

Vestiges of Sexism and Gender Stereotyping: ZIMSEC Ordinary Level English Language Examinations from 2007 to 2012.

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Abstract

The struggle against sexism and gender stereotyping in education has resulted in concerted efforts to produce teaching and learning resources which bear particular sensitivity to gender issues. One area which still needs realignment is the area of Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) Ordinary level English Language examinations. The paper argues that ZIMSEC Ordinary Level English Language Paper 2 examinations, in content and tone, engender the perception that the examinations are masculine, largely dwelling on masochist stories of male adventurism, as well as male intellectual and physical prowess. The paper recommends that item writers should display utmost sensitivity to issues of gender equality in their setting of examinations to ensure that any vestiges of sexism and gender stereotyping are eradicated once and for all. The research is qualitative in nature and relied exclusively on critical document study. Statistical information presented in the research was interpreted qualitatively.

Key Words: Sexism, gender, gender stereotyping, examinations

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper starts by exploring the background to this study which incorporates global and Zimbabwean national gender policies and the history of Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) Ordinary Level English examinations. An examination of critical terms to the research, namely, sexism, gender, gender stereo typing and examinations is done. A brief outline of the research design, theoretical framework, sampling and research methodology used in this research is highlighted. Results are then presented and analysed and a conclusion finally given.

1.1 Background to the Study

1.1.1 Global and Zimbabwean National Policies on Gender

Gender biased practices and attitudes have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks. The United Nations (UN) has responded to the problem of gender inequality through gender mainstreaming. In 1967, the UN adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Article 2 of CEDAW condemns discrimination and obliges states to pursue comprehensive policies and measures to eliminate discrimination of women at all levels (Benediek, Kisaaye and Obeiteither, 2002). Another effort by the UN was the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were set in 2000. MDG goal 3 states that there is need to promote gender equality by eliminating disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and to all levels of education no later than 2015. It also aims at increasing participation of women in decision making in all sectors and at all levels. This needs concerted efforts from all stakeholders.

In Africa, the African Charter (1986) shows that freedom, equality, justice and dignity are essential objectives for the achievement of legitimate aspirations of the African people. Regionally, the SADC Gender and Development Protocols were adopted in 2008. At gaining political independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean government took a proactive approach to addressing gender equity issues and problems. Zvobgo (1996) posits that at independence the Zimbabwean government had the task of transforming the education system to abolish the colour and gender band. Zimbabwe has ratified several international protocols on gender equality including CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and women's empowerment of 1995. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Number 17, 2005, Section 23 is a law on the protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, tribe, gender, sex and so on. Section 23(g) of the constitution states that there will be,

the implementation of affirmative action programmes for the protection and advancement of people or classes of people who have been previously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination.

Derived from this constitution is the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy whose vision is,

to have a society in Zimbabwe where there is economic, political, religious and social equality and equity among men and women in all spheres and at all levels. This is anchored on the protection and respect of the rights of the individual.

Objective 3.1 of the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy reads, "Mainstream gender issues into all sectors in order to eliminate all negative practices that impede equality and equity of sexes". The new Constitution of Zimbabwe (Final Draft: 1 February 2013) shows that the new constitution is premised upon a number of values and principles, gender equality being one of the principles. It states that the state must promote full gender balance in the Zimbabwean society. The 2010 Millennium Development Goals Status Report on Zimbabwe shows that Zimbabwe has reached near parity in primary and lower secondary schools but gender parity decreases in upper levels. The report highlighted that the target of increasing the participation of women in decision making in all sectors and at all levels to 50:50 by 2015 is seriously off track and may be difficult to achieve.

Gillham (2012) in Hendricks, Mouton, Hansen and Roux (eds.) (2012:94) argues that, "... one of the first things we must come to terms with is that what we have here is a local expression of a global problem...In this sense we are speaking about a global rather than distinctly an African problem."

The challenge is for every institution to put an effort within their own capacity to add a straw in the eradication of the evils of gender inequity not just for Zimbabwe, but also for the whole world. Ghafari (2008) shows that in contemporary society, men and women may on the surface seem to enjoy equal rights and responsibilities. However it is important to understand how values and practices embedded in particular domains and social institutions foster inequality. Thus, ZIMSEC must do its part to ensure that the country's vision is fulfilled through the contents of its examination papers.

