Reforming Education and Challenging Inequalities in Southern Contexts

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In Ethiopia, as in many Southern country contexts, girls have benefitted least from the rapid expansion of education access and are more likely to be affected by the 'learning crisis' (UNESCO 2014; World Bank 2018). While more girls are in school than ever before, many still do not have the opportunity to access school. Girls who are in school often learn little while they are there and dropout of school early without acquiring even basic skills in maths and literacy. The poor quality of education is a significant factor contributing to students' low learning levels. However, gender norms and practices, operating at multiple levels of society, produce additional barriers for girls and underpin the inequalities that they face (Colclough et al. 2000). While considerable commitment has been directed towards improving girls' education in recent decades, more effort is needed to ensure that education systems are equitable for girls.

A key question that we pose in this chapter is why the Ethiopian education system has not yet delivered equitable access and learning for all girls, despite high-level government commitment. We argue that this question requires a deeper look at the politics of education systems (Hickey & Hossain 2019; Levy et al. 2019). Research in other related contexts has highlighted the value of understanding the gap between ambitious policy for girls' education and disappointing progress in this area. Notably, in Kenya and South Africa during the period 2007–11, Unterhalter and North (2019) focused on policy actors and relationships, in what they term the *middle space*. They identify this space as an important site of negotiation for determining whether such policies are translated into practice. Building upon Unterhalter and North's focus on the politics of implementation in education systems, we consider not only what is happening within the middle space but also how it is influenced by, and interacts with, the wider political context over time.

In exploring the politics of girls' education, we draw on Hickey and Hossain's (2019) *domains of power* approach, which provides a framework for understanding the interaction between the political settlement and the education policy domain. The political settlement refers to 'the balance or redistribution of power between contending social groups and social cases, on which any state is based' (Di John & Putzel 2009, p. 4). In their comparative analysis of the political economy of education quality reforms in six low- and middle-income countries, Hickey and Hossain (2019) demonstrate how different types of political contexts

interact with the education policy domain in ways that shape the design, uptake and implementation of reforms design to improve learning outcomes. Similarly, Levy et al. (2019) demonstrate how, in South Africa, policy and implementation are shaped by the political and institutional context.

Yet the role of politics in understanding patterns of progress in girls' education specifically has received very limited attention. In this chapter, we address this gap by exploring the role of politics in relation to girls' primary education in Ethiopia, drawing on findings from our research on a large-scale government quality education reform programme. Drawing on Hickey and Hossain's (2019) *domains of power* framework, we consider progress in girls' education and how this may be influenced by the wider political settlement. We explore how politics shapes the commitment and capacity of the government to promote reforms aimed at advancing gender equality in education. Given that the negotiation of gender equality is a profoundly political process (Goetz 2019), it is particularly pertinent to understand more about how politics and power are relevant for girls' education.

We focus in particular on dynamics within the education policy domain, which refers to the meso-level field of social relations within which actors promote competing agendas (Hickey & Hossain 2019), which is similar to Unterhalter and North's (2019) concept of the *middle space*. We consider how policies are formulated and implemented, including how ideas in the wider political settlement shape what is possible within the education system in terms of strategies to promote girls' education (Hickey & Hossain 2019). We concentrate on the role and agency of policy actors within the education system – noting how they may be influenced by wider political and social dynamics – and what this means for girls' education.

Incorporating a gender lens, we highlight the importance of considering the role of gender norms within an education system which can mistakenly be seen as a gender-neutral site. We conceptualise gender norms as informal institutions which, in contrast to formal institutions, are more likely to be unwritten and imparted outside of officially sanctioned channels. We explore how informal institutions permeate formal structures of the education system, through their inherent exclusion of women, before moving on to explore the interaction between formal and informal institutions and their effects. Others have shown the importance of informal institutions in understanding how behaviour and outcomes are shaped (e.g. Chappell & Waylen 2013; Sen 2007). Broadly speaking, these authors have shown how the interaction between formal and informal institutions may work to complement, compromise or curtail progress in the area of girls' education as we will further explore. Given the influence of gender norms on girls' education in Ethiopia, exploring if and how gender norms operate within the education policy domain seems particularly salient. To set the context for this chapter, in the next section we provide an overview of the progress and challenges in girls' education, before describing our research and providing a brief political background in the Ethiopian context.

Progress in female education and gender equality in Ethiopia

Twenty years ago, Colclough et al. (2000) demonstrated that while poverty limits the educational opportunities of both girls and boys in Ethiopia, gender norms and practices, working within the household, the school, labour market and society created and maintained the significant and additional inequalities that girls faced at that time. Since 2000, considerable progress has been made in getting more girls into primary school in Ethiopia.[1] Government statistics show that girls' primary school net enrolment has more than doubled from a mere 37% of the official school-age population in 1999–2000 to 96% in 2016/17 (Ministry of Education, 2017), with average differences between boys and girls also narrowing over this time (Figure 6.1). In addition, more girls now are staying in school, with 52% of girls completing the full cycle of primary school in 2016/17 (Ministry of Education 2017), compared with only 12% of girls in 2000 (Ministry of Education 2005). Profound differences in enrolment for boys and girls are found across regions (Figure 6.2). Within regions, rural students are even more disadvantaged, with poverty further compounding the disadvantages faced.

