



## Editorial

## Gender justice and education: Linking theory, policy and practice

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**1. Introduction**

This special issue explores the question of gender in education from two perspectives, firstly the ways in which non-state organisations have taken up issues of gender and education, and secondly the ways in which these organisations have engaged with various approaches to the idea of gender justice. In this introduction, in order to contextualise the papers in this special issue, we review the emergence of non-state organisations, particularly Non Government Organisations (NGOs), as settings in which initiatives for gender justice, itself a highly contested term, are being negotiated.

An aspect of this engagement concerns whether discussions of gender justice are descriptive, relating to what particular kinds of organisations and their actors do, or whether they are normative, drawing on a different lexicon. In order to try to disentangle some of this we discuss a number of theoretical perspectives on gender justice to consider how they help us understand how non-state organisations work on gender inequalities and education.

Some of the first work to use the term gender justice came from public policy and law (Kirp et al., 1986), an analysis that had begun with an exploration of whether primary and secondary education produced gendered inequalities (Kirp et al., 1986, p. ix). This work highlighted how many issues associated with gender and justice required investigation that went beyond an examination of the situation on the ground. However, such investigation, as Kirp et al. noted, requires the intertwining of normative and non-normative perspectives. It needs to focus on different levels and domains, notably the institutional and legal, the economic, political, cultural and familial, and the subjective and relational. This is a complex undertaking. The papers in this issue have all attempted to focus on education, and they consider how approaches to gender justice, variously understood, inform the work of non-state organisations located in many different contexts. All the papers look at the possibilities for and constraints on achieving aspects of gender justice while revealing some theoretical issues and practical limitations of such perspectives. The papers also consider some of the methodological issues entailed in researching gender with and on partners who work in NGOs. These methodological challenges

raise normative and process issues which are of considerable importance in deepening both the theoretical knowledge we have about gender justice and our discussions about how to realise this goal in education practice.

**2. NGOs, gender and education**

The NGO engagement with gender and education has a long history. The first UN conference on women, held in Mexico in 1975, was attended by 114 NGOs who participated as observers in the discussions conducted by governments, UN bodies and inter-government organisations (United Nations, 1976). It was the activism of women in NGOs, who from 1972, constituted the NGO Committee on the Status of Women at the UN, and had started to drive a politics demanding of governments and UN organisations more equality for women in education, the economy, political and cultural representation. While the term gender justice does not appear to have been in circulation in the 1970s in the academic or policy texts, one achievement of that decade was to use the institution of the justice system to redress inequality. The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979, acceded to by virtually all governments in subsequent years, and monitored by a combination of national and international processes in which governments and NGOs participated, set out legal and institutional reform as an important terrain for gender equality and women's rights. Implicitly justice was both a site for gender equality and women's rights, and a process to secure and affirm these. However, at that time political philosophy and legal theory had only a limited conceptual vocabulary for thinking about gender.

Largely because of the exclusion of women and concerns with many dimensions of gender equality from centres of state power, throughout the 20th century discussions of women's rights were frequently located outside state organisations, although the relationship with civil society was never a simple or easy one in the direction of gender equality (Hagemann et al., 2008). The expansion of education was generally a major government directed or assisted project which involved many girls and women as learners, teachers, and administrators. This set up complex relations between the non-state location of much discussion of gender equality and women's rights, and the state assisted settings in which these aims were realised. Views on how to reflect on these relations and the realisation of equality ranged from attempts to enter into state structures of decision making or administration to raise demands for equality or women's education (e.g. Goodman and Harrop, 2000; McDermid, 2009; Martin, 2013), efforts to set up non-state alternative education initiatives (Freedman, 1979; Tamboukou, 2000; Datta, 2000), and reflections on the ambiguities

of 'romancing the state' – meaning engaging with state institutions while doubting their capacity to deliver on equality or rights in education (Stromquist, 1995; Subrahmanian, 2002; Vavrus, 2003).

Given the difficult relationship with states regarding gender, and the prominence of NGOs, working within the UN from the 1970s in raising women's rights issues, NGOs appear a 'natural' setting to take forward initiatives concerned with gender equality and social justice in education. Since the 1990s, analysts have remarked that NGOs play particular kinds of roles in relation to social development and action for change. Gender is one field in which they have been particularly prominent. A number of reviews of NGOs in international politics and development (Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Florini, 2000; Josselin and Wallace, 2000; Ahmed and Potter, 2006) identify the ways they deploy activists, carry out advocacy, and build networks and partnerships. Sometimes these are done on a transnational basis. Generally they stress an ethos of working on a non-profit basis, and articulate particular private organisational aims that nonetheless engage states and inter-state entities. To date there has been no in depth synthesised study of education NGOs, although a number of research studies have been completed on education NGOs in particular contexts or taking particular approaches (Bromley, 2010; Rose, 2009; Unterhalter and North, 2011). A considerable literature exists on gender and NGOs, with some sharp lines dividing those who see NGOs as an important organisational form to take forward demands for women's rights and address gender inequalities, even if existing NGOs may not always deliver on all aspects of this aspiration (Parpart et al., 2002; Kabeer, 2011), and those who see 'NGO-ization' as a particularly pernicious organisational form imposing donor driven agendas and lack of accountability (Alvarez, 1999; Kamat, 2004; Nazneen and Sultan, 2009). The work on gender and education NGOs is quite small (See DeJaeghere and Pellowski Wiger, this issue, for a discussion of studies of NGOs doing work on gender). Many of these studies do not examine the diverse conceptualisations of gender used by these organisations. It is this and the multiple conceptualisations of gender justice that the articles in this special issue seek to explore.

