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THE LIBERAL FEMINIST THEORY: ASSESSING ITS APPLICABILITY TO EDUCATION IN GENERAL AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (E.C.D) IN PARTICULAR WITHIN THE ZIMBABWEAN CONTEXT.

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Abstract

Radical feminism and Liberal feminism are some of the approaches that have been employed to explain inequalities and oppression within societies. These are two opposing approaches in terms of how they advocate for change and reform. The Radical Feminists advocate for revolutionary means to tackle oppression which they believe is a result of the biological differences between men and women. On the other hand, Liberal Feminists advocate for a moderate approach to bringing about change. Such an approach involves the use of legislation and an incremental strategy to bring about change. Whilst the paper makes reference to the Radical Feminist theory, this is done to show the contrasts in approach between the Radical Feminist Theory and Liberal Feminist Theory, its major focus is on the Liberal Feminist Theory. The paper focuses on how the Liberal Feminist Approach has been applied in education, especially at the Early Childhood Development level in order to address issues of inequality in education. The paper observes that whilst there has been progress in addressing gender issues through legislation as advocated by Liberal Feminists, gender inequality remains prevalent in politics and other spheres of socio-economic development. The paper proposes that there may be need for a more radical approach that dismantles structures, as the moderate approach on gender issues as advocated by Liberal Feminism has its limitations when it comes to such areas as politics and development.

Key words: Equality, Equity, Feminists, Radical Feminism, Liberal Feminism, Early Childhood Development, Inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Different theories have been used to explain and address gender inequalities in society. These include Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Radical feminism and Socialist feminism. These theories generally agree that there is oppression and inequality based on gender. They only differ on the approaches they advocate to have these imbalances within society



addressed. This paper focuses on the Liberal Feminist Theory. The paper will identify the major features of the Liberal Feminist Theory and then discuss laws, practices and policies in education that were designed to address gender imbalances at primary school, with special emphasis on Early Childhood Development (E.C.D). The following key terms are defined; Liberal Feminist Theory and Early Childhood Development.

Defining Liberal Feminist Theory

Liberal Feminist Theory can be explained by examining the term theory first. Owens (1994) defines theory as a thought process or way of thinking about reality which becomes a model of that reality. There are at least two important ideas that come out of the definition of the term theory by Owens (1994). These are firstly, a theory is a thought process that guides us, and secondly, it can be used to explain practice and action taken. Within this context Liberal Feminist Theory can be explained as an individualistic form which concentrates on women having their equality through being responsible for their actions and choices (Brookes, 2008). On a similar note, Giddens (2001:692) defines liberal theory as a “feminist theory that believes gender inequality is produced by reduced access for women and girls to civil rights and allocation of social resources such as education and employment”. From the two definitions above it can be noted that the liberal feminist theory acknowledges the existence of disparities in society that are gender related, but the onus is on the individuals affected to improve their situation.

Defining Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development as a term can be used to refer to the different stages that children go through in preparation for life. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2007), early childhood is the period from prenatal development to eight years. The focus of E.C.D is to expose the child to experiences that will provide a strong background for later years in life, as a child develops into adulthood. Such experiences have to expose the child to the nurturing of domains that contribute to the development of different domains in the child’s development. The aspects that need to be developed within the child include the physical, health, social, emotional, language and cognitive domains (ibid). Within the Zimbabwean context, the E.C.D level refers to the stage from 3 years up to 8 years.

Theories of gender inequality and gender oppression

Inequality and oppression in society have been explained using different theories. These theories include the Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism and Radical Feminism and Socialist Feminism. These different theories have been used to explain gender inequality. All the theories are based on the rationale that organisation of society has contributed to inequality between women and men and such inequality has contributed to women and girls having less access to power, economic empowerment, lower social status and generally limited opportunities than men and boys. Whilst they generally agree on this notion, the theorists differ on the approaches that can be employed to deal with issues of gender related inequality and oppression.