As seen in Figure 6.1, gender gaps are starting to open up once again, while girls are also more likely to be affected by the learning crisis. According to Ethiopia's National Learning Assessment from 2007 to 2010, while overall learning
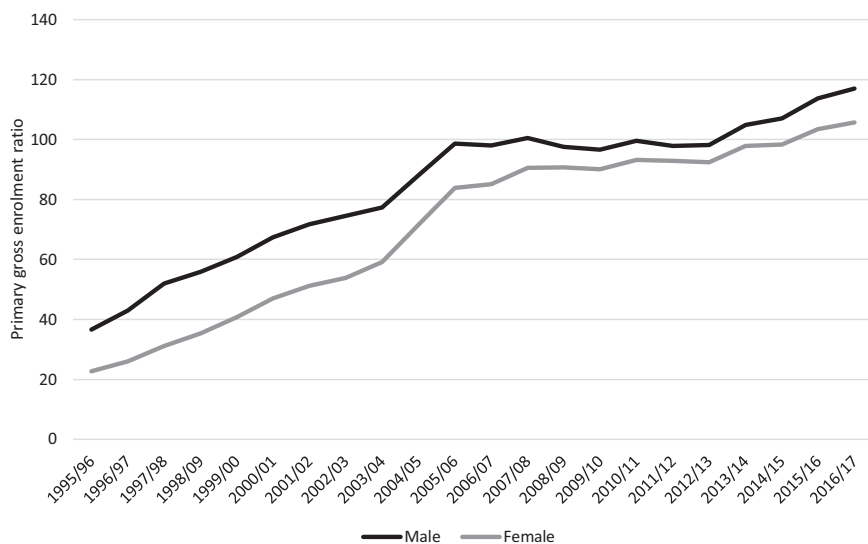
Figure 6.1 Gross enrolment rate at primary level (grades 1–8) by gender, 1995/96–2016/17
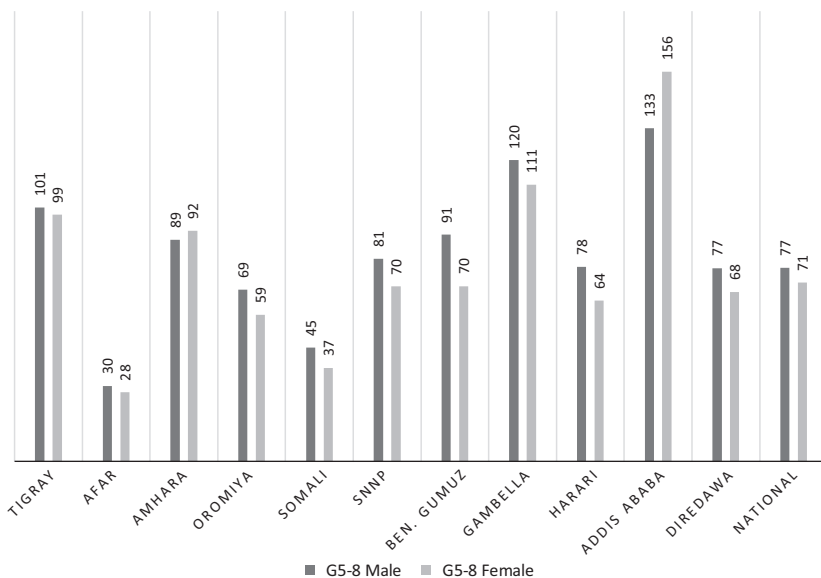
Source: Ministry of Education (2017)

Figure 6.2 Gross enrolment rate at upper primary level (grades 5–8) by gender and
region, 2016/17

Source: Ministry of Education (2017)

levels are low, girls are even less likely to be learning than boys in all subjects,
in all primary grades and across time (Woldetsadik 2013). Outside school, girls
and women continue to face discrimination, harassment and significant domes-
tic work burdens, and many of these challenges follow girls into the classroom,
reminding us that girls' education and gender equality are interlocked and pro-
gress in one domain requires progress in the other.

In explaining these enduring challenges, gender norms and practices high-
lighted by Colclough et al. (2000) two decades ago are still a powerful influence
and remain as some of the greatest barriers to girls' education enrolment, pro-
gression and achievement. Gender norms refer to the socially constructed forms
of masculinity and femininity that organise daily life and result in the dominant
status of men and the lower status of women. Ethiopia continues to be a deeply
patriarchal society, and traditional and restrictive norms and practices constrain
the lives and experiences of many girls and women both directly and indirectly
(Colclough et al. 2000). A strong sense of surveillance/monitoring by others
helps to reinforce these ubiquitous, yet unspoken rules and norms (Chuta &
Crivello 2013). While not all women experience disadvantages a significant major-
ity are not in the position to enforce their rights especially those living in rural
areas and those living in poverty (Burgess 2012). As a result, practices such as
early marriage and heavy domestic work burdens and limited formal employment

opportunities continue to impact the education and opportunities of girls and women in Ethiopia.