1.1.2 ZIMSEC Ordinary Level English Language Examinations.

At independence from Britain in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited a highly stratified and segregatory education system which had White students sitting different but reputable examinations from three overseas examination boards which controlled the setting and marking of Ordinary Level examinations. The boards were the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the Associated Examinations Board (AEB), and the University of London School Examinations Board (ULSEB) (Nembaware, 2004). Indigenous Zimbabweans were assessed locally and awarded an inferior Rhodesia Nation Certificate (RNSC) (Zvobgo, 1996).

In 1984, the government initiated moves to have examinations localised. Full localisation of Grade 7, Ordinary Level and Advanced Level examinations became complete in 2002. Localisation meant that examinations in subjects like English language are set and marked locally. Before the full localisation, Zimbabweans were not responsible for standards control for example in terms of making sure that question papers were valid and marking was reliable (Nembaware, 2004). Localisation of examinations in Zimbabwe was done alongside other educational reforms for example, reforms to include gender equity and equality in education. The UCLES examinations which were written nationally were foreign in outlook and there was little or no sensitivity to issues of gender in some of the teaching materials used.

Currently, primary and secondary school examinations are administered by Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) a local examination body created by the government of Zimbabwe through an act of parliament in 1994 to take over from the UCLES which was running examinations since independence. The board administers examinations bi-annually in June and November to willing candidates especially those in schools.

The Ordinary Level English Language examination is made up of two papers which are written separately and the marks are put together to find the final mark. Paper 1 which is written in one and half hours, among others, examines composition skills. Paper 2 is a 2-hour paper which mainly tests comprehension skills. The Paper has 2 sections with Section A being divided equally between comprehension questions and summary with 20 marks each. The other 10 marks are in Section B which examines use of register in communication.

It should be noted that though the aims and objectives of the syllabus for English language do not specify on the need for gender sensitivity, the government's policies on gender implicitly put an obligation on item writers to ensure that the examination is gender sensitive. The extent to which the ZIMSEC Ordinary Level Examination addresses or fails to address issues of gender in its content and language use in the past 5 years from November 2007 to 2012, makes the subject of this research.

1.2 Definition of terms

1.2.1 Sexism

Sexism can be defined as the existence of bias in favour of a particular sex. Sexism is manifested most in language. The use of language that expresses bias in favour of one sex and in the process treating the other sex in a discriminatory fashion is sexist. Any use of “words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender” is clearly sexist (Parks and Roberton, 1998a:455). Scholars like Sarrasin, Gabriel and Gyax, 2010:4) argue that “language is fundamental to the existence of gender inequality”. The male sex has benefitted from the sexist usage of words which in turn has entrenched certain beliefs and attitudes about the superiority of men and the subordination of women. These attitudes and beliefs, because of their existence over a long period of time, have led to the use of sexist language unconsciously by both men and women. Apart from use of words like *he*, *manpower*, *mankind*, *chairman*, *policeman* and *fireman* as generic terms, sexism can even manifest itself in instances where attempts at the use of no-sexist language have been done. It has been observed that even where a speaker or writer uses terms to represent both men and women like *he/she*, *men/women*, *boys/girls*, the pattern is to start with words which represent male sex. Sexist language as argued in this paper is reflective of and influences society’s thought patterns.

1.2.2 Gender

The concept gender is difficult to define; different people put different meaning to it. It describes the differences between men and women which are based on socially defined ideas of what it means to be male and female. It is important to note that sex refers to one’s biological makeup while gender refers to their social definition. Gender is thus culturally constructed and gender roles socially prescribed. Gender shows the social and cultural prescriptions of roles, responsibilities, attributes, opportunities, status, access to and control over resources and benefits between men and women, girls and boys in a society. Gender is thus one’s social identity. Haslanger (2000) notes some important dimensions of gender which are also important to this study namely gender roles, gender norms, gender traits and virtues, gendered behaviour, gender identity and gender symbolism. These are important as they form the basis of gender segregation in any society. It was noted that they also form the basis of gender stereotyping within the ZIMSEC English examination papers. Munroe (2001) rightly notes that attitudes, prejudices, assumptions and expectations held by individuals and society about men and women’s roles continue to be obstacles to the achievement of gender equity. The beliefs, prejudices and attitudes about men and women’s roles and privileges that dominate a patriarchal society influence discourses in different areas of the society. The discourses may not be a deliberate move to create a gender band in society, but may be a result of deeply embedded values which form the dominant paradigm and philosophy of a society.