### 3. Some questions of gender and gender justice

A number of themes are evident across the scholarship on gender, education and NGOs, and these in turn raise issues for an engagement with theorisations of gender justice. A key theme in many studies that examine gender and the work of NGOs concerns the question of how gender/women's rights NGOs engage with state, non-state, and inter-state bodies. This engagement is partly a question of scale, partly a question of legitimation, and partly a question of the nature of activism. From this perspective the question regarding gender justice is a matter of exploring whether or not state or non-state institutions secure and advance equality. The justice issues that arise concern resource distribution, decision-making, participation, the nature of power, inclusion and exclusion and how change happens in differently constituted organisations (e.g. Nazneen and Sultan, 2009; Kabeer, 2011; Unterhalter and North, 2011). Many of these are generic questions about political processes, and the problem that arises is whether there is anything distinctive about gender as a feature of justice. In addition, questions arise as to whether education as a site of engagement between state, non-state and supra-state organisations raises different issues with respect to gender to those associated, say with economic relations, health or housing, although most studies on this do not consider this in any depth (Markowitz and Tice, 2002; Harrington, 2012).

A second theme raises the question of how aims associated with women's rights, gender equality and equity are articulated. In some ways this question helps cast light on the first concern as to

whether or how gender justice may be similar or different to other articulations of social justice concerned with long established forms of social division, exclusion, and subordination. Is action for gender equality transacted differently by actors in different kinds of NGOs, and is it similar or different to other kinds of actions against inequality? How does the tension come to be negotiated between a universal claim for gender equality or women's rights and the particular setting of historically located education sites? Is the difficulty in effecting this negotiation a problem of theory, which is not attentive enough to context, or of the historical effects of a context that has not had enough opportunity to help make a notion about equality real? Is it possible to hold together the general and the particular in one approach to gender justice?

A third theme concerns the question of how transformations in gender inequalities occur and where NGOs position themselves. Do we look to structural or institutional change, for example shifts in the law, the nature of the labour market, or the distribution of economic or educational resources? Or are gender inequalities, because they are written on the body, encoded in language, and expressed through thoughts and emotions, to be changed by individual agency and social relations in small-scale sites of conversations, friendships, classroom or family interactions? What form of advocacy or engagement changes policies and institutions? Is it work with the powerful, the powerless or some middle group?

Partly these are questions that touch a fourth theme about the nature of empowerment, another much contested term in education (Monkman, 2011), and small-scale relationships and subjectivity. Do particular NGOs confer empowerment, and, if they do, on whom and how transformational is this? Or do NGOs deepen social divisions between women? Do they reach the most marginalised? Are they able to secure change not only within state policies, but within households, and in relations with men and boys? These issues all connect to the notion of how gender is constructed, and what the sites of equality and transformation are. These questions suggest that gender justice in education is not one particular node of a general debate about justice or social justice, but it has particular complex and multi-dimensional layers associated with the plasticity and multivocality of the notion of gender.

These issues also touch methodological questions of working with NGOs. Many education NGOs draw on action research, as a means to build relationships with a constituency, deepen processes of social change, and destabilise hierarchies of power (Murphy-Graham, 2009; Kapoor and Jordan, 2009; Prakash and Gugerty, 2010). However, these methodologies are not without problems relating to the legitimacy of the action research project, the status of the researcher, and the space for critical reflexivity, as many studies attest. These methodological debates raise questions about how we know we are effecting gender justice in education, and how the identities of the researcher and subjectivities and relational dynamics affect research, and more broadly, the contexts in which NGOs work.

All four themes cannot be adjudicated without some refinement of the conceptual language of gender justice. This has been done largely by writers outside education who examine some of normative issues associated with the term. We turn now to discuss four perspectives on gender justice which help us think through some of the work education NGOs do.

### 4. Reflecting on theorisations of gender justice

In reviewing some of the conceptual work on gender justice, we discern four approaches. A number of these inter-connect, but we think it is useful to review them separately. The first approach reviews the question of gender justice largely in institutional terms and talks to the articulation of the work of the education NGO with the state. The second approach is concerned with the problem of

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