

Overcoming Gender Differences in Education

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Abstract¹

Gender equity in education is a priority aiming to promote the right to education for everyone. It is necessary to ensure equal access to girls and boys for completion of their education cycles, as well as empower equity all through the education education process.

Lack of equity between boys and girls schools is not a special specific of one country, but also a sensitive issue. Annual reports show that a considerable number of children, mainly girls, have interrupted their education in various levels of Albanian education system, due to a number of reasons.

Lack of gender equity in the education system is a big obstacle for dynamic development of the society. The education of girls and women in Albania is important, not only as a matter of respecting a basic human right for half of the population, but also as a powerful force for economic development and achieving other social goals such as improved health and civic involvement. This work will focus on gender disparity in Albanian education system, where number of boys and girls is not the same in all education cycles - primary, elementary, secondary, according to data in the largest region in the country. A coordination of the qualitative and quantitative analysis is provided to indicate the reasons for this disparity and compare data according to random chosen schools.

This work shall offer suggestions and recommendations to improve school curricula and determine the role of teachers in this aspect in order to create a favourable environment for both genders as well as making the education system more inclusive for all children includes improving standards, curricula and a focus on teacher training and development in Albania.

Key words : gender, education, equity, Albania, teacher, curricula

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1. Introduction

The concept of gender is a concept that expresses the differences in the male and female body as a living being. On the other hand, gender is society's well-established views of men and women, unlike biological definitions and the source of these views is culture. Individuals, both men and women, perform roles, behaviours and actions that are built or given by society. (Basow, 1992, 10-15) From this point of view, gender equality means that individuals benefit from equal opportunities and rights and are treated equally in all areas of life, regardless of their biological gender, develop their personal knowledge and skills in all areas they wish, and freely express their preferences (Bayrakçeken Tüzel, Soyseçkin Ceylan, Chileler Tapan and Özvardar, 2019, 7).

Gender equity is now part of all policies and strategies of all education structures in many countries. Human rights, inclusiveness and equal access to are some of the priorities of a healthy education system. But, somehow, school today is considered an institution that encourages the female teaching styles, leaving male manners in shadow. Expressing feelings and thoughts verbally, doing homework, work in group are some women-like characteristics. These actions do not take into consideration the strength and male interest and as a result, a considerable number of boys abandon school (INSTAT 2021).

Hence, all citizens are granted the right to attend educational institutions irrespective of their gender, race, colour, ethnic belonging, language, sexual orientation, political affiliation, residence, health situation, limited abilities or any other reason defined in the Albanian legislation. (Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 1998, 25) The Republic of Albania recognises the importance of gender equality. This is reflected in the dynamic policy initiatives and clear strategic commitment to promote gender equality and empower women in all domains reflected by Gender Equality Index. (INSTAT 2020) UNCRPD strongly underlines the right to education. However as results indicate, full gender equality is still to be achieved.

2. Data and Theoretical Framework

Large gender gaps exist in access, learning achievement and continuation in education in many settings, most often at the expense of girls, although in some regions boys are at a disadvantage. Despite progress, more girls than boys still remain out of school. In the recent years, policies, strategies and action plans have focused on providing equal opportunities to boys and girls in the family and society. (INSTAT 2006) The Education 2030 agenda of Albania recognizes that UNESCO's work on

education and gender equality is guided by the UNESCO Strategy for gender equality in and through education (2019-2025) and the Gender Equality Action Plan (2014-2021, 2019 revision). It focuses on system-wide transformation to benefit all learners equally, and supports targeted action for girls' and women's empowerment across three areas of priority: better data, better policies and better practices. Even though, number of girls attending schools in developing countries is increasing more rapidly than boys, according to the UNESCO report, out of about 104 million children that miss elementary school, about 57 per cent are girls.

Women consist of 51% of Albanian population. Data on poverty in Albania testify to the feminization of poverty and increasing numbers of children afflicted by it. Albania ranked 20th among 153 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index in 2020, was placed 51st of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index in 2019.

