Peer-Reviewed Article

Addressing Gender Disparity Through International Higher Education: Use of Contextually Appropriate Global Policy Framework

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the globally important topic of gender disparity in higher education and how to, contextually address it by formulating and implementing an appropriate globally-recognized policy framework. Although gender equality is one of the seven Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, it is a known fact that globally, there is gender disparity that systemically limits or curtails the progress of the girl-child or women either in terms of their educational attainments or professional development. Several countries and international agencies continue to commit to eradicating gender disparity in their countries in particular and in the world in general. In spite of the efforts of the United Nations and international agencies, there is still a long way to go in achieving gender parity. This paper looks at the attainment of gender parity through the use of higher education to bring about a contextually appropriate framework that is global in its operation and implementation in the effort to eliminate gender disparity. This is an attempt to unleash the potential of marginalized people, particularly women, who have been curtailed for several decades because of their gender for the overall good of our global world.

Keywords: gender disparity, higher education, international policy, United Nations

INTRODUCTION

While there is a common saying that "Education is a human right and not a privilege," (UNESCO, 2015), that quote may not be fully realized and may not apply to everyone in today's world unless and until issues of gender disparity are fully addressed at national and international levels. There is abundant evidence to show that gender disparity exists, and this is not restricted to only the field of higher education regarding opportunities that are made available to people, access to education, retention, program completion, and graduation but also in employment after graduation in terms of career interests, career choices, career pursuits, and career progression UN Women (n.d.). This discrimination and gender stereotyping have further seeped into subjects and courses that are generally known to be gender biased, especially in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and math (STEM) fields where females are often victims of bias and discrimination (Kiamba, 2008; McCullough, 2020; Pechtelidis et al, 2015).

The UNESCO (2015) report revealed that gender continues to manifest in many aspects of human behavior and activities all over the world, including education access, retention, and success and in employment, such as career choices and opportunities. The report further stated that females often experience the worst form of discrimination all over the world. Therefore, our aim in this study is to examine the gap in gender equity globally, in spite of global policies and programs that have been formulated and implemented, and make an argument for gender parity through the formulation and implementation of contextually appropriate global policies and programs that ensure that everybody regardless of gender and/or sexual orientation is both fairly and equally treated and continues to have access to life-long learning opportunities. By ensuring greater gender parity in the provision of and access to education and employment globally, all people should be able to maximize their potential when they are empowered and be able to make meaningful contributions to the challenging task of attaining socio-cultural, educational, political, and economic equality across genders which should make the world a better place than it is today. In this study, the authors will examine the topic of gender disparity from the binary version and/or definition of men and women. This does not imply that the authors subscribe to this binary version as the only definition of gender disparity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

State of Gender Disparity in the World

Discrimination against women is widespread in many professions. For example, data from the 2010 UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) showed that there were more female teachers (62%) than male teachers (38%) at the elementary education level globally. However, the percentage of female teachers at the elementary level did not extend beyond that level. Although more women are increasingly getting access to education, globally, they are less likely to work in higher education and research areas.

In spite of the fact that more women are increasingly getting access to education, women still remain in the minority in STEM disciplines all over the world (Pechtelidis et al., 2015). Wood (2012) averred that there were still more female teachers than their male counterparts in the elementary school system while the UIS (2020) report showed that unfortunately about a decade later, there have not been significant changes made in the efforts to address gender disparity based on the fact that there are still more female teachers than their male counterparts at the elementary level of education. This may have been cultural based on society's influence and impact in assigning gender roles to certain professions and disciplines (UNESCO, 2015).

The 2015 UNESCO report therefore advocated for the introduction and implementation of gender-responsive policies ranging from school programs that encourage girls to pursue their studies in the STEM fields to professional arrangements that enable women to be able to manage their home and family care responsibilities while also pursuing their educational and professional interests and goals. The enforcement of such policies, the report averred, would help to overcome the bias that still exist and persist against girls and women not only in the field of education but also in workplaces all over the world.

Evolving Changes to Gender Equality

The concept of gender equality has evolved with different goals, approaches, and strategies that transcends cultural and advocacy groups to addressing country and global needs (UNESCO, 2015). According to the report, although the Charter of the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) have both historically recognized women's equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, the periods of the late 1960s involved an increased attention that was paid to achieving equality based on women's access to health care, adequate nutrition, birth control and women's reproductive role.