Radical Feminism

Within the context of feminism, radical feminism focuses on the theory of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a form of male dominance exercised by society over women. Radical feminism argues that men inflict physical and sexual violence over women through their supremacy which extends beyond the family, as it affects employment condition, distribution of wealth, provision of opportunities among others. Such supremacy has been accepted as normal by society and it is the philosophy of the theory that this supremacy can be challenged and changed. The philosophy underlining the theory is characterised by an opposition to male dominance, the need to challenge the status quo in order to radically reorder society and reorganise families and other institutions. As noted by Gandari et al (2012), advocates for radical feminism work towards creating alternative social institutions which fulfil their needs, at the same time allowing women to make



choices on social and health issues that affect them and rejecting pressures that are exerted by patriarchy. This view about radical feminism is also expressed by Gutsa et al (2011: 24) who noted that “men create and maintain patriarchy not only because they have the resources to do so but also because they have real interests in making women serve their interests”. The dominance of patriarchy in our perceptions and practices has to be challenged as it makes society accept inequality between men and women as normal. Some element of radicalism may be necessary to change such thinking.

2. LIBERAL FEMINISM

The Liberal Feminist Theory is premised around a number of assumptions. These premises are based on the understanding that individual ignorance has contributed to gender prejudice. In order to address this prejudice the affected individual has to take action. Education is therefore seen as a variable that can be used to improve the situation. Liberal feminists are also concerned with equal rights and freedom of the individual. If there are to be reforms, such reforms have to be gradually introduced without upsetting the status quo. Liberal Feminists have moderate aims, their views do not radically challenge the existing values and as such they aim for gradual change in the political, economic and social system (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Gender disparities are therefore attributed to a number of factors. Such factors include culture and the way men and women are socialised within that culture. The other factors are closely related to the attitudes of the individual. All these can be changed through empowerment and education. In essence, liberal feminism is for gradual reforms through advocacy for equal rights for all, and laws and policies that promote equality.

Addressing Gender Inequality through the Liberal Feminism Approach in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, there has been lobbying for gender equality in different spheres of life since attainment of independence in 1980. Such lobbying has contributed to important legislation that has contributed to reform in different areas including education. The post-colonial government of Zimbabwe had to abolish different forms of discrimination. The government of Zimbabwe abolished discrimination based on gender, race, class, religion or any other form of discrimination. This was made possible by the passing of Acts of Parliament. There are specific gender laws in Zimbabwe. One such act is the Equal Pay Regulations (1980). As noted by Gutsa et al (2011) the act prescribes equal pay for work of equal value such that differences in pay were to be determined by differences in skill and qualifications not by gender. The act was not specifically directed at education, but female teachers also benefited from the act as they were able to get equal pay with their male counterparts.

The national gender policies of 2004 and the latest Zimbabwe National Gender Framework of 2013 are guided by International Policy Framework and Regional Policy Framework of which Zimbabwe is part to and signatory. According to the Zimbabwe Government National Gender Framework (2013) the government of Zimbabwe has passed 17 pieces of legislation which were meant to advance the gender equality and equity objective. It may be necessary to take note of some of the legislation. These include the Labour Relations Act (1984) – Revised in 1993, The Public Service Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (1985) and the National Gender Policy of (2004).

An examination of the National Gender Policy (2004) shows that the policy had the following goals: to eliminate all negative economic, social and political policies, cultural and religious practices that impede equality and equity of the sexes; to mainstream gender in all aspects of the development process; and to ensure sustainable equity, equality and empowerment of women and men in Zimbabwe in all spheres of life (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). The enactment of such laws and the designing of such policies can be attributed to Liberal Feminism within the political structures and lobby groups such the Women’s Action Group (WAG) in Zimbabwe. The Women’s Action Group was formed in 1983 to highlight concerns of women in both the public and private domains (<http://www.wcoz.org/tyography/127-womens-action-group-profile.html>). There are also other women’s lobby groups in Zimbabwe. These include Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) which is instrumental for spearheading improvements to the constitution and the Zimbabwe



Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA) which advocates for women's and children's rights. The ZWLA states its goal as "to promote a Zimbabwean society where women are empowered and assert their rights within a justice system that treats men and women equally and that is sensitive to the needs of children" (<http://www.zwla.co.zw>). These lobby groups should be commended for what they stand for. They have contributed to a large extent to shaping the legal and political landscape in Zimbabwe. However, apart from lobbying for laws and policies that are gender sensitive they should go on a rigorous campaign to force their implementation. In that regard, their mandate should go beyond advocacy to include monitoring and oversight in some cases. The major question is now on the challenges that are related to implementation of some of the laws and policies that promote equality and equity.