Another problem related to gender differences in education which was reflected in the collected data is related to professional profiles. This aspect is important because it affects gender equity in labour market, and according to the data, there is a higher trend of boys attending vocational schools and higher trend of girls attending high school. For e.g. a vocational school in Tirana counts 26 girls out of 624 boys. (UNICEF 2021)

Likewise, there are problems with Roma community, where female Roma do not attend school, compared to boys, taking into consideration the fact that in some communes in Albania, Roma population consists of majority of local inhabitants, where lack of education among Roma girls is an important problem for the region. (UNICEF, 2021) Another problem is reduction of number of boys attending high school education in rural areas, taking into consideration that majority of population in Albania is rural. (UNICEF 2020) While enrolment of boys and girls is virtually identical in EU-28, in Albania boys have higher enrolment. Gender Equality Index in Albania scores 60.4 indicating that still high commitment is needed to achieve full gender equality. The score is lower than EU. (2017) But, all these can be improved with the right intervention in curricula and school environment, in order to overcome this misbalance in number of boys attending primary and secondary education.

3. Method

This work offers a quantitative analysis with data collected from schools of primary, elementary and secondary education in Tirana region. Additional data were provided from Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) and Educational Directorate in these regions. These official statistics include comprehensive information on registration of

students in various study cycles and their graduation. This work is focused on a collection of data on attainment of boys and girls in schools located in Tirana and an analysis of collected data pointing out to potential reasons that may have caused the gender disparity. (2008)

This analysis shall focus on number of boys and girls attending the selected schools in this region during 2020/21 period. This city consists of the majority of Albanian population with a big number of schools concentrated in this area and will help carry out a comprehensive analysis. This work also offer a qualitative analysis with the help of a questionnaire addressed to schools directors regarding reasons that force students to leave studies.

After review and interpretation results, this work shall offer suggestions and recommendations for improvement of school curricula in order to make the school environment favorable for both genders and consolidate teacher's role in this respect. It will provide also suggestions and recommendations about teachers' role in order to train them for dealing with situations of gender disparity in the class and highlighting the key points of teachers training in this context, as well as fighting prejudices about gender stereotypes in curricula and textbooks.

4. Results

Although there were no reported indicators of gender inequality in school enrolment and attendance rates, data show that women of reproductive age have lower educational levels. Data also show that women's educational levels, especially at or above secondary education, have a positive impact on the improvement of their economic status and reproductive health. (OECD, 2020)

The following table shows the actual situation in schools of Albanian capital, where at primary schools number of boys is higher than girls, then in elementary school the difference is smaller and girls gain some numbers. But in secondary education level we have the reverse situation.

Table 1. Number of boys and girls in pre-university education cycles

Education cycle	Total	Girls	Boys
Primary	158.528	75.821	82.707
Elementary	127.958	60.398	67.560
Secondary	88.965	47.623	41.342
Total	375.451	183.842	191.609

Enrolment of boys and girl is virtually identical in the EU28, in Albania, gender gap favours slightly boys in lower education, but reverses in tertiary education, where females graduate outnumber. Other statistics are offered by Albanian Institute of Statistics show also data from higher education, indicated in the following picture:

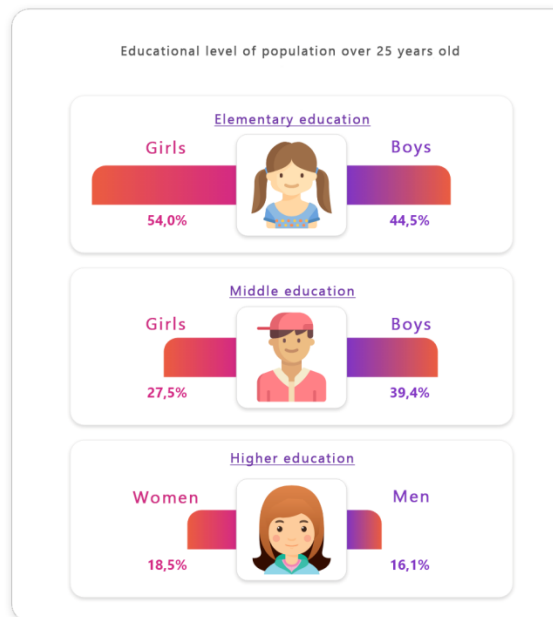


Figure 1 Source from Institute of Statistics

In the framework of this study, a questionnaire carried out in schools of Tirana with the participation of the directors and the responsible person for school statistics listed the main reasons that force school dropout in Albania, which are showed in the following figure:

