

Are Inclusion Strategies Targeted at Girls Leading to the Marginalization of Boys?

By Mwaka Hachisaala and Esther Tatenda Zulu

prsadmin@prs.org.zm | +260 97 4493357

A growing sentiment has emerged in Zambia that boys are falling behind particularly academically, overshadowed by the commendable progress of their female counterparts.

Some argue that the focus on empowering and encouraging girls, a response to historical gender disparities, has inadvertently led to boys being left in the dust. While anecdotes suggest a perceived gender gap particularly in academic performance, it is crucial to examine the broader context and explore whether statistical evidence aligns with observations that boys are being left behind.

Historically, women across the globe, including Zambia, have, and continue to endure systemic marginalization, particularly in the realm of education, politics, and leadership. Long-standing gender inequalities limited girls' access to education and other resources and opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and reinforcing societal norms. Recognizing this injustice, concerted efforts were made to bridge the gender gap especially in education. In Zambia, as in many countries, initiatives were implemented to empower and uplift girls, providing them with opportunities that were previously denied.

However, as we reflect on the present, questions arise about whether the pendulum has swung too far, with concerns that boys are now facing a disadvantage because of inclusion strategies. The perception that girls are excelling academically while boys are lagging behind is increasingly prevalent. It is essential to delve into this issue with a nuanced understanding, acknowledging the historical necessity of empowering girls while critically examining whether the scales have tipped to the detriment of boys.

Despite strides in reducing gender disparities, the persistence of inequality is evident. Girls, though making significant progress, continue to face challenges in accessing quality education and pursuing certain fields of study. The Education Statistics Bulletin 2020 report measures the Gender Parity Index (GPI) which is a statistical measure used to assess gender disparity. In the context of education, a GPI of 1 indicates perfect gender parity, suggesting an equal representation of both males and females in a given level of education or academic achievement. Values below 1 signify a disadvantage for the gender being measured, while values above 1 indicate an advantage for that gender.

At primary level the GPI now hovers at 1.04% showing an increase in the number of girls attending primary school, however at secondary level the GPI is 0.94% indicating that less girls are transitioning to secondary school education and completing grade 12¹. The FHI 360 National Education Profile 2018 Update reported that only 58% girls of school going age were enrolled in secondary school compared to 64% boys and nearly 42% of female youth of secondary school age were out of school compared to 30% of male youth of the same age². More girls (1.7%) than boys (0.7%) dropout at secondary school level as reported during the Zambia Sustainable Development Goals voluntary national review by the Ministry of Development and National Planning in 2020. Covid-19

1 Education Statistics Bulletin 2020
2 FHI 360 National Education Profile, 2018

substantially increased school dropout rates. In one district in Zambia, we found that dropout rates for girls increased from 113 girls in 2019 to 400 in 2020, compared to 32 boys in 2019 to 30 in 2020.

Further, girls face unique challenges compared to boys such as early teenage pregnancies and child marriages. In 2015, the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education (MESVTEE) then reported that there were over 15,000 pregnancies annually among schoolgirls, with over 80% occurring in rural areas³. Most of the girls who drop out of school do not return. The gender disparities extend beyond the classroom into the workforce. In 2021, Zambia had an employed population of about 3million, of this employed population only 39.5% were female. Additionally, of the one third who were formally employed, only 31.1%⁴ were female. The gender disparity advances upwards into leadership positions in organizations as well as at the country level. Out of 167 statutory members of parliament only 25 are women⁵.

The gender disparities go beyond statistics into more nuanced issues such as persistent cultural norms, ingrained gender biases, and entrenched stereotypical expectations that disadvantage women in various spaces. Additionally, the sway of traditional gender roles and perceived unfair advantages women "enjoy" in Zambia's current labor law significantly influences hiring decisions against women, thus perpetuating a cycle of inequality.

The gender disparity advances upwards into leadership positions in organizations as well as at the country level. Out of 167 statutory members of parliament only 25 are women.

In conclusion, while there may be anecdotal concerns about boys being left behind, a closer look at the statistical landscape unveils a more nuanced reality, there is still more work to be done. The strides made to empower girls and address historical gender disparities should be acknowledged as crucial steps towards creating a more equitable environment. Interrogating the data suggests that the narrative of boys being left behind is not substantiated, and much work remains to attain gender parity in employment, politics and leadership

It is imperative to recognize that achieving gender equality is not a zero-sum game; it is about ensuring that every individual, regardless of gender, has equal access to opportunities and resources.

Rather than framing the discourse as a competition between genders, our focus should be on fostering an inclusive system that addresses structural barriers and allows all people to thrive. In moving forward, let us aspire not for one gender to surpass the other, but for both boys and girls to have real equal opportunities to excel. The goal should be to level the playing field through affirmative action, providing support and encouragement where needed, and creating an environment where every Zambian can contribute their unique skills and perspectives. As a nation, we need the talents, ideas, and contributions of each individual to propel us forward.

3 National review report, 2015
4 Zambia Labor Force Survey 2021
5 National Assembly Website, 2023