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‘Gender’ Doesn’t Mean ‘Female’: Gender Minorities’ Exclusion in Development Education as Ontological Violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersections of gender, education, and international development, specifically noting the spaces in which gender minorities are either highlighted or discounted. It begins by providing a basic introduction to the history of conceptualizations of gender in education for international development settings as a way of foregrounding how the term ‘gender’ has become ubiquitous within the field to mean ‘female.’ It uses this background to explore both the invisibilization of gender minorities and the intersectional ways in which systemic violence is perpetuated against them. The sources analysed in this paper range from the past 20 years of academic findings from major journals across educational fields, Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals policy documents, and the GEM Report 2020 (which focused on gender equality in education). Because the explicit inclusion of non-cisgender identities in education settings is defined as a crucial tool in preventing violence against gender minorities (Meyer & Keenan, 2018), this paper argues that the decision to ignore and exclude gender minorities in international education development research therefore 1) contributes to the systemic forces of violence that they face and 2) is itself an act of ontological violence as well.

KEYWORDS

gender minorities, development education, systemic violence, gender inequalities, LGBTQ+

Introduction

Throughout my education, I have observed that when an international development educationist takes interest in issues of ‘gender,’ I find that they usually refer exclusively to the issues that girls and women face in Southern spheres of learning. While I do not mean to discount the necessity of girls’ and women’s access to quality educational opportunities as a means of upward mobility, I argue that this view of gender is exclusionary and insufficient. By focusing exclusively on feminine-sexed issues, the plurality of gender diversity is ignored: gender minorities are side-lined.

One of the most comprehensive definitions of the gender ‘spectrum’ explains that “... gender is not a binary category, as our dominant cultural and theoretical canons assert, but is rather a complicated three-dimensional web. Each individual will spin his or her own unique gender web, from threads of nature, nurture, and culture. Like fingerprints, no two gender webs will be exactly alike” (Ehrensaft, 2012, p. 338). The term ‘gender minority,’ as I use it, includes anyone whose gender web exceeds the confines of the cisgender binary, whereby their assigned sex at birth does not align with their gender identity or expression. This can include anyone who identifies as a transgender man,

transgender woman, as transmasc, transfemme, non-binary (enby), genderqueer, gender-divergent, gender fluid, genderf*ck, gender non-conforming, agender, bigender, intersex, Two Spirit, Hijra, or any other non-cisgender identity/expression not listed here. In instances where misogyny belies sociological norms and cisgender girls/women are regarded as secondary to men, they may be considered gender minorities. However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall focus exclusively on non-cisgender individuals. Throughout this paper, I will alternate between the terms ‘genderqueer’ and ‘gender minority’ to therefore refer to the same group of people which does not exist within the heteronormative gender binary. I make this choice because of the nature of queering and the allowance of alterity within queer academic research (Nash & Browne, 2010).

Secondly, because this paper centres around violence that gender minorities face, I will define these forms as they are explored in previous literature in subsequent sections of the paper. However, I define this violence as being both systemic and ontological in nature. This violence taken against genderqueer individuals is systemic because it is rooted within the systems of education, research, and policy, which are themselves rooted in society at large (Borges, 2020). Likewise, this violence is ontological because it is an offence to the nature of the victim’s being, to their existence, and to their reality (Shitta-Bey, 2016).

In this paper, I will explore the intersections of gender, education, and international development, specifically noting the spaces in which gender minorities are either highlighted or discounted. I will begin by providing a basic introduction to the history of conceptualisations of gender in education for international development settings as a way of foregrounding how the term ‘gender’ has become ubiquitous within the field to mean ‘female.’ I will use this background to explore both the invisibilization of gender minorities and the intersectional ways in which systemic violence is perpetuated against them. Because the explicit inclusion of non-cisgender identities in education settings is defined as a crucial tool in preventing violence against gender minorities (Meyer & Keenan, 2018), I will argue that the decision to ignore and exclude gender minorities in international education development research therefore 1) contributes to the systemic forces of violence that they face and 2) is itself an act of ontological violence as well.