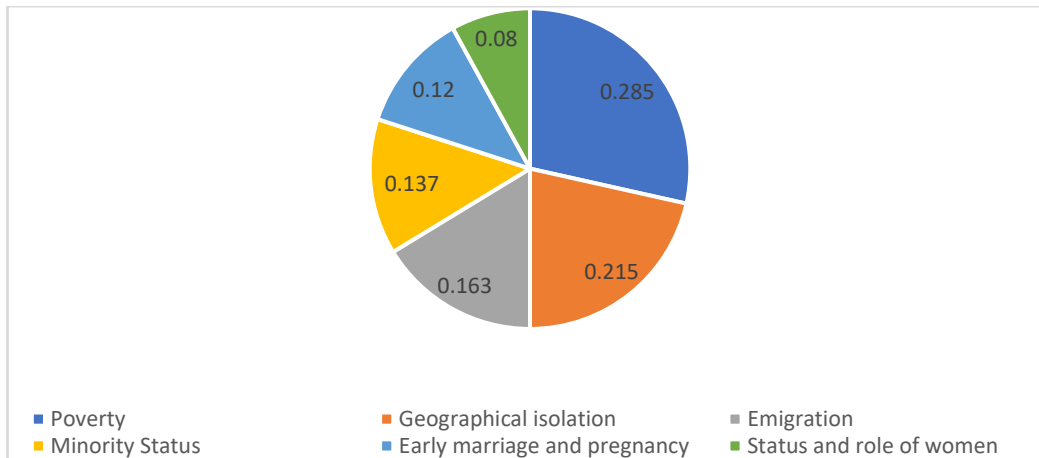


Figure 2. Percentage of reasons of failure to attend school

In Tirana outskirts, the economic situation does not favour school attendance. Due to poverty, parents force girls to stay at home to do the houseworks and take care of their little brothers and sisters.

Equity is also a concern, with continued disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes according to gender, ethnic background and geographical residence. Geographical isolation is caused by poor road and transport infrastructure places further restrictions on student access to school. While, pursuit of qualitative education is a key factor driving Albania's migration. Demographic changes and migration are driving changes in the geographic distribution of students within the country and presenting a dilemma in terms of education planning, particularly around recourse allocation, as schools are emptying in some municipalities and filling up in others.

Albanian legislation considers Roma as a non-ethnic language minority; an element quoted as an obstacle for engagement of Roma people in comprehensive education by many authors and lack of Albanian language possession has been seen as a reason for abandoning of school by these students. Most of street children and working children belong to Roma community, who are disadvantaged compared to students coming from other environments. They reach an average of about 4.02 up to 5.05 school years. Among group children who risk abandoning school are girls due to early marriages especially among Roma girls.

Mentality of parents obstacles girls in rural areas to attend school, stopping them to attend classes after compulsory education. Indicators showing school abandoning tell that parents offer excuses not to allow girls attend school, because they ask for

warranties and protection from school, security during road to school, protection from abuse.

5. Discussion

Gender equity can never be achieved through administrative decisions or legal acts, it can be established only through an efficient education system. In this respect, all the stakeholders: government structures, local government units, human rights and civil society organizations shall play a crucial role. Decentralization processes of education systems in Western Balkans mean an increasing autonomy of schools, which can lead to increasing rights for professional decision-making by teachers themselves.

Socio-economic conditions have a significant impact on access to education and educational outcome and students from disadvantages backgrounds perform less well than more advantage students. (Wayne, 2013, 36-38) This finding indicates a lack of opportunities in less well-off households and in poorly developed, rural or remote communities where access to education for both girls and boys is significantly lower then elsewhere. In this respect, the education laws should reflect national priorities in this field, drafting among others things a Social All-Inclusive Strategy.

Therefore, we should pay special attention to curricula and teaching models. We should look for teaching absorption ways suitable also for males 'role. Data from OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that about 79 % of the responsibility for curriculum implementation lies at school level, therefore local unit have to act in this respect.