Within the context of how legislation and policy play a role in bringing about change and reform as advocated by Liberal feminists, the Zimbabwean government a new education act, the 1987 Education Act. The Act stipulated, among other things, that every child in Zimbabwe should have the right to school education. The Act also declared that education would be compulsory and free at primary school in Zimbabwe. It further placed education in the category of human rights and viewed education as a vehicle of social transformation (Government of Zimbabwe, 1991). Although some provisions on free education were later amended in 1991, what is important about the 1987 Education Act is that it acknowledged the role of education as a liberating force which had to be provided to both boys and girls. It embraced the education for all policy.

Apart from legislature to support the promotion of women at primary school, stereotype titles in schools have been changed. Titles that are not gender sensitive such as headmaster, sports master and senior master have been replaced by school head, sports director and senior teacher respectively. This helped in reducing stereotypes that emanate from language use. In relation to the language used at primary school and E.C.D level there has been a revision to the textbooks that are used in primary school today.

Apart from giving children basic skills in life, the school has a socialization role. The way children are socialized has an effect on how they handle gender issues. The education system gives equal opportunity to both the girl child and boy child. The training of teachers in gender issues has assisted in how teachers can develop children to perform similar roles at school. Such exposure to different roles helps children to have a wide career choice as they grow. In schools, as a result of teacher development programmes in the area of E.C.D and the primary school as a whole teachers, are now aware of the need not to treat boys and girls as unequals. Children are given equal opportunities to play, discover things and dramatize different roles in class. At E.C.D level both boys and girls are allowed to play with different toys without gender bias. In plays and drama children play role regardless of gender. A girl can actually play roles as a father, doctor, engineer and electrician among others in order to move away from the stereotype that such roles and occupations are for boys only in real life. The same roles are played by boys.

In relation to the E.C.D and primary school curriculum, children are given equal opportunities to develop their skills in different areas. The E.C.D syllabus focuses on the individual child. The E.C.D syllabus states in the methodology that "the pace of learning will be determined by the individual child's readiness to absorb a concept or master a skill, not by a teacher-centred timetable" (Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, 2011). In that regard, the syllabus advocates for the right of the child to be free to develop at his/her own pace, thus offering some element of opposition to traditional model of teaching. The approach contains elements of liberal feminism in that it advocates for the right of the individual, equal opportunities and fairness. As noted by Mawere et al (2011:18) "Liberals have called for gender-sensitive teaching methods to afford pupils equal treatment". The child-centred approach to teaching as advocated in the E.C.D syllabus can be described as offering children equal treatment, the right to freedom and autonomy.

In that regard the E.C.D curriculum addresses children's needs regardless of gender as advocated by Liberal feminism. These include equal attention to different class activities such as games, drawing, reading, writing and play. When it comes to play, there is no restriction on gender basis as to the games children can play. Play centres are equipped with



outdoor play equipment. The equipment and activities include swings, sand play, riding horses, climbing ladders, tunnels and tyres among others. The groups within the class should promote equality. This is done through the use of mixed groups and leadership positions within the groups should not be gender biased. Positions of leadership should be gender balanced. This should be demonstrated in the selection of class monitors and prefects. In relation to leadership positions in the primary schools, the number of female school heads and deputy heads has been on the increase since 1980. However, despite this increase the number of female school heads remains lower than male school heads though the number of female teachers is greater than that of male teachers (Gwirayi, 2010).

The employment conditions in schools and E.C.D centres are gender sensitive. For example, the Labour Relations Act (1984) – Revised in 1993 prohibits any form of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, HIV status. The Act further notes that women are now entitled to 90 days maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, equality in recruitment, promotion, training programmes and benefits (Gutsa et al, 2011). Before these changes female teachers were treated like temporary teachers as they were treated as new employees each time they returned from maternity leave. They also went for maternity leave without pay. These changes came about as a result of lobbying from different interest groups. The Liberal Feminist way of tackling issues can also be applied at primary school and E.C.D level. The teachers and administrators can introduce change and reform incrementally without upsetting the status quo. Such an approach can be cost effective, as the resources and plans that are already in place are utilised and changed gradually. As such, teachers and caregivers can introduce new subjects, ideas or concepts one at a time until children appreciate the new concepts before they proceed to the next stage. These can be in the form of new games, new toys and new skills to be developed.