Biases and Limitations

Before delving into the arguments that I will present in this paper, I would like to address my own positionality and how my identity(ies) has influenced my research. Firstly, I was born without disability in the United States to a middle-class White family. My previous learning within the American public school system was hugely impacted by the inward-looking curricula which presented white settlers as protagonists of myopic histories. As such, I work to habitually confront my own biases that stem from my ecological history. Secondly, I identify as an intersectional member of the LGBTQ+ community as a gay and non-binary individual. I define my sexual and gender identities through our current Western understandings of gender and sexuality which are tied to our current time and place. Finally, as my politics are left leaning, I act under the assumption that research and academic literature should work to benefit the marginalised.

My positionality informs my biases and impacts the scope of my research lenses. Because I am not a member of the Global South, I contribute to Southern epistemological discourse as an ally. I support and call for continued development in this area of research from researchers who come from Southern contexts and who can provide alternative insights to my own.

¹Although I identify as a gender minority, I use the terms ‘they,’ ‘them,’ and ‘their’ to describe the genderqueer community rather than ‘we,’ ‘us,’ or ‘our’ to allow objectivity in this writing.

Gender in Education and Development

Historic Background

Although gendered educational policies vary widely across governments, most of the modern world's nation-states have agreed to abide by and pursue the aims of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These seminal global aims have been widely influential in the conceptualisation of gender issues in education and development in the last few decades. Firstly, the MDG Target 2.A sought to “Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (UNDP, 2000). Then, in 2015, the SDGs highlighted the gendered issue of education in development settings in SDG 4.5, Gender Equality and Inclusion, which seeks to, “By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations” (UNDP, 2016). However, while each of these initiatives placed emphasis on gender equity, neither gives any mention of gender identities or expressions outside the gender binary. The issue of gender equality is viewed within the lens of equal male versus female access and enrolment in schooling. While SDG 4 expanded the work of MDG 2 to include vulnerable children, its definitions of vulnerability excluded students who are gender minorities.

‘Gender’ as Synonymous with ‘Female’

Within each of these frameworks for reconceptualising global education, when gender is used as a lens with which to foster academic equity, the literature uses the word ‘gender’ most often within the heteronormative binary (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013; Valocchi, 2005). Whereas previous decades of education development research shifted from using the word ‘sex’ to instead using ‘gender,’ the meaning and implications behind it have remained relatively unchanged (Carver, 1996). Sex is understood to refer to biological signifiers whereas gender refers to the intersections of identity, expression, and performance – all of which may or may not be related to one’s birth sex (Connell, 2014). However, “gender meaning sex continues to be used in the policy documents, and is not fully acknowledged, explored or engaged as a social process or guiding cultural force” (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013, p. 78).

In 2013, authors Monkman and Hoffman explored these ideas in their discourse of gendered education research. Their paper, ‘Girls’ Education: The Power of Policy Discourse,’ analysed approximately three hundred education policy documents published between 1995-2008 by fourteen international nongovernmental organisations in international development education. They explained that – beyond issues of sex and gender referring to the same limited social construct in education policy documents – there are other issues present in the field of development. They argue that the word ‘gender’ is used by academics and education researchers to apply particular focus to girls’ education. “Gender seems to really mean girls in most of the documents” (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013, p. 78). This argument is mirrored by Unterhalter and Aikman when they articulate that “... ‘gender’ is equated with women and girls, who are identified descriptively in terms of biological differences” (2005, p. 17) in education and development literature. In other words, the word ‘gender’ is used synonymously with ‘girls’ and ‘women.’ Boys are often not a source of focus when discussing gender, and other gender minorities are largely disregarded altogether. I argue that this act of invisibilization against gender minorities is a form of ontological violence, based on what follows.