From the 1970s to the 1980s, attention by gender advocacy groups shifted to the role of women in promoting economic development both nationally and internationally. This period also witnessed the promotion of Women in Development (WID) approach towards the achievement of gender parity in the world. The UNESCO (2015) report also revealed that in the time period from the 1970s to 1980s, notable and landmark events such as the first World Conference on Women took place in Mexico in 1975 and the declaration of the UN Decade for Women held from 1976 to 1985.

In spite of the global efforts that were paid to give women a voice and to pay adequate attention and proper recognition to women's achievements, the UNESCO (2015) report noted that it wasn't long before gender activists and development experts started their campaigns in the 1980s on the need to address the failure of the WID approach. The two main failures of the approach according to the report were:

1)   Failure to improve the unequal treatments of women and men in terms of personal development opportunities and goals, and,

2)   Failure to consider the multiple roles of women in the society.

The result of the campaigns by these gender activists and development experts on the need to address the shortcomings of the WID approach led to the adoption of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach in the attempt to address the complex issues of gender disparity in the 1980s. The main goal of the GAP approach according to the UNESCO (2015, p. 22) report was "to remove social, economic and political disparities between men and women in more holistic and pragmatic ways." According to the report, by the 1990s, issues that concern gender equality had been successfully included in the international development agenda including Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The EFA is a global commitment led by UNESCO by 164 countries in the year 2000 to address the learning needs of every child, youth, and adult in the world. The EFA was initiated to help in the attainment of the MDGs by 2015. The MDGs relate to the commitment that was made in the year 2000 by 187 countries to among other things ensure the achievement of universal primary education, provide gender equality, empower women, and eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in the world (Oxfam Canada, 2019). Commitments were made by countries especially by the developed ones to ensure that both the EFA and MDG initiatives are achieved to make the world a better place by 2015. Although progress have been made in achieving the MDGs, however, the inability of most countries to keep to

their commitments continue to make the achievement of the objectives that were set out in the MDG initiative a mirage (Oxfam Canada, 2019).

Women in Development (WID) vs. Gender and Development (GAD) Approaches

Marchand and Parpart (1995) stated that in the 1970s and 1980s, the term "gender" became increasingly popular in describing the different roles and responsibilities that women have in the society. By the mid to late 1980s, the gender concept became more popular that it replaced in some circles the earlier Women in Development (WID) approach (Marchand & Parpart, 1995). The Gender and Development (GAD) approach extends beyond the definition to replace 'women' with the more neutral term 'gender' that was offered by the earlier WID approach which attempted to categorize women especially from developing countries into a category that were based on progressivist Western views of 'modernization' (Marchand & Parpart, 1995).

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) was established in Ottawa in 1968 with a mission of ending global poverty and promoting social justice and human dignity for everyone in the world. A 1991 report of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) revealed the differences between the WID approach of the 1970s and GAP approach of the 1980s in addressing issues and concerns regarding gender disparity and bias.

Contextually Appropriate Global Policies to Address Gender Disparity

Commitment by national governments and international bodies, including the UN, to formulate and implement "contextually appropriate" global policies and programs to ensure that girls and women are not discriminated in their educational, professional and career pursuits is an important step forward in the urgent and cogent need to better address the problems of gender bias in today's world. Pal (2002, p. 2) defined policy as "a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems." Also, Jallade et al. (2001, p. 42) stated that policy is important because "it can help to guide future decisions and actions in educational development including those by international agencies in a coherent way." They further stated that policy "represents the government's public commitment to the future orientation of the sector." According to the UNESCO (2015) report, a policy is made up of three basic components: 1) problem definition, goals, and instruments, 2) goals and its relation to problem definition, and, 3) the policy instruments

that are used to solve an identified problem in order to achieve an intended goal.

