



Gender discourses in an NGO education project: Openings for transformation toward gender equality in Bangladesh

Joan DeJaeghere*, Nancy Pellowski Wiger

College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 330 Wulling Hall, 86 Pleasant St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to illustrate how various actors participating in a non-governmental organization (NGO) education project in two Bangladeshi communities represent different framings of gender. Teachers, as critical actors in this education project, utilize multiple discourses of gender equality and when viewed in relation to community members', parents' and students' ideas of gender equality, we argue their discursive practices can create spaces for transformation. The use of multiple discourses suggests that specific local adaptations of women in development (WID), gender and development (GAD), post-structural and rights and capabilities approaches may all be useful in the work toward gender justice as these approaches inform the different meanings of gender equality in the communities. We conclude that NGOs play a critical role in making micro-level changes in schools as well as have a broader impact on communities and national agendas by engaging different actors' uses of gender equality discourses.

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1. Introduction

Gender equality in education, as set out in the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals, has been a widely adopted discourse by donors, governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), even though the meanings and measures of gender equality differ in these two mandates (Mundy, 2006; Stromquist, 2008; Unterhalter and North, 2011). To meet these international goals, Mundy and Murphy (2001) argue that NGOs have become critical actors in “spreading norms and changes in intergovernmental and governmental discourse” (Sikkink and Keck in Mundy and Murphy, 2001, p. 90) and they also offer “forceful alternatives to the current structure” of global agendas and society (p. 93). NGOs, as “an alternative space” (Fraser in Magno, 2008, p. 127), are particularly interesting to examine because they negotiate their roles in relation to these global discourses and local interests and needs. We are only beginning to understand through empirical studies how NGO programs addressing gender inequalities articulate with international, state and local community discourses about gender.

On the one hand, NGOs as civil society actors play a critical role in furthering gender mainstreaming through the state (Rai, 2008).

On the other hand, NGOs also act as “subaltern counterpublics... [that] are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (Fraser, 1997, p. 81). In contrast to these perspectives, Kamat (2004), in her theorization of NGO discourse in a neoliberal era, challenges us to consider how global policy actors, such as UN agencies, “accommodate NGOs into their strategies by depoliticizing the private sphere” and the work in local communities (p. 157). Given these differentially situated roles, NGOs are not homogenous in how they foster gender equality as the staff at different levels and actors with whom they engage bring diverse perspectives and actions to a gender project. In this study, we take the position that actors within and recipients of an NGO project utilize international and state discourses about gender equality as well as local discourses to make claims for justice. In a study of an Indian NGO with a women's empowerment agenda, Sharma (2008) argues that by closely examining the discourses of different actors we can see how NGO projects may depoliticize and reproduce power hierarchies as well as spawn subaltern political activism centered on redistribution and justice (pp. xxi–xxii). Drawing on Sharma's approach to understanding multiple discourses and their transformative possibilities, our aim in this article is to examine discourses of gender equality in an NGO project so as to understand how local actors might produce transformations toward gender equality at the micro-level while also being embedded in a transnational NGO project.

Manion (2008), in her examination of the dynamics of women's empowerment in The Gambia, calls for “attention to be paid to the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 612 626 8258; fax: +1 612 624 3377.

E-mail addresses: deja0003@umn.edu (J. DeJaeghere), pell0097@umn.edu (N.P. Wiger).

impact of the global development and gender equity discourse on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of the social practice of individual agents in their social contexts” (p. 44). In this study, we examine the discursive formations of gender equality as they are articulated within an international NGO project with community members, primary school teachers and girls and boys. We use the term “gender equality” for two reasons: first, gender equality has been utilized in international agendas and by governments to signify different meanings and we aim to understand how local actors think about and use this term; and, second, gender equality is a term often used by the NGO in this study. We contend that “gender equality” is contested and contingent in practice and that different discourses may present “moments of openings”, or what Fraser (2009) refers to as rupturing hegemonic understandings so that changes toward equality can occur (p. 11).

2. Framing gender equality

Gender equality, while broadly adopted, has a multitude of meanings shaped by different disciplinary and political perspectives. On the one hand, international agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals and targets, refer to gender equality as parity, in which the concern is to have girls and women present in similar numbers in education and other social, economic and political spheres to contribute to the development of the nation (Moser, 1993). However, EFA goals go explicitly beyond parity of access to include achieving gender equality with a focus on ensuring girls’ full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005). This use of equality has been much debated and many scholars and international organizations, such as UNICEF, have given particular attention to the means of “achieving basic education of good quality” and what quality means for gender equality (Unterhalter and Aikman, 2012).