An illustrative example of the persistence of gender norms and resulting practices is the continued practice of early marriage. Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of early marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, despite the government introducing a law in 2000 setting the age of marriage at 18 (Stavropoulou et al. 2017). There is evidence that the age of marriage is increasing overall. However, progress is uneven and especially slow in rural areas (Central Statistical Authority 2016), where gender norms are often more entrenched and difficult to address. Strategies to address gender norms have mostly focused on the community level. However, while gender norms may be produced and reproduced within communities, parents and communities are often doing what they perceive to be in the best interests of girls and seek to protect rather than harm them (Boyden et al. 2012; Chuta & Morrow 2015; Pankhurst 2014). While within communities more sophisticated and nuanced approaches are likely to be needed, in this chapter we seek to highlight how it is important also to consider how gender norms are operating in the wider society and how these affect education systems.

In the next section, we describe the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia programme on which this chapter is based, for which we have gathered information on Ethiopian policy-makers' views on girls' schooling. Before reporting our findings, we give an overview of the political context in Ethiopia, with respect to its policies and progress in education and promoting gender equality.

Researching the politics of educational reform in Ethiopia

We draw on work undertaken as part of from the Research for Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia study.[2] This study has been investigating the design, adoption, implementation and impact of the government's largest education quality reform programme, which has an explicit focus on equity for marginalised groups, particularly girls. The data that we explore in this chapter come from our system diagnostic of the Ethiopian education system carried out in 2018, which included analysis of government documents (policy, plans and reports) and actor mapping. In addition, we undertook key informant interviews to gather the perspectives of 150 key government stakeholders, who had experience with the design and/or implementation of education reforms. In these interviews, we explored these processes aimed at improving education quality and equity. Our interviews took place between February and December 2018, at the federal, regional and *woreda* (district) level, across the seven of Ethiopia's 11 regions and city administrations that are included in the RISE research (Table 6.1).[3] The small number of women who we were able to interview is reflective of the gender distribution of staff in key government positions in the education system in Ethiopia.

Table 6.1 Government stakeholders included in the key informant interviews

	Level	Male	Female
Stage 1, February 2018	Federal level government officials	26	3
Stage 2, May 2018	Regional and zonal level government officials	62	4
Stage 3, December 2018	*Woreda* (district) level government officials	50	5
	Total	138	12

The RISE Ethiopia research team members carried out the interviews.[4] Informed consent was obtained for all interviews. These were undertaken in the preferred language of the participants where possible. We recorded, translated and transcribed all interviews. We encouraged participants to share their personal views in relation to their role and we assured them that their responses would remain anonymous. While the sensitivity of exploring the politics of government reforms was a challenge in our study, a major advantage was the experience of the RISE Ethiopia research team of the political and social context. We used thematic analysis to code the data, facilitated by NVivo software. Two stakeholder dialogue meetings provided an opportunity to validate key issues emerging from the analysis. Members of these workshops included a number of donors and government officials who had participated in the interviews.

Drawing on the data from these interviews, we explore what was taking place both in the wider political context and within the education policy domain, with respect to approaches and strategies related to girls' education. It is to these elements that we now turn.

Dominance of girls' education in Ethiopian political priorities

In Ethiopia, the political settlement has been described as *dominant developmental*, which refers to relatively cohesive intra-elite relations within the ruling coalition and a focus on the idea of a 'developmental state' (Clapham 2018; Zenawi 2012). After defeating the socialist 'Derg' regime (1974–91), the current government came to power in 1991 under the leadership of Meles Zenawi, who ruled until his death in 2012. Key objectives of the new ruling coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),[5] were to establish peace and stability, to reduce poverty and to expand social and physical infrastructure. Economic growth and social inclusion became political priorities for achieving these overarching objectives, and education came to be seen as having a key role in achieving these objectives (Clapham 2019; Zewide 2018). The government embarked upon an ambitious education strategy and the importance

of equity, including gender equity, in and through education was firmly set out. Published in 1994, the Education and Training Policy (ETP), which so far has remained the main education policy of the government, sets out a transformative agenda for the education sector. For girls, education has a key role in 'reorienting society's attitude and value pertaining to the role and contribution of women in development' (Ministry of Education 1994, p. 11).

In addition to education, gender equality and women's empowerment have also been key priorities of the Ethiopian government since coming to power in 1991. It is well documented how women played an important role in the struggle against the Derg, and it has been suggested that this paved the way for a feminist space to emerge in the initial years of the post-1991 government (Blystad et al. 2014; Semela et al. 2019). Numerous policies intended to improve the lives of girls and women were developed, paying attention to international standards (e.g. the Beijing Platform for Action). Gender mainstreaming was taken up as a core approach to addressing gender equality across sectors in addition to strengthening the participation of women in the country's economic development and political affairs (National Planning Commission 2016).

Although committed to gender equality, ensuring that it has remained prominent on the government's agenda was less straightforward for gender equality than for education. In the early years of the new EPRDF government, a number of influential female figures played pivotal roles in ensuring that the 1995 Constitution was gender-sensitive (Article 35) (Government of Ethiopia 1995).[6] The Women's Affairs Office was established in 1991 which later became a Ministry in its own right, and this Office ensured that women's departments were founded in all government ministries, including the Ministry of Education. Additionally, a National Policy on Women was developed in 1993, and the implementation of this policy was supported by the introduction of the first National Action Plan on Gender Equality in 2000 and an updated version in 2006 (MoWA 2006). However, while the government established an enabling space for advancing social objectives including gender equality aided by the efforts of influential female figures, this space was created outside the central government structures.

