Progress towards gender equity in SADC—the draft SADC Protocol on Gender and Development

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Governments in southern Africa are moving with zeal to address social challenges faced by women. The SADC member states view education for women and girls as a sticking point for achieving this cause. For this reason, an ambitious leap to put together the SADC gender protocol is on course. --PATSON PHIRI.

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Although the draft SADC Protocol on Gender and Development contains wide-ranging proposals to bridge the male/woman inequality gap, much more needs to be done to break the rigidly allocated education and home activities.

The region is cruising towards the final phase of consultations on a landmark draft to promote gender equality.

The Protocol—the most binding of the SADC legal documents—will be tabled at a summit of regional leaders in Lusaka in August.

It has prospects for fast tracking the process of achieving gender equality, equity and improving the status of women in the region.

Zambia, like other member states in southern Africa, has remained with a challenge of factoring social issues into the educational curriculum to enable the girl child shift from the idea that she has inferior roles to play in family and society.

"There has been considerable progress in promoting girl-child education while the education curricular still teaches that the girl-child belongs in the kitchen to help cook and their male counterparts should help in the garden," said a Namibian journalist, Norah Apolus, at a workshop for media practitioners drawn from all the SADC member states.

The workshop, that was held in Harare and organised by Southern African Research and Documentation Centre—Women in Development Southern Africa Awareness (SARDC-WIDSAA), noted that the gender protocol makes provision and gives direction for equal access to education but makes no explicit attempt to change the teaching that girls are not just there to cook and collect water for domestic use.

This uneven distribution of roles, reflected in primary reading books that emphasise that girls have different duties from boys, makes the girl child grow up knowing that hers starts and ends in the kitchen while activities like looking after cattle are for boys.

The region has generally made progress in developing policies and programmes that specifically target girls' advancement in education.

The SADC Gender Protocol contains a provision that member states should make it compulsory for all girls and boys to complete a full course of primary education, and strengthen early childhood education and development programmes for both boys and girls.

The protocol, under Article 6, urges member states to eliminate gender disparities in access to primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Some member countries in the region have introduced affirmative action programmes to reduce the gender gap.

In Malawi, the government has made secondary education free for girls in an effort to close the enrolment gender gap in secondary schools, while Angola has made education free in all government schools.

Angola also has in place a positive discrimination quota system to guarantee women's access to the scheme.

To cater for those who could not attend school due to various reasons including the effects of war, such as those who sought refuge in other countries, adult schools have been introduced.

Mauritius has taken it even further and declared education free for all, from grade one up to college and university level. This has resulted in enrolment ratios favouring female students.

In Botswana, the situation as regards gender disparity has improved, but gender gaps in academic performance still remain.

Female enrolment in schools is generally higher than that of males both at primary and secondary levels.

The Girls Advisory and Support Project budgeted at US$20 000 is being implemented by the National Directorate for Primary Education.

The project is aimed at motivating girls to take interest in education, and discouraging them from dropping out from school in the middle of the course.

In Zambia and Zimbabwe, school text-books and supplementary readers which portray women positively are being designed to replace the gender-stereotyped materials.

Regulations that contribute to unequal access and inadequate educational facilities are being revised.

Like Zimbabwe's minister for women's affairs, gender and community development, Oppah Muchinguri said, more could be achieved with the support of the government in parliamentary and other political structures.

In line with the global declaration that education is a fundamental right to which both women and men should have access, countries in southern Africa are striving to achieve gender equity.

The efforts to scale up girls education stems from the targets that were set in 2000 when eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted by world leaders as a framework for measuring global development progress up to 2015.

The goal— which is second on the list— aims to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and was set for the year 2005.

There was also an undertaking to achieve this commitment at all other levels of education not later than 2015.

Related to this was the target that focuses on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women.

The challenge is to ensure equality in education that should lead to girls and boys being offered the same chance to go to school and enjoy teaching methods, curricula, and academic orientation unaffected by gender bias.

While guided by the MDGs, education policies of SADC countries can draw inspiration from the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which contains the most comprehensive set of legally enforceable commitments on gender equality in education.

A positive step has already been taken with the signing of CEDAW by all SADC countries.

The 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development reinforces CEDAW, by recognising the need to strengthen "access to quality education by

women and men, removing gender stereotyping in the curriculum, career choices and professions."