

## **Contribution to Final Debate**

By

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Excellencies, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, good evening!

It is a pleasure and an honor to be invited to speak at this timely and important conference in the landscape of education worldwide. I'd like to salute IBE for its organization.

There is little one can add about the theme of this conference that has not already been discussed through and through by participants in the preceding days. One thing I would like to touch upon, however, is the gender dimension of inclusion because it has not been systematically addressed. When speaking of inclusion, we must go beyond generalities about the excluded and think of inclusion from a gender equity, equality and rights perspective. We must ask ourselves who are the excluded? What gender are they? Why are they out of education systems? We must put a face on the excluded before we can respond adequately to their education and learning needs. Most often that not, we will find that after all obstacles and factors of exclusion have been identified, girls and women will form the group that suffers the most from exclusion in the education system and in society, be it because of poverty, ethnicity, language, religion, disability and the list goes on and on.

It has been established and is commonly recognized today that gender inequality exacerbates all other forms of inequalities and exclusion. Therefore espousing a gender equity approach to inclusion is an important starting point for meaningful inclusion for ALL, regardless of the litany of compounding factors I just mentioned. I'd like to submit that adopting systematically a gender approach to inclusive education solves half of the inclusion equation. As one speaker mentioned during yesterday's plenary, the excluded have a gender too! orphans, minorities, the disadvantaged, the disabled, those living with HIV and AIDS, are men and women, boys and girls, whose gender, when interacting with other factors, determines whether they enjoy their right to a quality and empowering education or not.

Gender is an overarching element and that is why it is crucial to add a gender dimension to any discussion or approach to inclusion. The millions of girls and women who are excluded from education system worldwide, and who have no alternative to formal education face multiple forms of discrimination which are compounded and exacerbated by gender, a factor that cuts across all of them. Subscribing to inclusive education from a gender perspective shows an intention to approach education as right, and a commitment to fulfilling that right for all members of society (boys and girls, women and men).

Pointing this out is not an attempt to create a hierarchy among forms of exclusion. We simply cannot continue to act as if a wholesale, gender-blind approach to inclusion can lead to the eradication of inequalities that keep the excluded out. Inclusion from a gender perspective means that we systematically pay attention to how schools and learning systems disenfranchise the many and how schooling conditions and environments most often do not

provide girls and women, and the poor or the disabled safety and a relevant education. This has led to higher rates of drop out which signals getting the excluded in is not enough. The nature and quality (or lack thereof) of what they encounter in the system often reproduces gender inequalities found in the society at large. We must also draw lessons from the EFA process which, by considering gender equality as an afterthought, even when gender parity in enrollment was a key milestone, ended up missing on both, at least in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Meaningful inclusion is gender-fair and democratic. And these are not just abstract notions or ideals. Meaningful inclusion goes beyond the provision of special services, which tend to “ghettoize” recipients, often perceived as “beneficiaries” of charity, for something that is a fundamental right. If we really mean business by making education inclusive, we must strive to create educational environments that transform unequal gender and socio-economic relations in society at large.

Practically, meaningful inclusion would require investments in the removal of obstacles that reduce or prevent physical mobility, access to basic social services, participation in educational processes, transition to gainful employment and participation in social cultural and political life which truncate blind citizens’ life chances.

Mainstreaming gender in education is central to the full attainment of inclusion. I would even say that it is a *sine qua non* condition.

Engendering the inclusion movement as well as policies and learning processes will ensure that women and girls’ concerns are mainstreamed into education policies and are translated into all institutions of learning that are respectful and responsive to the specific needs of excluded men and women.

Thank you for your attention.