Limitations of the Liberal Feminist Theory

Whilst the Liberal Feminist approach has contributed much in terms of laws and policies that outlaw different forms of discrimination in education, employment and pay, there is much to be done in the area of politics and development. Whilst the Electoral Act of 1990 allows women to participate in politics and contest for any position, the number of parliamentarians and ministers in Zimbabwe basing on the 31 July 2013 elections remains skewed in favour of men. For example, the Zimbabwean government formed after the 31 July 2013 elections has 26 cabinet ministers, and out of these only three are women. The government also has 13 ministers of state, and out of these only three are women. When it comes to deputy ministers, out of a total of 24, only five are women. As noted in the Zimbabwe Independent, 20 September, 2013 the number of women in the cabinet represents only 11.5 %. This is a percentage well below the 30 percent quota advocated for by different Conventions and Declarations ratified by SADC. Such a scenario appears to indicate the limitations of attempting to bring about reform through legislation as advocated by the Liberal Feminists. The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008): Part Four: Article 14: Gender Equality in Education states that:

- Parties shall, by 2015, enact laws that promote equal access to and retention in primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and non-formal education in accordance with the Protocol on Education and Training and the Millennium Development Goals.
- Parties shall by 2015 adopt and implement gender sensitive educational policies and programmes addressing gender stereotypes in education and gender based violence, amongst others.

(http://www.sadc.int/files/8713/5292/8364/poProtocol_on_Gender_and_Development_2008.pdf).

As noted above there have been advances in the area of equality in education. Such advances still fall short in other spheres of the social spectrum. Advances in education and training should symbolise the equality and equity in society. There are still a number of factors that have negatively impacted on the advancement of women in different spheres in Africa.



There are many factors that inhibit full participation of women in politics and development. One of the factors is male chauvinism that manifests itself in different facets of life in traditional African culture. Whilst Zimbabwe has made notable progress in terms of policy and legislation as advocated by Liberal Feminists, the legal, socio-economic and political status of women has remained relatively low (UNFPA, 2011). According to the 1998 Human Development Report Zimbabwe remains a “highly unequal society” as a result of “ignorance of the law, its administration, economic hardships that make it difficult to pursue their legal rights, cumbersome court procedures, customary laws and fear of breaking valued relations with family kin” (ibid).

Apart from the factors noted above, the structures in place tend to reinforce gender stereotype. Participation of women in politics is influenced by such factors as culture, religion and gender stereotypes in both men and women. On the other hand, the conditions and processes that are involved also demonstrate inadequacy in the representation of women right from the selection stage. Taylor (1992) as cited by Gutsa et al (2011) noted that the private sphere which is dominated by housework, child care and all other related undervalued tasks at home are commonly reserved for women, whilst those in the public sphere such as power, status and money are dominated by men. Weiner (1994) also notes that sexual inequality is caused by such factors as prejudice of parents and society in general, traditional values and structural barriers. Weiner (1994) is of the view that sexual inequalities in education and other sectors of the socio-economic spectrum can be overcome by raising awareness through training and schooling and the enactment of laws that support equality.

It is hoped that education and training will change the stereotypes that exist in society. This requires concerted efforts to improve the participation of women in such areas as politics and development. Such education and training should improve the socialization process of both women and men.

3. CONCLUSION

There have been great efforts to give equal opportunities to boys and girls at school. The same can be said in terms of equality at the work place and at home. Laws have been put in place to support the participation of girls and women in all spheres of society. Whilst education can help change attitudes and perceptions, the Liberal Feminist Theory has limitations when it comes to political change. This may be due to the theory’s failure to upset the status quo and the changes it initiates might be limited in scope. It may be concluded that the Liberal Feminist Theory is quite applicable to the primary school, thus in terms of the Acts that are generated to support equality, justice and fairness in education. At the same time, some of the approaches adopted in the school curriculum bear semblance to what Liberal Feminism advocates. However, there have been limitations to the achievement of equality and equity in education and other areas such as politics and development. This is due to many factors that include the stereotypes found in society and the socialisation process that has to be changed through education and training. There may be need for radical reform, to support legislation as advocated by liberal feminism.

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