In coming to power, the government established a largely hierarchical and top-down style of governance giving the government considerable reach down to the local level, while also ensuring that they had tight control of the political space and authority over what was implemented (Hagmann & Abbink 2012; Vaughan 2011). Like other dominant developmental states (e.g. Rwanda), Ethiopia made rapid economic advancement in a relatively short time period. Yet the 'downside of the dominance' of the EPRDF was perhaps most clearly illustrated during the 2005 elections (Williams 2019). In response to opposition gaining greater ground than expected, the ruling coalition attempted to re-establish authority and secure power by reasserting their control in both civil and political space (Clapham 2019). This led to a stifling of civil society organisations including those working to advance gender equality, which had drastic consequences for the advancement of the gender equality agenda (Blystad et al. 2014; Burgess

2012). The fact that these organisations were outside the core government structure may have enabled the swift manner in which they were dismantled.

Justification for this increasing centralisation of power was made through a re-energised and accelerated focus on economic development (Zenawi 2012). The goal of reaching lower middle-income status by 2025 became the driving force of the government and 'double-digit' growth became a new source of legitimacy claims as set out in the government's Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) (Clapham 2018; Hagmann & Abbink 2012). While poverty reduction and social inclusion remained on the government's agenda, the focus on economic growth and infrastructure expansion gained greater ascendency. Implicit was the assumption that economic growth would lead to greater social equality, without the need to address underlying structural disadvantages (Fiseha & Gebresilassie 2019; Hagmann & Abbink 2012).

The increasing focus on economic growth, in turn, had implications for the strategies in the domains of education and gender equality (Woldehanna & Araya 2019). In education, while the core policy remained, focus intensified on the rapid expansion of education to create the skilled labour force needed to move towards the goal of lower middle-income status. This had implications for how gender equality was envisioned, and women came to be seen as having a key role in advancing the government's development agenda. At the same time, it was suggested that women's education and economic empowerment would be a central mechanism for increasing gender equality and addressing the discrimination of women in society by 'unleashing women's potential through education, skill development and employment' (National Planning Commission 2016, p. 92). Thus, the emphasis was on an instrumental approach to women's participation in education and formal employment to achieve the goal of rapid economic growth and promote other positive externalities without addressing the root causes of women's inequality (Goetz 1997). It seems that policies implemented by the government in education and gender equality were more concerned with improving the educational access, formal employment and participation, while doing little to redistribute power in the social relationships affecting the lives of women. This perhaps explains the growing gender gaps amid increasing enrolment rates described in the previous section. In the next section, we consider in more depth the interaction of the specific political context of Ethiopia with the education policy domain and, in particular, with girls' education.

Policy legacies and strategies for girls' education

We find that strategies that were being pursued in relation to girls' education have been very much shaped by the wider political context. In particular, ideas in the wider political settlement concerning how development happens in the context of the hierarchical mode of governance have influenced the perceived challenges and solutions for girls' education. These strategies have mainly served to improve enrolment of some but not all girls, while doing much less to improve their learning outcomes.

Since 1994, the ETP has been implemented through a series of Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs) that outline goals and strategies for the education sector, with the government currently implementing its fifth plan (Ministry of Education 2015). The 1994 ETP identified a number reforms to improve girls' education, including ensuring the curriculum is sensitive to gender issues; increasing the number of female teachers; providing educational inputs for girls; encouraging the participation of women in education organisation and management and providing financial support to raise the participation of women in education. While these are important strategies for improving girls' education, it is evident that these strategies largely relate to issues of representation and increased inputs, reflecting more widely held ideas in the political domain concerning how progress happens and may partly explain why progress has been mostly limited to access rather than quality of education.

Across the five ESDPs to date we can see that strategies to improve girls' education have not deviated from the ETP (Ministry of Education 1994), focusing on increased inputs, increased participation of girls, increasing the number of female teachers and addressing gender dimensions in the learning environment (see Table 6.2). Characteristic of the hierarchical mode of governance, the link

Table 6.2 Strategies for girls' education outlined in the Education Sector Development Plans (I–V)

Strategies to improve girls' education		ESDP I	ESDP II	ESDP III	ESDP IV	ESDP V
Access and retention	Local and mass media campaign encouraging girls' schooling	-	✓	✓	-	-
	Increase provision of water supply	✓	-	✓	✓	✓
	Girl-friendly facilities, including separate latrines	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Gender dimensions in the learning environment	Remove gender bias in textbooks and curricula	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
	Gender awareness training (parents, teachers, managers and students)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Increase number of female teachers	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Guidance and counselling for girls	✓	✓	-	-	-
	Tutorial support and assertiveness training for girls	✓	✓	-	✓	-
Improve the system	Gender sensitive budgeting	-	-	-		✓
	Capacity of structure to promote girls' education	-	-	-	✓	✓
	Increase female administrators, supervisors and directors	-	-	-	✓	-

Source: Ministry of Education (2015)

with the ETP has ensured tight control of the federal government over what is planned with limited scope for innovation with regard to the strategies pursued within regions of Ethiopia. Strategies for addressing cultural norms are also evident in some of the plans, including local mass media campaigns and skills training for girls. While the continued focus on girls' education through the plans should be commended, it appears that the approach adopted has not been sufficiently transformative and has restricted the ability to make meaningful and sustainable progress in relation to girls' education.