1.2.3 Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping refers to the assignment of characteristics to an individual based on the individual’s belonging to a certain gender. Gender stereotyping “consists of beliefs, about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities appropriate to, men or women” (Brannon, 2004:2). The belief that women should be involved in household chores is stereotypical just the same as the belief that men are brave. Gender stereotyping emanates from activities which men and women are seen to engage in with different frequencies. Such gender related duties become part of what is generally regarded as feminine or masculine, “not because of any innate

reason for these differences, but because of the association with women and men” (Brannon, 2004:2).

1.2.3 Examinations

While the school curriculum can be described as all the experiences pupils are exposed to under the guidance of the school, examinations are a way of assessing the extent to which the curriculum would have been grasped by pupils. Examinations can be formative, that is running through the duration of the course or summative, when they come at the end of a particular phase. Examinations are a measurement of achievement by candidates and they also serve to make sure that candidates consolidate whatever they learnt in preparation for the examinations.

Skilbeck (1984) argues that examinations are the cornerstone of any formal education system. Being a cornerstone, examinations should be objective enough to yield reliable results for the benefit of society at large. If examinations have certain deficiencies and shortcomings then their validity and reliability are seriously in doubt. Examinations should be in tandem with national policies on gender to ensure that gender discrimination along sexist lines is eradicated. If textbooks for use in schools reflect gender sensitivity, then the final examinations should not show any deviation.

2.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research adopted the qualitative research design. Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of phenomena. This study explored *sexism and gender stereotyping in ZIMSEC Ordinary level English Language Paper 2 examinations*. Schumacher and McMillan (1993:372) maintains that “qualitative research is based on a naturalistic phenomenological philosophy that views reality as multilayered, interactive and a shared social experience”. Healy (2012) asserts that, most qualitative projects do attempt some kind of generalization, if not of a numerical nature. In this study, complex textual descriptions of phenomena are used. The qualitative design was appropriate in this study for it granted the researchers opportunity to look at context and social meaning and how it affects individuals and is grounded in use of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs to describe phenomena.

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded on the post modernist feminist theory. One of the principles of Post Modernist feminism is that language and discourse affects individual dispositions. Alverson and Due Billing (1997) assert that discourses about men and women as expressed in the uses of language and in text are central. Henry and Tator (2002) see underlying beliefs and worldviews as mediated by discourse. Most beliefs about the world are acquired through discourse. The discourse in the ZIMSEC English Language paper 2 comprehension texts were seen as a way through which explicit as well as subtle meanings which may perpetuate gender disparities and inequalities are given expression. Abdullah, Abdullah and Hoon (2008) argue that discourses reveal hidden ideologies and they can be used to make unequal power relations and representations of social groups appear to be ‘common sense’, ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ when in actual fact there is inherent prejudice, injustice and social inequality.

2.3 Sampling

The main type of sampling utilised in this study is purposive sampling. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling. The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest, which will best enable the researcher to answer research questions. Ordinary Level English examination papers were sampled using operational construct sampling: a type of purposive sampling. Patton (1990:177) argues that operational construct sampling samples, “incidents, slices of life or people on the basis of their potential manifestation of important theoretical constructs.” This study is meant to complement existing theories of gender, as reflected in the theoretical framework, as it uses real examples of examination papers where real life examples of gendered constructs are evident.

2.4 Research methods

The study utilised document analysis to explore manifestations of sexism and gender stereotyping in Ordinary Level English Language examinations.

2.4.1 Critical Document Analysis

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes similar to how focused group discussions or interview transcripts are analyzed. A rubric can also be used to grade or score a document. Document analysis is a technique for gathering and analysing the content of text. The ‘content’ refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The ‘text’ is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication. Neuman (1997) states that, in document analysis, a researcher uses objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a qualitative description of the symbolic content in a text.