Table 1
Differences between WID and GAP approaches

	WID Approach	GAD Approach
Approach	Attempts to integrate women into the development process	Attempts to empower women and change the unequal relations between women and men
Focus	Women	Relations between women and men
Problem	Exclusion of women from the development process	Disparity in power relations that prevent equitable development and women's full participation
Goal	More efficient and effective development	-Equitable and sustainable development -Women and men having equal and shared decision-making power
Strategies	-Implement women's projects, women's components, and integrated projects -Increase women's productivity and income -Improve women's ability to manage their households	-Identify and address short-term needs that are determined by both women and men to improve their conditions -Identify and address women's and men's longer-term interests

Source: Canadian Council for International Co-operation

In order to address the lingering concerns and problems regarding gender disparity in the world today, global policies must have these three basic components identified above and also be contextually appropriate
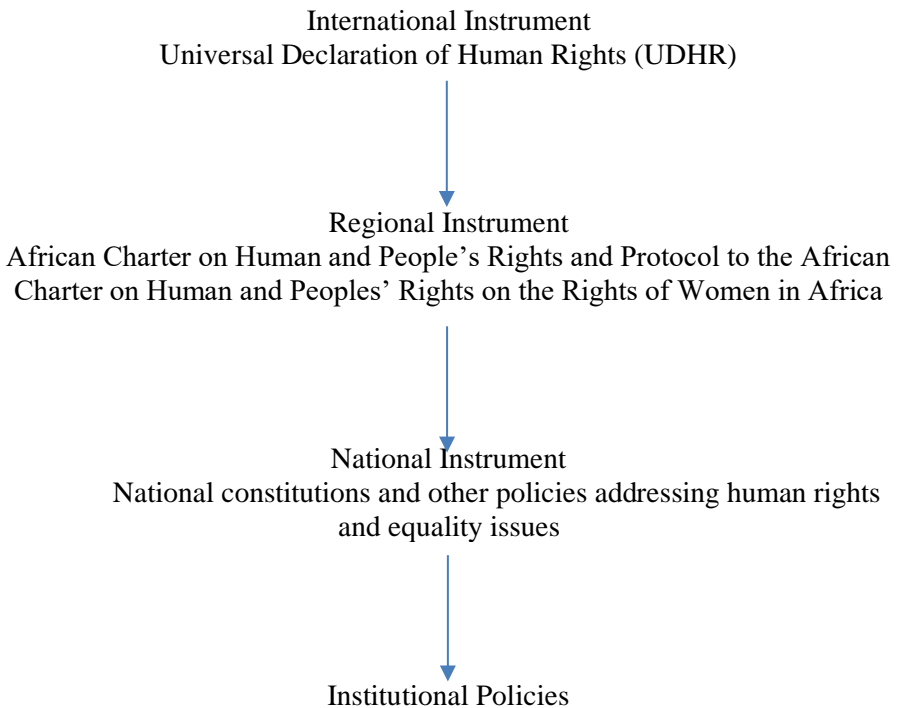
(UNESCO, 2015). Policy instruments that are contextually appropriate and take into cognizance these components identified above will also help in addressing uneven distribution of learning opportunities and resources that tend to favor men over women in different regions and different cultures of the world and thus deprive girls and women access to learning and empowerment opportunities and programs (UNESCO, 2015).

International and Regional Policy Process

The UNESCO (2015) report suggested that national governments and international bodies can commit to policy instruments designed in the format below to ensure that the challenges of gender disparity from a global scale to a local scale in a consistent and uniform strategic process are comprehensively addressed. This is one example:

Figure 1
Example Format Illustrating Commitment Across Policy Instrument Design

International Instrument
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

↓

Regional Instrument
African Charter on Human and People's Rights and Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa

↓

National Instrument
National constitutions and other policies addressing human rights and equality issues

↓

Institutional Policies

Source: UNESCO (2015).

Arguments for a Globally Contextually Appropriate Policy Framework

Every problem that exists should be treated within a given context of its existence and that context should inform the solution in terms of policies and programs that may be introduced, formulated, or implemented to address the problem. For example, UNESCO (2015) reported that appropriate policies that are aimed at addressing gender bias may be formulated at a global level, such as the UN, and member countries that are signatories to such policy agreements will be able to make commitments to abide by such policy agreements, which will compel these national governments, to implement such policies in their individual countries in a contextually appropriate way given the differences in the socio-cultural, political, and economic levels of development of the member countries.

