleman, 2008; Tong, 2009). Now, since the focus of feminist critique is on many of the oppressive elements in society and in the schooling system that dictate to students what to believe and how to perceive information, we can bring such critical inquiry into the Moroccan education sector by asking questions about whether female pupils conform entirely to the EFA global commitments which strive that children have access to and must complete their education.

Feminist Criticism challenges the idea of men who hold the power to dominate women. The nature of the current situation of rural girls in education is to be deductively inferred from the qualitative analysis; the presence or non-presence of bias with respect to girls' retention is to be later interpreted as an evidence of domination.

Critical feminists offer a lens that understands and analyzes child development through both biological and socialization frameworks to make sense of gender and gender differences. They seek to explore the hierarchical nature of gender under patriarchy and the male-female binary that is produced and reproduced in the schools' policy towards genders (Kenway & Modra, 1992).

In education, feminist criticism aims to examine how women's marginalization and 'othering' (De Beauvoir, 1949) takes place through particular educational activities, such as the effects of school-based variables that affect the retention of girls.

Now, our rationale for focusing on female students' dropouts at primary schools lies in the social power that education can have on girls as future active agents for social change. Previous research in the field has highlighted girls' and boys' access to education and many researchers argued that education is the best solution for eliminating social biases and achieving economic independence. Garcia, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, and Watts (2006), have demonstrated in their findings that women with less education face violence, marginalization and they are less likely to have employment chances. In the Moroccan context, a recent report from the Higher Council for Education (CSEFRS) released alarming figures of school dropout; the numbers are said to reach 431,876 students in 2018 and the Beni Mellal region is one amongst the regions where the rate is prevalent. In rural areas, the rate of dropout is higher because of economic inequality "people live below the poverty line in the country" (UNESCO). Girls in contrast to boys do not have full and basic right education and traditional values also constrain their freedoms (El Massioui and Mengad, 2016).

Mansouri and El Amine (2017), in their article published by the IJERE journal, believe that students' dropout is more related to students' repetition rate than to social problems, they claim that the dropout phenomenon is the result of students'

achievements as well as repetition rate. Reasons for school drop-out are exam failure, at a rate of 33.8%, reports the CSEFRS; Derdar (2014) claims that "low achievement at primary school has also been found to be a result of some school-related issues". Worldwide studies show that students with higher achievement are less likely to leave school (Allensworth, 2005; Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver 2007; Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Catalano, Hawkins 2000), other factors might include low motivation as stated by Smyth and Hattam (2001).

Mansouri and El Amine (2017), argue further that the government initiated between 2008 and 2012 "a number of preventive programs that had a positive impact" (p: 13) to encourage school retention in rural zones; the programs included 'Tayssir' and 'Istidrak' (School of second chances) besides to other projects like 'Child-to-Child' and 'Youth Speak'. In a recent study by Louis Witter, reasons for dropout among children are related to their disadvantaged situation in rural areas "Lack of pre-schools means Morocco's children are at a disadvantage from the start" (2018). Moha Ennaji (2018) in a recent study claimed that "Girls from privileged social backgrounds have been able to benefit from excellent education…boys from socio-economically deprived areas – in rural zones and provincial towns – are also in dire need of improvement"; both genders face dropout in rural areas but as stated by CSEFRS the rate is highest among girls. The existing data in the Moroccan context show that the number of girls who abandon schooling provides a less optimistic conclusion. At the regional level (Beni Mellal), the dropout rate affects 5.6% of girls in primary school compared to 4% of boys in rural areas as stated by the last CSEFRS report. The analysis of various dropouts according to the report reveals the negative influences connected to poor regions.

Methodology

A qualitative analysis was conducted to investigate the extent to which is Education for All meeting its goals of girls' retention in primary schools in the rural areas of the Beni Mellal region. The researchers use the interpretive paradigm with the aim of obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers, parents and girls who drop out of schools. The interviewees, both women and men, were purposefully selected to be relevant to the current study.

The interview questions were purposefully designed to answer the research question. Weiss (1994) claimed, "In the qualitative interview the respondent provides information while the interviewer, as a representative of the study, is responsible for directing the respondent to the topics that matter to the study… helping the respondent expand her responses without constraining the information she might provide "(p. 8). Interviewing in the case of this research was a conversation with a purpose; interviews with participants were semi-structured as they were free to exceed the boundary of the questions if they have more to tell. We conducted the interviews following an established protocol that allowed the flexibility to include or help the participant have the experience of a natural conversation. The approach to this study promotes a qualitative content analysis methodology that results in social change rather than pure generation of information through an action research process. The case study we conducted is grounded on emancipation to help educators and policymaker become more informed of the major factors influencing girls' dropouts in rural areas.

Findings from the Teachers, Parents and Girls' Interviews

Although our data come from different informants including teachers, young girls who

drop out of school and parents we see no major differences among their answers. The questions asked to the six participants were indirect and aimed at assessing their perceptions about why girls' dropout from school in an attempt to find answers to the main research question and sub-questions that guided this study. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed new ideas to be brought up by the participants. Below we report the emergent themes with relevant testimonies.

A-Females and males gender difference as a cause of dropout

All interviewees connected the stereotypical qualities of girls and boys to the social and religious culture. Boys have more chances in social activities and in turn are more efficient to express themselves and reinforce their masculine imagery. This is not just a social reality; girls will end up being housewives/mothers while boys have more promising future positions as breadwinners. All participants agreed that sexism is rooted in the social system: *"girls are told not to overstep gender binaries and restrain themselves in a limited area where they are conditioned to be future wives and prepared for early marriages"* as one of the girls who drop out of school claims. There is evidence in the findings that the structure of the patriarchal society is inevitable, the implicit message here is that women's accomplishments are not as important as men. Children from age six encode data related to their gender. They watch and mimic same-sex models (their mothers or fathers). They take, in other words knowledge that suits their gender. The roles that girls see and learn through the social structure become so a part of their self-concept.