Wider political dynamics may also influence stakeholder's understandings on what they perceive as necessary to ensure progress in girls' education. Ongoing difficulties with making progress are reported throughout the ESDPs, including with respect to engaging stakeholders in efforts to advance gender equality. The government has tried to address this by alternating between a mainstreaming approach in the earlier plans (ESDP I–III) and a targeted approach in the fourth plan (ESDP IV), returning once again to a mainstreaming approach (ESDP V) to ensure that cross-cutting issues become the responsibility of all implementing bodies. However, this has not sufficiently brought about the needed change in girls' education.

In the context of a top-down governance structure within the education system, the lack of motivation of stakeholders to implement these policies perhaps relates to their beliefs about what is needed to bring about change and also to the process for monitoring progress in girls' education. Government targets related to girls' education have consistently focused on enrolment and gender parity, with learning targets only introduced in the most recent plan (ESDP V), providing few incentives for stakeholders to engage with more hidden forms of gender inequality. Data on girls' education is not disaggregated across rural–urban location or socio-economic status which erases important aspects of difference among girls. In summary, we find that within the education policy domain, strategies are often not sufficiently transformative and constrain responses to girls' education. As we go on to discuss, some stakeholders may not be sufficiently motivated to implement them, which we argue is at least partly affected by the wider political context.

Informal institutions and the education policy domain

In adopting a gender lens to our analysis, we take account of the influence and interaction of informal institutions within the education domain which may shape behaviours and outcomes. As such, in this section we explore how gender inequalities emerge in the education system in both nominal and substantive ways, including the power and representation of female actors in the education system, along with other more hidden gender biases.

Women's power and representation in the education policy domain

Key influential female figures not only played pivotal roles in advancing the gender equality agenda in the political realm in the early years of the government,

but their influence was also an important factor within the education policy domain. Dr Gennet Zewide was one such figure who served as the Minister for Education from 1991 to 2006 and, until very recently was the only woman to have held this position.[7] Through her leadership, Dr Zewide raised the visibility of women in this domain and played a central role in incorporating gender concerns into education policy and ensuring that strategies for greater gender equality were pursued, evident from the inclusion of issues on girls' education from the first Education Plan (ESDP I) (Rose 2003). These achievements, however, were hard-won, and as a female Minister operating in a male-dominated space, Dr Zewide[8] describes the continuing opposition she faced despite her high-level position:

> For a long time, they didn't take me seriously. . . . I was the only Minister who had bad things written about them in the media. . . . I was the only one that, you know, who some parliamentarians disobeyed.

Against such opposition, Dr Zewide describes how she had to 'struggle' to encourage others working in the education system to recognise the importance of gender equality. She describes the opposition of male stakeholders within the education system:

> One of the directors, an elderly man who has been working in the Ministry [of Education], for a long time, he came up with this idea that, you know, 'we don't need a women's department in the Ministry [of Education] as the government does not discriminate against women.

This encounter, she explains, was emblematic of the attitudes of others in the education system at this time. Had it not been for the presence, commitment and persistence of Dr Zewide, the issue of girls' education would most likely been sidelined.

Even to this day, the representation of women within the education system remains limited. Our mapping of key education stakeholders found that women are grossly under-represented in the education system, especially in decision-making positions, even though ensuring women's participation has been a policy priority throughout the education plans. Only 12 of 150 of our interviewees were women, despite our efforts to include women whenever they were identified through our actor mapping. We found that women tended to occupy positions considered as 'lower status' by other stakeholders, often positions associated with advancing equity issues. The absence of women from decision-making positions is a glaring injustice in itself, but it also has consequences for policies that are pursued, particularly those related to girls' education. Given that the design of reforms occurs in a top-down manner, with only those in high-level positions included in decision-making in any meaningful sense (Asgedom et al. 2019), women are unlikely to have been involved in the design of these plans and programmes.

One male federal-level stakeholder described the difficulties in increasing the number of women in the education system. For example, he described how the introduction of gender quotas was met with resistance from some stakeholders who claimed that these positions were 'already occupied'. A number of male interviewees also suggested that women were reluctant to enter into leadership positions, even though there was training available. No explanation for women's hesitancy was provided, but we can speculate that this may be due to the fact that insufficient efforts were made to attract women, an issue also highlighted by Dr Zewide, or that women were not willing to enter into a male-dominated structure that did not accommodate their needs.

Similar to Dr Zewide, both male and female stakeholders included in our interviews working to advance gender equality in education described experiencing these same struggles. At the federal level, stakeholders tasked with the main responsibility for designing and implementing strategies for improving girls' education reported having very little power within the structures of the Ministry of Education and described difficulties in mobilising support and coordinating action to improve girls' education. At the regional level, stakeholders further described how the de-prioritisation of girls' education resulted in inadequate funds being allocated. Particularly striking in these accounts are the similarities between the present-day reality captured during our interviews and that described by Dr Zewide more than 20 years ago. Women continue to be under-represented in decision-making powers in the education system and gender biases are still prevalent in the attitudes and behaviour of stakeholders, despite over 20 years of policy commitment. This signals the persistence of more hidden and intangible factors, to which we will now turn.