3.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

A brief summary of each comprehension passage is given as well as the emerging themes.

month & year of exam	summary of comprehension passage	emerging theme (s)
November 2007	The main actor is man who takes a solo journey along the Sanyati and Zambezi Rivers in his canoe called skokiaan. He passes crocodiles, herons, giant kingfishers and a troop of monkeys. Edwards runs up against a herd of hippo. He travelled many kilometres through wild country and spent many months in regions where injury and even death could have come his way. He survived. <i>Adapted from Zambezi Odyssey by</i>	Courage - Masculine attributes manifest through the main character’s adventure. Male adventurism - The main character even says, “I knew well my adventure was a significant phase in my life and would set me down at a new point of development” Risk taking - the decision to tackle Sanyati and Zambezi is viewed with fear by everyone and yet he takes the

	<p><i>SJ Edwards (1979) Printed by Printpak Ltd</i></p>	<p>risk.</p> <p>Determination - Edwards is determined to live an interesting life, needed a subject for a book, and is obsessed with the notion of accruing experience, of storing up impressions, ideas and facts.</p> <p>Male quest for success and glory-The protagonist has a desire to live in many places, to flourish not in one season but in all, to see those sunsets, cities, people and mountains.</p> <p>Comment-No female characters are portrayed in the story. There is total omission of feminine characters.</p>
June 2008	<p>The main character is John a graduate student at university of Utah who is involved in academic research. The paper shows male character dominance in academic work especially in issues to do with research.</p> <p><i>Adapted from an article by Lewis T Nielsen, National Geographic, Vol 156 No 3 September 1979</i></p>	<p>Male intellectual superiority</p> <p>The male character is presented as dominant in academic work especially in issues to do with research. This shows the stereotypical views on male intellectual superiority.</p>
November 2008	<p>Two female characters, Fatima and Assibit, are mentioned in the passage. Fatima has worked for her master as a slave for a long time in Niger. She lived in a scrawny brown tent that rose no higher than an elbow. One of her children had an infection which she could not cure. Her master did not pay her but fed and clothed her. She is poor and has no money and food. She is a slave and is humiliated by her status but seems to have no greater expectation of life. Slave owners encourage them to reproduce and increase their numbers. Sometimes the masters determine when they should have sex. Female slaves are</p>	<p>Suppression of females and dependency on males</p> <p>Females are suppressed, live under squalid conditions, work as slaves, abused, underpaid and used as procreation machines.</p>

	<p>sometimes raped by their masters. Males are castrated by masters. Assibit, another slave, could not bear the punishment any longer and runs away from her master, leaving her husband, also as a slave, behind. She faces traumatic experiences as a slave and does not know the meaning of freedom.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Source: BBC Adapted from the Daily Mirror</i></p>	
November 2009	<p>A party of male travellers has to cross three big rivers which are in flood. Before crossing the rivers, the party has to contend with very high mountains, enduring very cold temperatures and limited supplies of oxygen. The last river is described as “a great river” with four arms each over four hundred metres in width. The crossing of Drichu is described through the narrator who observes that, “Ahead of us innumerable heads of men and beasts were bobbing in the water” under the guidance of “long-experienced men”. (<i>Adapted from Tibet is my Country by Thubten Norbu</i>)</p>	<p>Gender role stereo typing Men display strength and endurance and they are regarded as adventurous, courageous and brave</p>
June 2010	<p>James, an old and terminally ill man is trying to give Mary, his caregiver some gold from his tin box. He has also asked Mary to destroy one of his wills but she turns him down because she feels that the man wants to exploit her to further his own selfish intentions. Mary says that she cannot take the gold because James’ relatives will be suspicious of her and that she does not want to spoil her reputation. She tells James frankly that, “I will not let the close of your life spoil the beginning of mine”. (<i>Adapted from Middle March by George Eliot</i>).</p>	<p>Male Chauvinism Men are seen as selfish though economically stronger than women. Women are seen as subservient to men, working as caregivers to underscore their stereotypical image of being compassionate, soft and caring. The exception is that Mary is incorruptible and strong willed. The overwhelming picture is one of subordination of women.</p>
November 2010	<p>This is a discursive piece of writing on famine and strategies to combat it. There is very little sexist usage of language in most parts of the passage. However as the writer makes reference to the farmer, he/she</p>	<p>Gender role stereotyping Farming is associated with men. This is clear from the use of pronouns which denote men.</p>