The context of policy formulation and implementation in different countries is very important and may be different from one country to another given the differences in gender disparity across the world due to differences in culture, norms, beliefs, and practices. For example, Eshete (2003) stated that in Ethiopia, women make up only 2.3% of the total number of professors (including lecturers and instructors) in all the post-secondary educational institutions in the country. However, the case is different in other countries where gender disparity also exists. For example, Samble (2008) stated that in the United States, only 23% of full professors were women while Doherty & Manfredi (2010) stated that only 13% of full professors in England were women. In Latin America, in spite of the increasing enrolment of women in universities representing 55%, only 46% of women occupy teaching positions while 18% occupy leadership positions as rectors of universities (UNESCO, 2021). The differences in gender disparity in different countries in the world today therefore makes the need for a contextually appropriate formulation and implementation of global policies and programs to be both imperative and germane in the efforts to address the problems of gender disparity, globally.

In order to address gender disparity between women and men in higher educational institutions and workplaces across the world today, it is necessary to evolve a contextually appropriate policy framework that recognizes the contextual and cultural disposition and inclination of the people of a particular country. This recognition must be pursued in a unique and peculiar manner rather than a generic framework that may not take into cognizance the contextual and cultural challenges of individual countries in the world.

However, regardless of the differences that exist between and amongst the different countries of the world, any policy framework that is

introduced and pursued for implementation must appropriately and adequately address salient and vital issues that relate to gender, class, race, and ethnicity in order to ensure justice, equity and fair play in any efforts deployed to address the very important issue of gender disparity not only in the field of higher education, and in workplaces, but also in every sphere of human interactions and activities across the world.

Gender-responsive policy. UNESCO (2015) stated that any policy that is gender-responsive takes into cognizance the awareness and knowledge of the different situations and circumstances that women and men find themselves in society, including differences in access to learning opportunities and resources (UNESCO, 2015). The essence of any gender-responsive policy is to address the challenges of gender disparity in the world by ensuring that countries implement such a policy in a way that contextually recognizes gender differences. True (2003) argued that a gender-responsive policy must consider the diverse needs, interests, and values of men and women in different positions in society.

Curriculum, curriculum language, gender equality, and gender assessment. The importance of curriculum design and development in any higher education system cannot be overemphasized because of its importance in the process of selecting and presenting knowledge and its role in shaping character and developing behavioral expectations and patterns in the learner (UNESCO, 2015). Given the importance of curriculum in training learners who include future teachers and leaders, UNESCO (2015) averred that it is important to ensure that the curriculum design and development process recognizes and addresses any gender bias that may be inherent in any higher education or training curriculum.

Given the impact of social and cultural norms and practices in particular societies and countries regarding curriculum design and development, it is important to ensure the formulation and implementation of contextually appropriate policies as a way of addressing the gender disparity that is often noticed in certain courses at both the secondary and higher education level. For example, UNESCO (2015, p. 59) reported that "Physical Education (PE) is one case in point where gender equality issues arise from preconceived stereotyping of boys and girls." The report argued that all over the world, it is generally believed that physical and outside activities are boys' domain while girls are better suited to in-house and home activities, such as cooking. The UNESCO (2015, p. 59) further

reported that this practice is "prevalent in many cultures around the world and is not specific to one culture alone."

UNESCO (2015) reported that the objectives of a course and learning outcomes form an important foundation for any curriculum. The report further stated that the samples of curriculum objectives and learning outcomes in certain countries show that there is gender bias in the language used. For example, Norton & Toohey (2004) stated that in Japan, girls are made to see English language as a language of empowerment. They also stated that the use of pronouns in the English language permits students to express themselves as independent individuals as opposed to what obtains in the Japanese language. This is an example of how language, an important part of culture, makes for gender disparity in curriculum design and development in Japan. To address this particular problem in Japan, for example, a contextual and appropriate policy and program strategy could be adopted in the context of the problem rather than a generic policy framework that may not adequately and appropriately address the problem of gender disparity in the curriculum language that is presently being used.

UNESCO (2015, p. 61) reported that "assessment involves many variables that affect the outcome over and above the stated learning outcomes under assessment." Also, Feingold (1992) stated that certain types of assessment favor boys over girls. For example, he argued that boys do better on multiple-choice questions and girls do better on essay type questions. While more research is needed to verify his findings, it is still important to take note of the possibility of gender bias in students' assessment and such should be given the needed and necessary attention that it deserves in a contextually appropriate manner.