Stakeholders' attitudes towards girls' education

While all stakeholders included in our analysis were committed to improving educational quality, a different perspective emerged in relation to stakeholders' commitment to gender equality in education. Discrepancies were found amongst stakeholders concerning the challenges that stakeholders believed girls faced and what they considered as necessary to ensure progress in relation to girls' education. In explaining these patterns of difference, we grouped the attitudes of stakeholders who we interviewed into three broad categories – *progressive* (gender equality requires attention to gender norms), *narrow* (gender equality is synonymous with gender parity and thus has been achieved) and *mixed* (gender equality is linked to gender parity and more inputs are needed) (Table 6.3). We found stakeholders' views to be influenced by ideas related to how development happens, patterns of governance and more implicit gender biases, which interacted in different ways. Furthermore, we identified differences across regional locations in terms of which views stakeholders were more likely to hold, but not across gender with both male and females found in each category.

Table 6.3 Categorisation of stakeholders' attitudes towards girls' education

Attitudes towards girls' education	Progressive	Narrow	Mixed
Progress	Gender parity has improved as a result of an increase in girls' enrolment, but this is not enough to secure gender equality.	Progress in gender equality equals gender parity. As such gender equality is achieved.	Progress in gender equality is mostly linked to gender parity.
Challenges	There are multiple and intersecting challenges that different groups of girls face. Gender norms and practices have a significant impact. Lack of resources and attention are directed to girls' education.	Girls do not face challenges and are not disadvantaged. Girls are seen as a homogenous group.	Girls face many challenges, but differences of experience are not emphasised. Gender norms and practices have a significant impact. Lack of resources and attention are directed to girls' education.
Strategies	Increased and coordinated attention and support needed. Should be tailored to needs. Planning should be gender sensitive.	Strategies are not needed/were not suggested.	More inputs are needed. Girls should be supported to withstand challenges.
Who held these views?	Held by many stakeholders, at federal, regional and *woreda* levels, especially in Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region.	Held by some stakeholders at regional and *woreda* levels, mainly in Addis Ababa and the emerging regions.	Held by most stakeholders at federal, regional and *woreda* levels, particularly in Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Region.

Progressive views

Almost one-third of the stakeholders we interviewed expressed *progressive views* on gender equality. These views were found particularly at the federal and *woreda* level in the northern regions of Amhara and Tigray. Individuals in this category

acknowledged that great progress had been made in getting more girls into school, but that this was not enough:

> In terms of gender, there is some improvement in the participation of females, but still several females need special support in order to stay in schools.
> (Male stakeholder, *woreda* level, Amhara)

In this group, stakeholders reflected on the damaging effects of gender norms and practices and emphasised the intersecting challenges that meant girls living in rural areas were even more disadvantaged. They also emphasised girls' agency, noting that when girls are supported educationally, they are capable of achieving at least as much as their male counterparts. At the same time, they recognised that girls' progress in education was limited by structural factors that had not yet been addressed:

> As we know girls are not as free as boys. They are not given the chance to go out and go to library and study like their male counterparts . . . They also do work at home and girls carry the burden of the household. So, I feel that they are still lagging behind in many ways.
> (Male stakeholder, zonal level, Tigray)

A crucial challenge described by the stakeholder in the progressive group was the lack of attention and support given to this issue by other stakeholders, echoing the issues we raise in relation to our assessment of the ESDPs. For example, one stakeholder at the federal level described how:

> very limited [support is provided]. That is our challenge. The reason girls' dropout is high because we do not give [this issue] especial emphasis . . . The support is limited compared to the need.
> (Male stakeholder, Ministry of Education)

The lack of prioritisation of girls' education resulted in insufficient funds being allocated which in turn constrained the ability of stakeholders within this group to make progress. Recognising the inadequacy of current strategies, more holistic and targeted approaches were called for, which would need the commitment not only of all stakeholders in the education system but also across different sectors (such as health) noting that 'the education office cannot solve this problem' (Male stakeholder, *woreda* level, Oromia).

Narrow views

We identified just over one-quarter of stakeholders as having *narrow views* towards girls' education. In this group, gender equality was equated with gender parity and little attention was given to the challenges faced by girls. Differences between girls were not acknowledged and understanding of girls' education was

largely based on stakeholder's interpretation of official government statistics. In some locations where government statistics indicated that gender parity had been achieved, or where girls outnumbered boys, stakeholders referred to these figures to support their view that gender equality had been achieved and this was sufficient for addressing the inequalities faced by girls. Reflecting patterns in official government statistics, stakeholders in Addis Ababa, at both at the regional and *woreda* level, frequently described how there were 'no problems related to gender disparity' (male stakeholder) and that 'in the schools we have a greater number of girls than boys' (male stakeholder). Progress was measured by achieving the governments' targets without giving further thought to the real experiences of girls.

Similar views were captured outside of the capital. In SNNP, for example, a *woreda* official stated that:

> In terms of access for education, there is improvement . . . The gender parity index is also one now. This indicates that there is equal number of male and female students within our schools. So now we have to look for affirmative action for male students.
>
> (Male stakeholder, *woreda* level, SNNP)

Perhaps even more surprisingly, some stakeholders also held the view that gender parity had been achieved in the emerging regions of Benishangul Gumuz and Somali where overall enrolment remains low. For example, a view was expressed that girls were now performing educationally 'on the same level as boys' (Male stakeholder, regional level, Benishangul Gumuz) and that, while in the past girls had been disadvantaged, 'nowadays, but they are supported by affirmative actions to compete with the men' (ibid.). Overall, in some cases, these views appear to reflect the hidden biases of stakeholders (which may be both conscious and unconscious), and that appeals to enrolment figures were used to justify these biases. While it may be that special support is required for certain groups of boys in this region, the idea that progress in girls' education has somehow undermined boys' education indicates at best a lack of comprehension of the nature of disadvantage faced by girls.