	<p>displays the view that a farmer is male by sex. This is evident where the writer writes that, “If the rains are late, the farmer with a tractor has a much better chance of catching up with his cultivation and seeding...” and that “the speed of harvesting may give him a similar advantage in threatening weather conditions”. (<i>Adapted from Famine: Its Prevention and Relief by G.B Masefield</i>).</p>	
<p>June 2011</p>	<p>The main actor in the short story is the writer himself. He shows a lot of prowess in boxing as he describes himself as full of ‘speed, ferocity and stamina’. He had dreams of success and he feared failure. His description of himself shows that he was self confident, self assured, determined and had a high self concept. He says, ‘I lacked the killer instinct, but all the same, I spent hours drugging myself with dreams in which I became the undisputed middleweight champion of the world’ (line 13). The writer also shows that he is someone who was quite aggressive. He says, “whenever I had the chance I would persuade one of them to spar with me” (line 27). He is also fearful to demonstrate and acknowledge failure and signs of weakness or surrender. Although when he meets Gibson it is clear to him that he is not his match in the boxing ring, he braced himself for the fight. The writer describes his feelings at the encounter with Gibson as accompanied with ‘indescribable horror’, he is ‘dazed with disbelief’ and ‘a current of fear coursed through my veins.’ In spite of these feelings the writer set off for the fight for fear of being branded weak.</p> <p>In his dreamland about being a world class boxer and a celebrity, the writer fantasized “beautiful, rich, amoral, reckless and hot blooded women” pursuing him wherever he went. He saw women as objects of male satisfaction and males as the heroes. He</p>	<p>Male heroism and female dependency and irrationality</p> <p>Men are seen as self confident, self assured, determined, aggressive and had a high self concept, dreams of success and people who fear failure.</p> <p>Femaleness is mentioned in contempt of femininity and their roles are trivialized. Females are revealed as being irrational and ludicrous. Women are seen as objects of male satisfaction.</p>

	went on to say, “I could choose one or half a dozen of them any time of my life.” Women are seen as the icing sugar upon the cake of men’s successes. They are seen as simply people who are after successful men and who do not seek success for themselves.	
November 2011	Like the June 2011 paper, the November 2011 comprehension passage is also quite gendered. In this paper, a group of male railway workers experience a rail accident. The whole passage shows the way the men reacted to the impending danger and the peril itself when it finally came. The men show terror, fear, alarm and surrender at the awareness of the inevitable accident before them which they were sure would not spare even one life in the train. However as fate would have it, they all survived the accident. They showed a lot of toughness, prowess, astuteness and collective minds in order to rescue each other from the train which was at the verge of bursting into flame. Despite the indescribable horror of the imminent danger, the men emerged triumphant at the end and they were above the bleak situation. In this passage there is no female character and there is no mention of any female in thought or in word.	The indomitable male <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men show a lot of toughness, prowess, astuteness and collective minds • Despite the indescribable horror of the imminent danger, the men emerged triumphant
June 2012	The paper has no human character. It is about nature and its destruction by ‘ <i>mankind</i> ’. The most striking aspect in this paper is the use of <i>man</i> and <i>mankind</i> as words for the human race including women. The use of the words <i>man</i> and <i>mankind</i> show the place given to the male species in the world. Line 14 reads, “the whole planet must be administered for <i>man</i> ’s best interests.” This shows the centrality of the male species in language and discourses especially in the English language. Line 78 states that, “...fire can	The male figure centrality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The centrality of the male species in language and discourses especially in the English language. • Males are seen as the owners of the means of wealth.

	<p>lead to stable habitats highly profitable to <i>man and his domestic animals.</i>” This statement shows that the means of wealth are in the hands of man. This passage also gives rise to gendered questioning which requires gendered answers.</p> <p>Question (b) (ii) What is <i>man</i> currently searching for which proves that the balance enjoyed by nature is indeed fragile?</p> <p>Question (c) (ii) Give two examples to show how <i>man</i> can successfully administer the world to <i>his</i> best interest.</p>	
<p>November 2012</p>	<p>This comprehension passage illuminates two male characters: one a stranger who is a criminal and the other is the author himself as an adolescent boy. The author retells a tale of a stranger in their neighbourhood who instilled unfathomable fear in everyone in the community and “he had the police running round in circles”. (line 3) The author lucidly explains what they felt about the stranger where he says, “...we were in a chronic state of terror from the time we heard that the Stranger was on the run” (line 11). So the Stranger here is portrayed as a formidable personality because of his criminal activities.</p> <p>The author sees himself as someone who although sharing in the fear of the community with others, has his fear evaporating when he is on his own. This shows a character with a lot of courage. However the author shows an inner conflict in personality where he says, “I only felt frightened when I was with the others. When I was on my own the fear suddenly evaporated. However, a great unease swept over me as if the fear had reached such a pitch that I no longer responded to it consciously...” although he wanted to convince himself that he was not afraid, but</p>	<p>The formidable and brave male</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although he acted heroic, deep inside the author was engulfed with an immense apprehension. • The two male characters in this passage are illuminated as one being terrifying and the other although afraid of the fearsome one being very bold. These are both characteristics associated with masculinity in the Zimbabwean society. • A lot of courage. • The implication of these statements is that if the stranger was a woman he would not be as fearsome, but in turn he would be ‘an object of scorn and derision.’ Thus femininity is degraded in such sentiments. • This image shows a language which illuminates female qualities as evil. Thus, society identifies femininity with malevolence.