In instances where gender minorities’ existence in educational development literature is referenced, they are usually only relegated to sidenotes, thus denoting a form of literal marginalisation. When

researching the topic of gender in educational development literature for this paper, I found that even some of the most reputable publications in development education, such as the *International Journal of Educational Development*, did not include gendered language or foci outside of the normative binary (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005; Marshall & Arnot, 2007; Chisamya et al., 2012; Unterhalter, 2016). Within the discourse of works like ‘Gender and Education for All,’ the words ‘transgender,’ ‘non-binary,’ ‘LGBT,’ or ‘queer’ did not appear.

One work, for example, comes particularly close to explicitly discussing gender minorities but stops just short. ‘Gender and Education in the Global Polity’ provides definitions of gender that demonstrate its relative fluidity and variance. In this seminal piece, gender is defined grammatically as a noun (“...that delineates different groups defined in terms of sex”), an adjective, a verb, and as a gerund (Unterhalter, 2016, pp. 161–162). As a verb, gender can be viewed in active “ways of doing or performing gender, articulating particular ways of speaking, embodying, or signalling gender identities, and the sliding forms the relationship takes. Doing gender may be associated, for example, with forms of dress, talk or behaviours required of girls and boys at school, or of women and men teachers and the relational dynamic that expresses this” (Unterhalter, 2016, p. 162). Although gender is acknowledged here as a performance (McEwen & Milani, 2014; Shefer, 2019), this limited definition only reinforces the binary expectation of gender expression because it does not go on to address the plurality of queer gender expressions possible. While this work implicitly broaches the subject of genderqueerness, it does not mention gender minorities; the only gendered words referenced are boys, girls, men, and women.

Gender Minority Invisibility

The inclusion of gender minorities in data collection and analysis is most commonly relegated to the field of queer studies. However, in literature that does include an explicit focus on queerness, gender minorities are merged imperceptibly within the LGBTQ+ community. Perhaps this is a failing of the nature of the expansive LGBTQ+ umbrella (McEwen & Milani, 2014). By including both sexual orientation and gender identity/expression under one broad auspice, gender minorities tend to be overlooked in favor of sexual orientation. Queer-focused literature focuses on LGB-individuals whereas ‘gender’-focused literature is only about cisgender girls and women. As a result, although transgender women, for example, suffer hypervisibility through both transphobic and misogynistic scrutiny (Vliet, 2020), they are paradoxically made invisible within the margins of the literature.

Beyond ignorance of gender minorities, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are additionally wrongly conflated within academia. For example, in UCLA Law’s Best Practices for Asking Questions to Identify Transgender and Other Gender Minority Respondents on Population-Based Surveys, they offer the following sample question guide for conducting social research:

Recommended measure for LGBT identity

Do you think of yourself as (please check all that apply):

- Straight
- Gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- Transgender, transsexual, or gender non-conforming

IF yes to transgender, then probe:

- Transgender or transsexual, male to female
- Transgender or transsexual, female to male
- Gender non-conforming

Figure 1. *Best Practice for Identifying Gender Minority Respondents (Badgett et al., 2014)*

In this example, highlighted as a best practice in social research, survey participants would be given the option of identifying either their sexual orientation or their gender identity. Respondents are not given the option of disclosing both aspects of their identity if their queerness is intersectional. Additionally, this example mistakenly conflates identities of sexual orientation and gender; participants can only offer their non-cisgender identity through the medium of sexual orientation. This ignorance of alternate gender identities thus serves as an example of ontological violence because it minimises the existence, or manner of being, in their individual queerness. This example therefore provides another form of visible marginalisation despite its intent at bringing about greater inclusivity for gender minorities.

Emerging Literature on Gender Minority Inclusion in Education

Because non-cisgender students have widely been excluded from international education development research, the everyday realities they face are unclear. Similarly, one cannot extrapolate the scale at which gender minority students even exist because they have not been considered. In the same vein, ‘Northern’ and ‘Western’ educational discourses have likewise left gender minorities in the margins, leaving them only within the sociological discourse of queer studies (Valocchi, 2005). However, very recent years of education literature have provided some fledgling insights into the experiences of gender minority students in educational settings.