Teacher attitudes and gender issues. Teacher bias deserves needed attention in the efforts being made by both national governments and international bodies to address the issue of gender disparity. This is because teachers are in a position to influence and mold the perspectives and position of their students on gender matters and issues. For example, Bloom (1976) stated that attitudes play a significant role in students' success in their subjects while the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2006, p. 6) stated that "the sensitization of academic staff to the gender dimensions of teaching and learning is an important first step towards the transformation of the curriculum, including content, methodologies and processes." Therefore, it is important that teachers provide a gender-bias free environment in their classes, and they should also be aware of gender sensitive instructional styles in order to be able to

provide a solid and quality education to their students. Regarding the importance of teachers' attitudes to gender issues, Scott & McCollum (1993, pp. 175) stated that "teachers must learn how to address the multiple needs arising because of gender, class, ethnicity, language and location" while UNESCO (2015, pp. 68) also reported that "teachers need to be aware of their own beliefs and behavior towards male and female learners" including the "need to reject their held belief that boys excel in mathematics and that girls should catch up with boys."

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PURPOSE

The research questions are based on gender disparity in both the developed and developing world. These questions are:

1) What is the state of gender disparity in the world today?
2) How can higher education help in addressing gender disparity?
3) What policies and practices can help address gender disparity at the international level?

In this study, we examine the need for a global contextually appropriate policy framework within the higher education sector to address issues of gender disparity, globally, rather than a generic framework or approach. This is because higher education plays a significant role in addressing the problems of gender disparity. If concerns regarding gender disparity can be successfully addressed by higher education, this can be used as a model to be replicated in other sectors. Also, students who are positively impacted can go into their different workplaces upon graduation from their programs in their colleges and universities as ambassadors who will be able to advocate for gender parity and challenge the status quo in their various and diverse workplaces all over the world.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the purpose of this research, we conducted a retrospective review of policies examining global gender disparity using data generated from the United Nations. A substantial amount of time and focus was used to conducting a literature review and understanding global gender disparity and how the United Nations worked collectively to combat the issue. After the literature review was conducted, we evaluated the policies and developed an understanding of how the policies played a role in addressing gender disparity. Thereafter, we proposed a contextual appropriate policy framework as an approach to consider. This allowed us to have a perspective of the current and future implications through this approach.

RESULTS

Policies and programs to address gender disparity at the UN level

From examining gender disparity through a contextually appropriate global policy framework, it is important to understand the wide range of international policies. Some policies and programs aimed at eliminating gender disparity or reducing it by UN member states include the following.

- Affirmative Action: Efforts at the international and national levels that are intended to increase access to higher education opportunities to marginalized groups (Nguyen & Ward, 2017). This policy takes into consideration the responsibilities and activities of women, which go beyond their academic studies and extends to their home and family care and responsibilities, by giving them a consideration that allows them access to learning opportunities in male dominated disciplines even when they are a few points less than the required grade. This policy, according to Eshete (2003) has helped to increase access to learning opportunities for girls in countries like Ethiopia and Zimbabwe where girls and women are disadvantaged compared to boys and men by housework and chores. Nyoni et al (2017) also stated that affirmative action policies are meant to provide more opportunities for women engagement in learning opportunities, leadership positions, politics, higher administrative responsibilities, and economic development.

- Equal Opportunity: Nyoni et al (2017) stated that these are policies that were formed and developed to address issues of gender disparity like the gender mainstreaming policy that was promoted in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).

- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Was a resolution by 189 countries and 22 international bodies at the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000 to achieve eight goals including the reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, achievement of universal primary education, women empowerment and gender equality by 2015.

- Education for All (EFA): Is a global commitment led by UNESCO to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults. The commitment was made by 164 countries at the World Education Forum that held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 and it was meant to support the attainment of the MDGs by 2015. The EFA also aims to reduce barriers to education such as poverty and undernutrition that is prevalent in developing countries (Soetan, 2019; Soetan, 2020).

- Gender Sensitization Campaigns: These are programs in which certain days are set aside in the year. These days are internationally recognized

by UN member states to both recognize and acknowledge the huge and important contributions that women make in the world today. Examples include the International Women's Day that takes place every year on March 8, and the International Day of the Girl Child that holds on October 11 of every year.