	<p>his reactions showed great fear. He says, "...my fertile imagination translated every blackness into a shadow, every flicker of movement into a knife thrust." When finally he met the Stranger the author describes his fear in clear terms where he said, "I felt a burning deafness as if hot soup had been poured into my ears and I could no longer hear, move or breathe." However the author did not want to show that he was afraid as he says, "my chief concern was to summon my will power and bring it to bear on this involuntary expression of fear." Finally he sits down with the Stranger and shares a cigarette.</p> <p>On the other hand femininity is reflected through the use of feminine imagery within the passage. In line 53 the author writes that, "the branches of the undergrowth swayed and rustled and a slightly built 'woman' appeared, dressed in black with a head shawl and a veil." He goes on to say, "some people might think that in these clothes the stranger became an object of scorn and derision." In line 73 the author describes the face of the stranger as, "the face of a she-devil..."</p>	
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3.1 Discussion of findings

There are fundamental truths about women and men which have been lost due to stereotypical attitude of societies which are reinforced within the education system as evidenced by the preference given to masculine passages in ZIMSEC Ordinary Level English Language comprehension examination. These truths have been replaced by distorted views of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. The themes that emerged from these papers exemplify the gender based stereotyping that is rife in the Zimbabwean society.

- **Celebrating maleness and male heroism**

In these passages men are stereotyped as self confident, responsible, mature, independent, resolute, powerful, aggressive, academically inquisitive, formidable and courageous. The contents of the November 2007, June 2008, November 2008, June 2009, November 2009, June 2011 and November 2012 papers reinforce such attitudes on the abilities and qualities of men. Most of the

passages present male characters in adventure. These male characters prevail against all odds to confirm the stereotypical characterisation.

- **Ignoring femaleness and female heroism**

Women on the other hand are stereotyped as wicked, passive, emotional, docile, senseless and irrational and objects of contentment for successful men. It is only in one paper (June 2010) out of the selected sample of 10 papers that women are presented as central characters who display intelligence and assertiveness. In the June 2010 paper, Mary refuses to be manipulated by James who wants her to burn his will and produce another one. Though Mary stands to benefit from the new will she refuses to be used and to act in furtherance of James's selfish motives. In the overwhelming of cases, however women are completely absent or they are presented explicitly or implicitly as subordinate to men. They are seen as people who do not seek personal success but are people who pursue successful men. This is reflected in June 2011 and November 2012 papers. Because of such stereotyping reflected in the national examination papers, the girl child might 'hear voices' even during the examination which give her, a prescribed social personality. The same 'voices' inspire the male candidate to take up the prescribed male personality from the comprehension passages.

- **Silencing the female voice and promoting their passivity**

The passivity of women in society is also reflected by the silent treatment or the ignoring of women in all the papers under discussion. The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture (2000) produced a module on gender in 2000 and the writers noted that women are considered weak, thoughtless, indecisive, subjective, irrational, and excessively emotional and have nothing to contribute to society. It is clear that the English Language comprehension passages do not give a thought to the issue of gender equity in the society.

- **Promoting negative masculinities like violence as in the June 2011 and November 2012 papers**

An overwhelming majority of comprehension passages are masculine and it is not clear whether it is by design or default. This may be due to the dominance of the male voice in all discourses and the peripheral position given to the female voice in the process of knowledge production. There are negative and harmful messages about what it means to be a man including being manipulative (November, 2009), withholding emotions (November, 2012), exerting power (June 2011), using violence (November 2012 and June 2011) and risk taking (November, 2007, November 2009, June 2011 and November 2012). It is apparent that these question papers celebrate negative constructs of masculinity.