Mixed views

The category *mixed* was the largest category, accounting for nearly one-half of the stakeholders and reflects most closely ideas within the education policy domain as to how progress in girls' education is conceptualised and pursued. Like those in the progressive category, these stakeholders recognised the intersecting nature of challenges faced by girls, including the persistence of gender norms and noted how different groups of girls experienced challenges. At the same time, progress in girls' education was viewed mainly in terms of equal numbers of boys and girls enrolled. Proposed strategies for improving girls' education included the provision of more inputs and resources, similar to strategies outlined in the

education plans. They also included helping girls to withstand the challenges they faced with little attention given to underlying structural disadvantages faced by girls, which perhaps explains the persistence of these challenges:

> The school has to play its own role through organising club[s] and student council[s]. This will help them to withstand traditional cultural influences. The teacher has to support them by arranging separate tutorial class for them.
> (Male stakeholder, *woreda* level, SNNP)

It seems that stakeholders within this category have in some ways internalised ideas within the education policy domain as to what is needed for progress in girls' education.

In summary, considerable heterogeneity is evident in terms of the attitudes of the stakeholders that we interviewed, which we placed along a continuum ranging from progressive to narrow, with the majority of stakeholders falling somewhere in between. While the commitment of stakeholders to girls' education is important, we find that their understanding of progress in girls' education also matters, which in turn affects the strategies and approaches they believe are needed.

Reflecting on the differences in stakeholders' views towards gender equality in education, we find that ideas and institutions (formal and informal), and their interactions, have a role to play. Within the constraints of formal institutions, those with progressive attitudes identify some progress in increasing access but acknowledge that much is yet to be done, but that they are limited in many ways, including difficulties in engaging others and the shortage of resources available for girls' education. For those with mixed attitudes, while they may also be committed to improving girls' education, their understanding of what is needed to ensure such progress may compromise their ability to achieve this goal. In failing to take account of the more deep-seated inequalities faced by girls they may be left wondering why progress is difficult to achieve. We also noted the persistence of more hidden and underlying forms of gender biases held by a minority of stakeholders, such as those who were opposed to gender quotas or believed that progress in girls' education undermined that of boys. Claims that gender equality has been achieved and targets have been met are often used to justify these hidden biases. In some cases, not only are strategies for girls' education not sufficiently transformative, but stakeholders are not incentivised to implement them, even where formal strategies have been pursued to attempt to foster a commitment to girls' education.

Our analysis of these patterns over time has revealed how little change has taken place over the course of 20 years demonstrating how embedded gender bias (nominal and substantive) are. It is perhaps naïve therefore to think that the education system is equipped to address the intractable problem of gender norms and practices found at the local level without first addressing these biases in its own structures. In the next and final section, we reflect more on the insights offered through our analysis of the politics of girls' education and consider the

implications for addressing the gap between ambitious policies and meaningful and sustainable progress for all girls.

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown how taking account of the politics of girls' education helps to reveal important insights concerning the gap between high-level commitments to girls' education and slow and uneven progress in this area. The *domains of power* framework (Hickey & Hossain 2019) has helped to reveal the importance of the interaction between the political settlement and the education policy domain and how this shapes the uptake and implementation of strategies for girls' education. Yet, in understanding patterns of progress in relation to girls' education, we have also demonstrated the need to take account of gender inequality within the education policy domain (Chappell & Waylen 2013; Sen 2007). Based on our analysis a schematic representation of how we understand the politics of girls' education is provided in Figure 6.3.

Our analysis has shown how the political context has to some extent shaped what is possible in relation to girls' education in the education policy domain. The dominant developmental state of Ethiopia has produced a specific political context, which over time has seen increasing centralisation of power and an ambitious development agenda that gives special importance to education and gender equality. Within this context, Ethiopia has made rapid gains in recent years driven by rapid economic growth and infrastructure expansion towards the goal
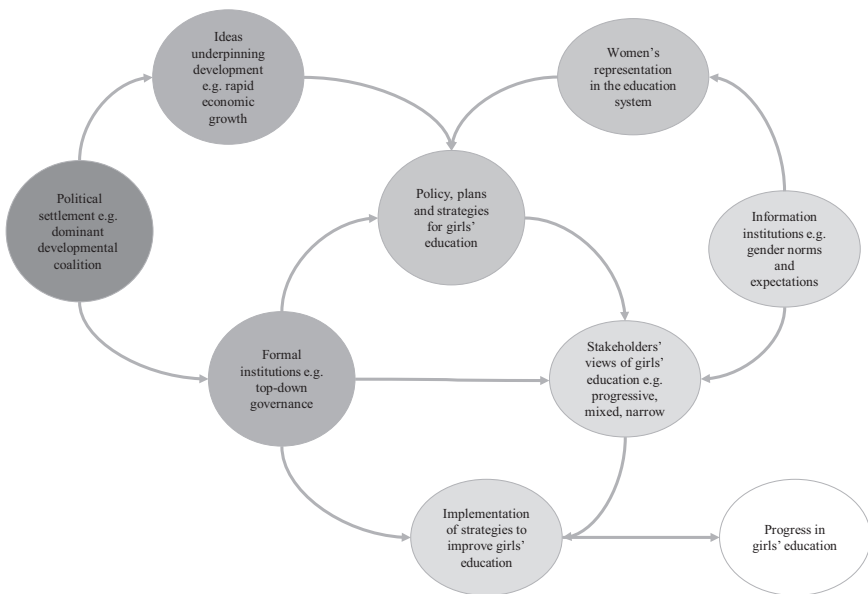