- Gender Mainstreaming: Is a globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality. Gender mainstreaming ensures that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are crucial to all activities involving girls and boys and women and men all over the world.
- Focal Point for Women: This was mandated according to the UN Women (n.d.) to monitor the status of women in UN member states and measure the level of compliance of member states to policies and programs that they made commitments to implement in the efforts to address gender disparity in the world. Progress reports on findings regarding the status of women in all UN countries are reported to the Secretary-General of the UN.
- IANWGE: The Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality is a network within the UN system that monitors, supervises, and ensures the mainstreaming of gender perspectives in the programmatic, normative, and operational work of the UN System (UN Women, n.d.).
- Women, Peace and Security: Is concerned with the adoption of the Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. The resolution according to the UN Women (n.d.) marked an important act in the efforts aimed at increasing women participation and providing increased publicity to gender perspectives in all UN activities and efforts that involve peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and reconstruction all over the world.
- UNITE Campaign: This was an initiative of the erstwhile UN Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, aimed at ending violence against women, globally.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Today, all over the world, women are increasingly breaking their ceilings and limits (albeit at a slow pace) by taking up leadership positions in higher education institutions and in various workplaces through the different policies and programs that have been formulated at the UN level. These programs and policies compel member countries to commit to adopt and implement these policies and programs in their respective countries. Some of these policies and programs are the results of some global meetings and conferences that were convened by the UN General Assembly. For example,

in 1998, UNESCO convened a world conference on higher education in which participants at the conference stated that higher education has an important role to play in bringing about gender parity, globally.

Regarding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a resolution that was agreed to by 189 countries during the historic millennium declaration of the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2010, Nyoni et al (2017) stated that the attainment of the MDGs will go a long way in addressing the ills of gender disparity in the world today. They further stated that 189 countries made a commitment to both adopt and enforce the MDGs in their countries and that the MDGs is "concerned with promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women," based on the recognition of "the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in effecting social change and transformation" (pp. 44). While it is true that 189 of the 193 countries that make up the UN made a commitment toward the enforcement of the MDGs, the reality is that several countries have been slow and non-challant in the implementation of their commitment to that cause i.e., the enforcement of the MDGs in their countries.

In India, Jha (2022) argued that the country has come a long way in addressing the issue of gender disparity with the literacy rate for females increasing from 8.9 percent during the country's first census in 1951 to 65.8 percent in 2008; however, India, still has a long way to go in ensuring gender equality by ensuring systemic shifts regarding the role of women in the society (Jha, 2022), including in higher education. This systemic shift in the role of women in the society could be appropriately addressed in our view through the use of contextually appropriate global policy framework. In Ethiopia, evidence suggests that access and quality should not be viewed as an "either-or" issue but as an integral part of the same whole (Semela, 2007). This is connected to the issue of gender disparity, which is evidenced by the dearth of female university graduates in the country which has resulted in few academic positions for women in higher education in the country (Asfaw, 2012). Sadly, today, in many countries, the issue of gender equality is still a common topic of concern as evidenced by the recent statement made by the United Nations at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2023 (UN Women, 2023).

Blackmore & Sachs (2001) and Segania (2007) stated that even in developed countries, gender disparity still exists as there is still a deficiency of women in high leadership positions. Gender disparity is, however, worse in developing according to Dunne & Sayed (2007); Kiamba (2008); Prah

(2002); Ohene (2010); Onsongo (2004); Adadevoh (2001), Odejide (2007); Pereira (2007); and Morley (2013).

Through the approach of using a contextually appropriate policy framework, we hope that the goals of the United Nations to combat gender disparities will be more targeted and impactful to respond to the needs of the member nations and local contexts and communities. Limitations of this approach and research are that there are multiple factors that influence the ability to utilize this framework. Policymaking and policy implementation does not operate in a vacuum and are influenced by a variety of factors, such as politics, economics, health and welfare, conflicts, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the improvements recorded in increasing learning opportunities and access to minority and discriminated groups especially girls and women through the formulation and implementation of policies and programs at both national and international levels, gender disparity still remains a serious issue that deserves great concern and urgent attention at both national and international levels. The formulation and implementation of contextually appropriate and effective global policies and programs, in our opinion will bring about greater improvements to the attainment of gender parity compared to what we are witnessing today. Also, the earlier the ills from gender disparity are appropriately and adequately addressed through the adoption and implementation and/or enforcement of contextually appropriate global policies, programs and resolutions, the faster and better the potential of millions of people particularly girls and women will be realized and the better and easier the world will be for us all.

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