

Mutable Meanings: Gender Equality in Education and International Rights Frameworks

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Abstract

Gender equality in education has considerable prominence in a wide range of international treaties and declarations, encompassing those concerned with human rights, gender equality, the expansion of education and the reduction of poverty. Despite this, however, it has not been easy to realise gender equality in education at the national and local level in many countries. Although statistics on rising numbers of girls and boys enrolling in school and the improvements in attainment by many girls suggest large steps towards equality, these often mask persistent inequalities in which gender features prominently. This article examines why the international frameworks relating to gender equality in education are so difficult to realise. The discussion draws mainly on data collected from a three year research project in Kenya and South Africa on how international frameworks concerned with poverty, gender equality and education were negotiated in a range of local settings.² The first part of the article reviews different ways in which gender equality in education can be understood, and associates these with contrasting approaches within the relevant international frameworks. The second part distinguishes between: (i) those international frameworks that work with a very restricted notion of gender equality and education, and (ii) those which deploy a more expansive meaning. In the third section some of the findings from a research study in Kenya and South Africa are presented in order to demonstrate which features of the conventions and declarations are implemented in different sites, highlighting how the conceptual distinction between different meanings of gender and equality and forms of international framework have a bearing on the forms of implementation.

Key words: Gender Equality in Education; International Rights Frameworks; Kenya; South Africa

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