Unknown Gaps in Gender Knowledge

In order to understand how broad these gaps in the literature are, some of the first questions to address are: How many non-cisgender people are there? What are the rates and scopes of gender minority students? I raise these questions with the understanding of the power dimensions at play in the issue of ‘counting.’ Not everyone wants to be ‘counted’ in the same way and there are distinct elements of power in being the ‘counter’ versus the ‘counted.’ However, in order to better understand the importance of gender-minority issues, it is helpful to understand the scale of the problem.

Transgender and non-binary individuals’ accurate statistical representation, both in Western and global society, is currently unknown. Firstly, this is because governmental census data in most countries does not include genders outside the normative gender binary (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). Therefore, even current best estimates for each country may be largely misguided. Secondly, insidious societal factors often prohibit gender minorities from self-identifying. Even when given the option,

gender minorities may not choose to disclose their accurate gender identity if there is a perceived element of risk or danger that could come about as a result of their self-disclosure (Austin et al., 2019). The stigma associated with having an alternative gender identity or expression therefore serves as a barrier to capturing accurate data.

Because governments have not accurately captured sociological data on gender plurality, academic researchers have undertaken this task independently. A recent study in the United States estimated that approximately one million Americans are transgender (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). However, it is worth noting that this study focused exclusively on transgender individuals and did not account for non-binary or other non-cisgender identities. Secondly, a large-scale, cross-sectional quantitative study in Brazil interviewed six thousand adults to estimate the proportion of the population that identified as transgender and non-binary in the country. Ultimately, they found that, together, gender minorities accounted for approximately 2% of the population, or about three million Brazilian adults who do not identify as cisgender (Spizzirri et al., 2021). If we extrapolate the statistical prevalence of non-cisgender individuals from these studies – even by conservatively estimating all gender minorities to only account for 1% of the population – we can estimate that there are approximately 79 million gender minorities living around the globe, roughly equivalent to the population of Germany. Ultimately, both studies conclude with similar end notes. They call for future research in accurate gender-related data collection, posit that non-cisgender people were statistically more likely to be young, and forecast that they believe future surveys would be likely to observe higher percentages of gender minorities (Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017; Spizzirri et al., 2021).

The above studies suggest that academia is only beginning to understand the ‘true’ prevalence of gender diversity because society is still in a state of recovery from an ongoing history of oppression. Education is political; education policymakers create curricula to carry out an explicit agenda and make assumptions about students and teachers alike (Hickey et al., 2019). The goal of education is to develop students who are capable of maintaining societal norms and who succeed within the status quo (Nordensvärd, 2014). Therefore, genderqueer students who stand in opposition to these norms and values are oppressed through direct and indirect social pressures (like conversion therapy and social stigma, respectively). As a result, academics can only understand the accurate rate of gender minorities’ presence when there are no taboos associated with gender alterity, and when the very experience of gender minorities is not shaped, at least partly, by violence. I turn to this point now.

Gender(minority)-Based Violence

When genderqueer individuals are neither given account nor considered, this is an act of ontological violence against them as it stands as a threat to their identity and being. The exclusion of gender minorities within education development literature, thus, serves as a clear violence of ontology as it denies their very existence.

Although the extent to which the genderqueer community exists is unknown, modern research is clear in its presentation of everyday experiences which gender minorities inhabit. Firstly, two pieces explore the diverse and creative ways in which young US and UK learners conceptualise their own – and others’ – gender identities/expressions despite schools’ imposed binaries (i.e., gendered uniforms, toilets, and sports activities) (Bragg et al., 2018; Ehrensaft, 2012). Finally, a recent study specifically looked at non-binary students’ experiences of schooling in the UK, highlighting the everyday experiences of eight teenage research participants (Paechter et al., 2021). Each of these texts argues that students creatively define their own sense of gendered identity despite inadequate structural school

supports and pedagogy that is not inclusive of their gender expressions. They each conclude that the most common experiences gender minority students face within schools are acts of violence.