Equity, another term often conflated with equality, is used to signify various means of achieving equality (Chismaya et al., 2012; Unterhalter, 2009; Unterhalter and North, 2011). Chismaya et al. (2012) refer to “equity as differential of distribution, recipients, goods, systems, and outcomes in service to greater fairness or justice” (p. 744). In this quote, justice is purposively used as an alternative concept to avoid the problems of conflation; however justice as a concept and practice has various theoretical underpinnings and lacks empirical examination to understand how political and conceptual work on gender equality can be furthered where other approaches have fallen short. Next, we briefly review different approaches to framing gender equality and we consider how NGO projects informed by these frameworks realized transformations in gender inequalities.

Several scholars have written about the distinctions among the women in development (WID), gender and development (GAD), post-structuralism, and human rights and capabilities approaches used to frame gender equality work in education (Rai, 2008; Unterhalter, 2006; Vavrus, 2003; Vavrus and Richey, 2003). For instance, Unterhalter (2006) illustrates how different approaches inform diverse constructions and outcomes of gender and education programs. Women in development (WID), based in the seminal work by Boserup (1970) and undergirded by human capital theory, argues for the inclusion of women in economically productive activity (see Fennell, 2008 for an in-depth discussion of WID and economic approaches more broadly). In education, this approach includes various strategies to promote girls’ education, based on an assumption that by educating girls and women they contribute to the economic and social development of a nation (Herz and Sperling, 2004; Lewis and Lockheed, 2007). The indicators used most often to determine the effectiveness of such strategies measure parity of girls’ and boys’ enrolment, attendance

and completion at the various levels of education (Unterhalter and North, 2011). Recent work by Takyi-Amoako (2008) and Tembon and Fort (2008) extend the WID approach by examining intersectionalities between poverty, gender and ethnicity troubling the assumption that merely educating girls will result in economic development. While still drawing on WID assumptions, they call for more nuanced approaches to policy to address parity comprehensively and to target marginalized groups, respectively.

A WID approach is used most often by international donors, such as the World Bank, and it shapes government policies; however, some NGO work is also informed by this approach. For example, Ross et al. (2011) describe the Spring Bud scholarship fund for girls, a partnership between a US based INGO and Shaanxi province, with the clear goal of increasing girls’ access to education at all levels from primary to university. Rather than measuring the achievements of this program in terms of educational access, Ross et al. (2011) examine its effect on empowering girls. They state that schooling opportunities through this program “enable a complex interplay of intrinsic and instrumental empowerment” by providing a sense of “power within” in making decisions about their future and opening up opportunities for future work opportunities, respectively (p. 36). In this case, a particularly WID-designed program is shown to have effects on shifting agency and structures in these communities.

The gender and development (GAD) approach arose as a critique of WID limitations in changing social and household-level gender inequalities. GAD-informed gender projects aim to identify and challenge institutionalized patriarchy and gender relations in the domestic sphere that oppress women (Moser, 1993; Stromquist, 1995). A considerable body of recent scholarship on NGO education programs draws on GAD perspectives by examining the interaction between structures (including economic, political, social and educational) and agency (Maslak, 2008; Murphy-Graham, 2008; Ross et al., 2011). For instance, Monkman et al. (2008) consider how an NGO women’s literacy program fostered individual and collective agency that in turn worked toward social change, such as community practices of female genital cutting, and material change, such as building latrines and removing trash. They illustrate, using Stromquist’s (2006) dimensions of empowerment, how women gained and used economic (financial resources), as well as political and cognitive forms of empowerment. While a focus on economic empowerment through mechanisms such as micro-lending was not the aim of this NGO project (because they explicitly wanted to address other transformations and avoid dependence on external funding), Monkman et al. (2008) suggest the link between economic and political empowerment is a difficult dance as financial resources are needed to enact other political and social transformations.

Another approach to framing gender equality is post-structuralism, which aims to disrupt hegemonic and static conceptualizations of gender and assumes that gendered identity construction is a fluid and dynamic process in which education plays an important part. While this approach has not been used as extensively in the education and development field, possibly due to difficulties in translating research into policy and practice, a recent special issue by Stromquist and Fischman (2009) looks at various cases of how schooling plays a role in “doing” and “undoing” gender. These studies illuminate the possibilities of education to shape and shift identities and gendered practices. Less focus has been given to discursive analyses of gender and education policies and educational practices, which also draw on post-structuralism.

Finally, a fourth approach, human rights and capabilities, frames much research and political work on gender and education (Unterhalter, 2006), though recent work discusses philosophical and practical distinctions between these approaches (Benhabib, 2011; Robeyns, 2003; Tikly and Barrett, 2010; Unterhalter, 2006).

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