During the questionnaire, findings showed that boys had a different behavior regarding learning environment, which is regulated by teachers at school, but in some cases new teachers are more insecure and incapable to create a favorable environment for boys. Some boys claim that teachers are not fair because they always stand on girls 'side. In contrary to boys, relation of girls with education includes several aspects, such as improvement of social status, key weapon to poverty, emancipation and integration of women in all fields.

In general, teachers are not well-prepared to work with children of different social-cultural origins. Likewise, studies show that teachers 'current education is characterized by theoretical knowledge, whereas practice is almost absent, zeroing opportunities to establish teachers 'capacities to deal with external factors regarding

all-inclusive education. This is one of the biggest challenges for teachers' trainings about all-sided education practices.

Initial qualification system of teachers in Albania is mostly based on subjects and program structure, which makes almost impossible the specific teaching of competences and professional expressions for students' inclusiveness and recognition of diversity. Continuous qualification of teachers has provided a minimal contribution in learning of inclusiveness competences, due to the fact that qualification programs during working years are not comprehensive or accredited.

The policy planning and teachers training practices should be focused on all-inclusive education in contexts of social and cultural diversity. The changes in policies and practices are better if they could be made in harmony with teachers' experience, in harmony with other developed countries. (Florian & Rouse, 2009)

6. Recommendations

We propose a number of measures to be taken by decision-taking authorities, teachers' trainers and teachers themselves to accelerate the reform for an inclusive policy, based on data provided during the study.

1. Fight prejudices about gender stereotypes in curricula and textbooks.
2. Encouraging sensitisation importance of education among girls, combating prejudice of this issue affecting Albanian educational systems, ways how to overcome barriers in the access for girls to and in educational systems of Albania, measures for trainers and teachers themselves at a system level for a social inclusion through education.
3. Creating a school environment that is friendly to both sexes and ensuring that women are equally represented in teaching, administrative and educational leadership roles.
4. Carrying out the right interventions in curricula and school environment, in order to overcome this imbalance in number of boys attending primary and secondary education.
5. Paying special attention to curricula and teaching models. We should look for teaching absorption ways suitable also for males' role.
6. Increase teachers' competences necessary for an all-sided education in social and cultural diversity situations.
7. Holding organized training activities for teachers

According to all recent studies, all-inclusive education in Albania requires a different model to influence in all system's levels.

- More powerful effort is needed to recruit men in the role of lecturer in our schools
- More attention to needs of boys
- Lecturers should not only be focused on theory, they should include action

Schools environment should become friendlier for boys.

Meanwhile, authorities should contribute in promotion of policies and practices for an all-sided education in context of social and cultural diversity.

7. Conclusion

Development of inclusive education practices requires efforts and joint initiatives with the participation of all groups of interest. Government plays an important role in coordination of trainings and other services offered by governmental and non-governmental institutions, international agencies, teachers training institutions, schools and communities. This would help fill all pieces of the puzzle to contribute for the same objective. A leading role can be carried out by the governmental institute or a commission subordinated by Ministry Education may be created to ensure coordination and supervision of its implementation for a long term period.

Albania has undertaken significant education reforms over the last two decades that have improved access to education and raised learning outcomes, including decentralisation of school governance and introduction of a competency based curriculum. Access to compulsory education has expanded and student performance has improved, but learning levels remain among the lowest in Europe. A big number of Albanian students still leave school without mastering basic competences. This limits the employments and life chances of many individuals and risks holding back national development. Closing the skills gaps by improving educational outcomes is seen as crucial to attracting foreign direct investments as Albania moves toward EU accession.

This topic is relevant for European policymaking regarding future projects focused on prevention of school abandoning by girls. This topic is sensitive in some Western Balkan countries, but as long as aspiration of these countries is joining EU, they must be ready to join. Inclusiveness education in a broader point of view is understood as a process through which schools try to treat students as individuals of their own from local communities, who will to attend studies and should reduce all forms of

exclusion. Ensuring the integrity of girls and women, promoting their socio-economic rights, supporting disadvantaged groups and engaging men and boys in all activities aimed at empowering women and providing equal opportunities are some of the key objectives of Albanian authorities.

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