Violence, which extends from microaggressions and bullying to explicit physical harm and murder, against gender minorities is well-documented and specifically emphasised in education literature (Buiten & Naidoo, 2020). As visualised in Figure 2 (below), violence is often intersectional and can include any experience of physical, psychological, sexual, or verbal harm. According to UNESCO’s most recent education report, which focused specifically on the issue of inclusivity in education, approximately 2/3 of UK transgender students experienced bullying in schools (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). They also note that, in the United States, violence is documented at roughly double the rate for gender minorities than cisgender students (33% versus 17%, respectively) (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). In a review of Catalan higher education institutions, for example, transgender individuals are identified as being most likely to suffer violent targeting, discrimination, and challenges to their work and studies over any other minority group (Gallardo-Nieto, Gómez, et al., 2021).

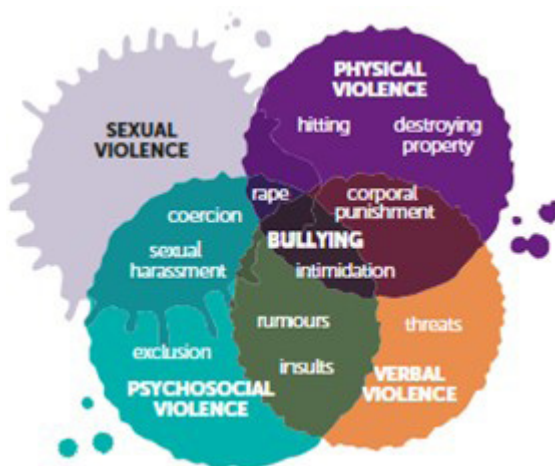


Figure 2. *The Intersectional Nature of Gender-based Violence.* Source: (Humphries-Waa & Sass, 2015)

Multiple studies highlight the minor but insidious forms of violence and bullying that come from microaggressions, as follows. One study that specifically identified non-binary students raised the issue of misgendering (i.e., by calling students “it” rather than their preferred pronouns) as the most frequent form of bullying (Paechter et al., 2021). But misgendering comes not just from school bullies; parents, teachers, and authority figures similarly enact forms of violence against children who express gender creativity. According to Diane Ehrensaft (2012), “...significant harm is done to children when adults attempt to adjust the children’s gender expressions and self-affirmed identities to match the gender listed on their birth certificates and from which the children show signs of transgression” (p. 338). Another study systematically explored the types of microaggressions that gender minority students experienced and separated them into six categories of violence: “(1) structural oppression, (2) cisgender bias, (3) faculty knowledge gaps, (4) visible discomfort, (5) the pervasive nature of transphobia, and (6) social exclusion” (Austin et al., 2019, p. 908). This work concludes that genderqueer students experienced clear hurdles to both their ability to learn and threats to their personal safety during the learning process (Austin et al., 2019). Within these studies, interview participants regularly highlight instances of micro-aggressive violence taken against them when asked about their everyday experiences, particularly within education systems.

Multiple recent studies specifically focus on the issue of genderqueer-based violence in Spanish institutions as a key emphasis within the literature. Firstly, they posit that the act of not identifying young students who hold creative gender identities and expressions is an act of violence taken against them (Gallardo-Nieto & Spínola, 2019). This violence continues in education centres throughout students' experiences in learning, which then have significant consequences on the victims' wellbeing and health (Gallardo-Nieto, Espinosa-Spínola, et al., 2021). But violence against gender minorities is not just experienced by students; genderqueer staff and faculty similarly experience hate crimes and violence. These acts of violence continue because higher education faculty are untrained on how to handle genderqueer-based violence: "...university staff shows certain unfamiliarity regarding the measures and politics to prevent and intervene in cases of violence against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community" (Gallardo-Nieto, Gómez, et al., 2021, p. 1). These articles collectively argue that gender minorities are misunderstood, unprotected, and that staff are uncertain how to support them. Violence taken against them is interconnected and systemic. This notion mirrors the systemic gender-based violence that is highlighted against girls in Southern contexts (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). Because of the invisibility of gender minorities within development literature, I argue that acts of violence taken against them are likely ubiquitous.