Figure 6.3 Categorisation of stakeholders' attitudes towards girls' education

of reaching lower middle-income status by 2025. Yet, in the midst of these gains, inequalities have increased, and growing fragmentation has taken place within the country. The assumption that progress in addressing underlying disadvantages and structural inequalities would occur once economic growth was complete has not borne fruit, and the absence of effective strategies for addressing underlying structural disadvantages has affected those who were the most marginalised. Widely held ideas concerning how development happens, have shaped policies, plans and strategies that are pursued in relation to girls' education in the education policy domain and this has constrained the range of available choices for girls' education (Hickey & Hossain 2019). Rapid progress has been made in terms of access and some progress has also been made in gender parity represented by the decreasing gender gaps in enrolment, although worryingly these gaps are opening once again. Yet beyond this visible progress, substantive progress is still lacking, including real improvements in the lives of those who are most disadvantaged and hidden aspects of gender equality have not been addressed.

While understanding the wider political context undoubtedly provides important insights into patterns of progress in girls' education, we have also highlighted the need to take account of informal institutions within the education system, which cannot be considered to be a gender-neutral site. Nominally, women continue to be absent from positions of power in the education system while substantively ideas about the nature of gender roles influence the attitudes, behaviour and action of stakeholders and limits the progress that can be made. Nevertheless, individual actors can make a difference and throughout the government's trajectory, the importance of female figures committed to advancing gender equality has helped to ensure a continued focus on gender equality both in the education policy domain and in the wider political settlement.

In more recent times, positive progress has been made in increasing women's representation in the wider political context. The first female president of Ethiopia, Sahle-Work Zewde, appointed in 2018, promised to ensure that the empowerment of women remains firmly on the government's agenda. This was followed by the appointment of Ethiopia's first gender-balanced cabinet, along with the entry of women into a number of high-level positions[9] many of whom have been strident advocates of gender equality offering outspoken and often critical views of the government throughout their careers. Their presence suggests a commitment on the part of the government to real change. Nevertheless, our analysis demonstrates how we cannot assume that this progress will automatically translate into benefits for girls and women, and there is an urgent need to also address more substantive forms of gender inequality, both in the wider society and within the education system.

Drawing on these insights, we suggest that a more transformative approach to girls' education is needed. It will be important to move beyond simplistic notions that increasing girls' access and retention will lead to greater gender equality. In formulating such an approach, it will be important to recognise the diversity of girls' experiences and to draw upon their lived experiences. Importantly, we have highlighted how engaging all stakeholders in ensuring gender equality within

the education system may require a more nuanced approach than simply shifting between mainstreaming and targeted approaches. Finally, while understanding the politics of girls' education has provided valuable insights into the progress in girls' education and has helped to provide important insights for addressing gaps in relation to girls' education, we recognise that this is only one aspect of a much wider picture on girls' education. As such, there is a need for further work to understand how this links to what takes place at the school level, including girls' lived experiences.

Notes

1 In Ethiopia, primary education currently consists of eight years of schooling, including lower primary education (grades 1–4) and upper primary education (grades 5–8). Children usually enter into grade 1 around the age of seven years old.
2 RISE Ethiopia has examined whether and how a large package of national reforms works to improve learning equitably. More information is available at www.riseprogramme.org/countries/ethiopia
3 Addis Ababa, Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz, Ethio-Somali, Oromia, SNNP and Tigray.
4 In addition to the authors of the chapter, this included RISE Ethiopia members at Addis Ababa University (Prof. Amare Asegdom, Dr Belay Hagos, Prof. Darge Wole, Prof. Girma Lemma, Prof. Tirussew Tefera) and the Ethiopian Policy Studies Institute (Mr Chanie Eligu), Cambridge University (Dr Padmini Iyer) and Harvard University (Ms Shelby Carvalho).
5 The EPRDF consists of four parties: the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara Democratic Party (ADP), the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM). Our chapter was written prior to December 2019 when Dr Abiy Ahmed disbanded the EPRDF and formed a new political party, the prosperity party. While our analysis focuses on the period before December 2019, this does serve to highlight the rapidly changing political context in Ethiopia.
6 Dr Gennet Zewide, personal correspondence.
7 The Ministry of Education has recently been divided into two sections: the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MOSHE), Dr Hirut Woldemariam, a former professor at Addis Ababa University was appointed Minister of the MOSHE.
8 Given her role of prominence and easy identifiability, Dr Zewide granted us permission to identify her in this chapter. All other interviews are anonymised.
9 This included the President of the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia (Meaza Ashenafi) and Head of the Election Board (Birtukan Mideksa).

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