B-Poverty-related circumstances as a cause of dropout

The findings generated from the interviews we conducted with participating teachers show that poverty is an obvious cause for girls' dropout in rural areas: *"...because of*

the economic status, parents cannot continue to support their children's schooling throughout their education life" and *"...because they are underprivileged"* therefore they tend to leave school at an early age as one of the female teachers asserted. *"Poverty has been and is still a big struggle either in rural or urban areas"* as most participants mentioned. Another girl who drop out of school and is currently jobless said, *"Employment chances decrease also, girls who dropout from school are unable to find a job that affords their basic facilities".*

The main reasons for girls leaving primary school before completion are linked to parents' social and economic status besides *"... to their non-interest in females' education"* as one of the teachers who works in the rural zone of the Beni Mellal region argued. The economic factors are, in fact, interrelated with the social factors; a diversity of factors cannot be overlooked. Social injustice caused by the global economy of a country is what leads to this systematic inequality between the genders.

C- Spatial factors as a cause of dropout

Spatial factors might be considered as push out factors rather than drop out. Structural injustice caused by the governmental policy is behind the high dropout rate of girls in rural areas… *"The welfare model that the country adopts and that we see on the television doesn't reach the vulnerable"* as one of the male parents claimed. The Spatial factor is a concern for parents who believe that the government must take serious steps to minimize the distance between schools and where girls live. The spatial cause here forces the girls to leave primary school before completion. Geographical injustice here is linked to social injustice and the government turns from adopt enabling strategies that encourage girls' enrolment to adopting a disempowering perspective that pushes out girls from schools.

Discussion

The acquisition of social roles in the context of patriarchy begins through the process of socialization. Family and social institutions contribute to this process; they determine what is appropriate and acceptable in terms of roles and behaviors. Girls and boys are socialized differently and their power relationship is constructive and interactive. Social roles are constructed within a society, the role models' children identify with traditionally define the roles men, and women should acquire. In this research, the feminist critical lens is therefore used as an act of revealing underlying assumptions and ideologies that mask the power relationships that devalue girls forcing them to quit school before completion. Emerging from this study are oppressive elements that dictate to girls what to believe and how to perceive information. Feminists explore the features and institutions of patriarchy and develop an explanation of how gender inequalities have their roots in ideologies of gender difference. Feminists have used patriarchy to make sense of how unequal gender roles are created and replicated on an ongoing basis in society. So universal is this patriarchal force that it seems normal and invisible. It is sustained by a socialization process that starts in the family and is enforced later in schools. This means that power division is not limited to the public space but extends into the most intimate relationships; family life relationships where girls are conditioned to traditionally accept their future roles as wives and mothers.

Family as an institution is gendered and dominated by men to reinforce all the epistemological beliefs and values that are associated with patriarchy. It incorporates in a way or another the so-called hetero-normative masculinity as a basis for judging societal norms. Consequently, girls will be socialized by definition into processes that are patriarchal and which emphasize the superiority of all the values that are associated

with men and masculinity over all the values that are associated with women and femininity.

Through qualitative analysis, this study tried to discover whether the official goal of girls' retention as outlined by the EFA global movement is translated into practice in primary education of rural zones in Beni Mellal. The findings obtained from the interviewees showed that the current situation does not live up to the standards and goals of the equality policy introduced by EFA aiming to meet the learning needs of all children around the world. It was evident in the results obtained that in comparing boys and girls, there is no significant improvement in how the girls receive gender-equal schooling as linked to retention. The gender bias here reinforces in a way or another the conventional societal view of patriarchy and male domination.

Now, access to equality in school retention is linked to access to resources. The welfare dimension and the standard of living can minimize the gap of dropouts, create equitable schooling opportunities and decrease social injustice. The standard of living matters given that the poor conditions are what prevent most parents to send their girls to schools. Poverty in the developing world is a major reason for dropouts. Inclusive education must be ensured for the less disadvantaged. The social entity including the rural one must receive more attention from the government to achieve the EFA goals.

Social division is the result of geographical inequality and dynamics of exclusion in rural areas are push out external factors in girls' education. The principle of equality, therefore, consists of planning for an inclusive education where an equal division of infrastructure leads to equal justice integration. This opinion was shared by all the respondents who agreed that the government must offer an educational climate which is close to girls' homes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Critical feminists in education believe that the unequal treatment of women is a barrier to the achievement of democracy; they also believe that social sustainability is about gender equality practices that shape people's lives toward democratic relationships. Therefore, Morocco cannot achieve democracy, which is an important part of sustainability, by undermining women as a group, and neither can it address gender inequality without rethinking the current education that is reproducing various inequalities both in enrolment and retention. The issues that directly affect the lives of women are predefined inside the proper realm of education and when the system fails to adhere to the guidelines that help achieve social equality (only attainable through girls' access and completion of education), it will automatically reflect a gloomy picture about the political will of a country to empower /or not to empower women in various social institutions.

Findings from the respondents' interviews show that the Education for All (EFA) goal is not implemented into practice. The gender equality strategies designed and adopted by the Moroccan government are not achieved and do not meet the global goals formulated in a number of conventions that the country ratifies. Looking beyond the EFA goals, much needs to be done to achieve the desired outcomes. The governmental policies and practices must be developed to ensure that rural girls enroll back to schools. Parents should be advised on the need to have their girls remain in schools. The whole community must be sensitized on the great importance of girls' education completion.

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