Systemic violence against gender minorities is perpetuated as a result of ignorance. Research highlights lack of awareness and knowledge about gender minorities as one of the key reasons that genderqueer individuals face discrimination and aggressive behaviours (Snapp et al., 2015). Curricular inclusion of gender minorities can therefore serve as a salve to stave acts of violence taken against them (Paechter et al., 2021). The simple act of recognition and inclusion of non-cisgender students within school curricula leads to improved safety for gender minority students (Kosciw et al., 2018). Despite this, very few schools offer any inclusion of gender minority students within curricula. UNESCO points out that most countries are unilaterally failing students in this way; "In Europe, 23 out of 49 countries do not address sexual orientation and gender identity explicitly in their curricula" (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020, p. 3). However, Nepal is specifically noted as a leader in gender inclusivity and diversity that explicitly includes Hijras in their national health and physical education curriculum (Humphries-Waa & Sass, 2015). Education policies that work to end gender-based violence against gender minorities do not have to begin in the North with the South following behind; this leadership can, and does, come from Southern contexts, with Nepal exemplifying one source of inclusive education policy leadership.

One crucial understanding within the literature posits that curricular genderqueer inclusion is the most beneficial way to improve student safety. Research highlights that "students in schools with inclusive curricula were less likely to feel unsafe at school," especially when considering LGBTQ+ issues (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020, p. 42). Furthermore, this safety extends beyond the improved conditions for gender minority students and also includes cisgender students. When LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula are implemented in schools, all students' perceptions of safety are stronger (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). Increased knowledge of queerness leads to less bullying overall, and all students feel safer as a result (Snapp et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial that governments support pro-queer curricula and policy so that teachers may be adequately trained in truly gender-inclusive standards and so that these curricula may be properly implemented and supported in school. Schools can either serve as safe havens of understanding or landscapes of isolated suffering for all students depending on the policy decisions that either include or exclude gender minority students.

Beyond acts of physical violence, multiple writings finally point to issues of ontological violence that

are taken against gender minorities. Exclusion, firstly, is otherization, and this otherization promotes ignorance (Colombo, 2020). The act of not including gender minorities in the production of knowledge stunts the knowledge-production process itself (Namaste, 2009). Finally, the misuse or disuse of language against one's gender identity can be seen not just as a microaggression but as an act of ontological violence (Lim-Bunnin, 2020). Thus, the exclusion of gender minorities from education development literature and education settings is itself a form of violence as it undermines the very existence of gender diverse individuals.

Conclusion

In consideration of the above literature together, I draw the following conclusions. The deliberate choice of excluding gender minorities in education settings – such as within curricula and policy – only further perpetuates the systemic violence that genderqueer students face ubiquitously. Discussing gender issues in education and referring exclusively to girls and women in the process continues to invisibilize gender minorities. While education research holds the power to illuminate the diverse experiences of vulnerable students, the choice of excluding gender minorities only further obfuscates intersectional gender issues and promotes ignorance. Additionally, because research has shown that giving students the language to speak about gender minority issues reduces bullying and makes schools safer, by excluding gender minorities from these conversations, logically, this makes schools invariably less safe for everyone. Finally, because many international education policy interventions do not recognize or include gender minorities, this can be seen as an inherent form of ontological violence taken against them.

Throughout this writing, I have struggled with the close adjacency of this work and my own identity. I frequently felt angered that some of the world's most vulnerable are routinely ignored and are killed as a result of their marginalization. I therefore hope that this work may serve as a point of advocacy and a catalyst for additional research in this vein.

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