- **Promoting language that upholds the superiority of maleness over femaleness**

In Rutoro (2012)'s doctoral thesis she found out that language is an integral part in control and domination. The philosophers Wittgenstein and Falcault in Abdullar, Abdullar and Hoon (2008) argue that the constructive power of language is the construction of social identities and the constriction power of selective labelling as the tool to preserve the status quo which cannot be

underestimated hence the need to confront the discourses in which women's identities are couched. The November 2010 passage uses the pronoun 'he' as a generic pronoun or to show the writer's stereotypical bias that farming is for men. The use of the words 'man' and 'mankind' in June 2012 comprehension passage and subsequent comprehension questions fosters an attitude of male superiority in humankind and female inferiority

- **Uplifting the male voice and inspiring them to take up the prescribed behaviour shown in the examination papers**

Through the prominence given to male characters the male voice is uplifted. The repeated prominence of the male character encourages males to take up the prescribed behaviour which is both positive and negative. At the same time it has the effect of creating low self esteem in girls as they are consistently exposed to stories of male success and domination.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Zimbabwe's Education Act of 1996 states that no child shall be denied access to education. The National Strategic Plan for the Education of Girls, Orphans and other Vulnerable Children (2005 - 2010) reported that completion rate for girls as compared to boys has declined as we move to upper secondary school. This is despite the provisions of the Education Act of 1996, Zimbabwe's constitution and other national, regional and international instruments. A lot still needs to be done in the form of educational discourses to advance the gender debate. The United Nations Development Programme (2001) shows that it is extremely important to perceive that we live in societies that are permeated by gender differences and inequalities. The dimensions of these inequalities are so deeply embedded that they are difficult to comprehend. Runhare and Gordon (2004) noted that gender insensitive school environment is one of the areas that need attention in promoting the equality of boys and girls. This includes the choice of gender sensitive examination passages and setting gender insensitive questions.

More attention should be given to female scholars to balance the male and female voices in educational materials. Female heroism should also be celebrated through passages which celebrate femininity. Chitando (2012) in Hendriks et al (2012) (eds.) shows that male scholars, interests and methodologies have been dominant. These interests have asserted themselves deeply even in educational discourse resulting in highly gendered passages and questions. The gender equity dimension should be put on the agenda in the choice of examination passages.

Question papers should question some of the more detrimental constructs of masculinity and femininity and explore alternative attitudes and actions. Question papers should be a forum for social transformation and not means of deepening inequalities. Stories should be based on character building for both males and females. Papers have to challenge the harmful constructs of masculinity and femininity and replace them with alternative models which promote gender equality.

We have to go to the drawing board and interrogate our values, our culture and more so our philosophies. We have to decisively question the issue of gender justice using a holistic approach and identify the branches and the roots that feed into the crisis. Korten (1990) in Chitando and Hadebe (eds.) (2009: 73) argues that,

the more we focus our attention directly on the symptoms, rather than on transforming the institutions and values that cause them, the more certain we can be that the crisis will deepen for lack of appropriate action.

To illustrate this point Korten (1990) in Chitando and Hadebe (eds.) (2009: 74) gave an example from Wayne Ellwood,

if you see a baby drowning, you jump in to save it; if you see a second and third, you do the same. Soon you are so busy saving drowning babies you never look up to see there is someone there throwing these babies in the river.

The essence of this illustration is that we have to address and cross examine the root cause of gender injustices which reflect in various institutions in our society. Progressive society should work towards a non-sexist society and “to eliminate the sexist language, we should above all eliminate the concept of prejudice in human beings thoughts” (Lei, 2006:8).

The researchers thus recommend that ZIMSEC should:

- delve deeper and discover voices that have and are still ignored and discarded;
- make sure that comprehension texts are forums of expanding and deepening the liberatory voices;
- play its part in ensuring that the concept of knowledge is revisited in the setting of English comprehension passages and questions and gendered perspectives must be discarded;
- include women’s experiences also within the comprehension component of ZIMSEC Ordinary Level English Language Paper 2 examinations;
- include passages that reflect both male and female heroism; and
- set questions which instil gender sensitivity within the candidates.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is evident that English Language examinations at Ordinary Level carry significant traits of sexism and gender bias. There is need for Management at ZIMSEC to ensure that item writers carefully choose examination items to promote gender balance and in adherence to international best practices.

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