Humanistic futures of learning

Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks

UNESCO Education Sector

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation on which to build peace and drive sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education and the Education Sector provides global and regional leadership in education, strengthens national education systems and respondsto contemporary global challenges through education with a special focus on gender equality and Africa.

Education Sector

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

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Foreword

One of the missions of UNESCO as a knowledge-based organization is to act as a global think tank and a laboratory of ideas in the various domains of its mandate. In the area of education, this includes leading the global debate on the futures of education and learning.

This publication is a contribution to this role, in particular through the *Futures of Education* initiative that aims to generate an agenda for global debate and action on the futures of education, learning and knowledge in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity. Acknowledging that all voices must be heard in order to shape and transform education, the initiative is based on a broad and open process of engagement involving a range of stakeholders at global, regional and local levels.

The mobilization and contribution of the network of UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs is a key part of this process of engagement. Comprising over 800 institutions and affiliates, the global network is an essential resource for the generation and mobilization of interdisciplinary knowledge. The think pieces by over one hundred authors from 65 institutions presented in this publication were selected from the numerous submissions received in response to the call for contributions to the *Futures of Education* initiative.

Humanistic Futures of Learning: Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks presents diverse views on the aims and purposes of education, as well as on learning content and methods within increasingly complex learning systems. This publication represents the first curated input submitted to the International Commission on the *Futures of Education*, chaired by Her Excellency Ms Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The Commission is mandated to steer the debate and lead the development of a global report on the futures of education to serve as a platform for policy debate, research and action for the years to come. This is in the spirit of previous reports published at key historical junctures of societal transformation, including *Learning to Be: the world of education today and tomorrow* (1972), *Learning: The treasure within* (1996), and, more recently, *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* (2015).

A humanistic approach to education and development is the common thread that weaves together the diversity of contributions into a rich tapestry on learning. The approach is grounded in a vision of development that is economically inclusive, socially just and environmentally sustainable. A vision that acknowledges the diversity of knowledge systems, worldviews and conceptions of well-being, while reaffirming a common core of universally shared values. It is a vision that promotes an integrated approach to learning, acknowledging the multiple personal, social, civic and economic purposes of education. The collection presented in this publication provide fresh multidisciplinary insights for a re-purposing of education that inspire hope for the future as we address increasingly complex development challenges and as we strive to transform the future.

UNESCO would sincerely like to thank all those who enthusiastically responded to the call for think pieces on the futures of education. The pieces featured in this publication represent only a fraction of those submitted.

It is only by leveraging our collective intelligence that we can repurpose education and learning for alternative futures of humanity and the planet. This publication is one contribution in this direction.

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Introduction

Our planet is growing ever more fragile – with accelerated climate change making this reality increasingly apparent. Persistent inequalities, social fragmentation and political extremism have driven many societies to the brink of crisis. Although advances in digital communication, artificial intelligence and biotechnology harbour great potential, they also raise serious ethical and governance concerns – especially as promises of innovation and technological change have an uneven record of contributing positively to human prosperity. In a world defined by increasing complexity, uncertainty and precarity, we must urgently re-examine and reimagine how knowledge and learning can best contribute to the global common good.

UNESCO's *Futures of Education* initiative is generating global engagement and debate on education, learning and knowledge to inspire the multiple possible futures of humanity and of the planet. Based on the assumption that the complex challenges of today's world requires innovative solutions beyond established sectoral approaches and disciplinary boundaries, the UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks from all disciplines and scholarly fields were mobilized to contribute. The network was invited to prepare think pieces in any of the six United Nations official languages to help advance a shared vision for the future. *Humanistic Futures of Learning: Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks* presents the first curated contribution to this global debate.

This first publication is organized into five sections, each containing eight to twelve independent think pieces that address important dimensions critical to re-purposing education for the future. It calls for greater focus on the role of culture in strengthening social and environmental sustainability; the values and attitudes needed to shape future generations; the need for robust public education and alternative learning spaces; human creativity and capability in a digital era; and the role of higher education, research and innovation in generating knowledge to transform the world.

1. Culture and the environment:
Harnessing customs and knowledge for planetary survival

The think pieces in this section foresee a possible future with planetary stability enabled through the mobilization of education, diversity of knowledge, customs and culture. They posit that embedding a deep attachment to landscapes and tangible heritage instills a sense of stewardship for the world. This stems from an understanding that heritage is a manifestation of transformation and survival despite changing times. The authors suggest that the study, preservation and appreciation of diverse languages, knowledge and customs enrich our collective consciousness through an understanding of the relations between past, present and future societies. This section envisions the evolving role of education to include sustainability studies as a means of driving planetary survival. It proposes that curricula include Earth science and environment studies under the framework of humanism to help

enable learners and communities to become more cognizant of the world they inhabit and leave behind. This awareness leads to a deeper affinity to land, heritage and culture, and, ultimately, to greater environmental stability.

2. Responsible citizenship:
Cultivating a generation at peace with itself and the Earth

This section recognizes the potential of education as a socialising process to build equitable and sustainable societies. A particular emphasis is placed on the integration of philosophy, human rights, visual learning, socio-emotional competencies, media literacy and the humanities in school curricula – in particular in subject areas that focus predominantly on acquiring scientific knowledge. It also suggests that the practice of storytelling can encourage a model of hybrid thinking that takes into account local challenges and their global impacts. Interdisciplinary knowledge is introduced as key to inclusivity and social justice. The authors foresee the role of education across all levels as a means to create a shared global future through the inclusion of a visioning component in teaching and learning about societies. This approach aims to foster a future generation that is conscious of the vital need for planetary sustainability and focused on solving global challenges, including food shortage and planetary health.

3. Rethinking learning systems:
Strengthened public education and integrated learning networks

This section calls on the need to rethink learning systems. It touches on the blurring boundaries between public and private education. It also emphasizes the need to create cross-cutting digital and physical spaces that facilitate the sharing of knowledge. Such collaborative learning spaces are proposed as a means to explore math and art education while fostering collective imagination. Authors in this section call for a democratization of knowledge through greater inclusivity in and accessibility to higher education as well as to make common the use and availability of open educational resources. It is assumed that these new internationalized learning systems will cultivate a culture of responsible citizenship and equity that legitimizes different ways of knowing – particularly those that lie outside of traditional Western paradigms.

4. Science, technology and innovation:
Building the capacity to aspire in a digital era

The pieces in this section acknowledge the changing facets of teaching, learning and knowledge production in a future characterized by increasingly developed artificial intelligence technology. While many claim that artificial intelligence can play a significant role in solving the global learning crisis, they stress that its governance should incorporate the principles of humanistic learning in scientific study. The think pieces highlight new digital competencies and media literacies and call for a gender transformative approach to the digitization and utilization of AI. Higher education reform is broadly seen as a means of preparing learners to engage meaningfully in this change. There is also a call to unlock digital barriers through open educational resources to enable global online learning and facilitate education for all.

5. Knowledge and transformation:
Setting the stage for the futures of education

This section sets the stage to envision the futures of education through transforming how we view education and the role of learning institutions. The pieces touch on the transformation of universities, the benefits of fostering transdisciplinary teaching and encouraging innovation, as well as of stimulating creative imagination. The section also explores how the teachings of futures literacy can prepare learners to become more open and ready to face an unknown future. There is a call to reimagine the possibilities of vocational education and training to fulfill human needs and reach beyond industrial work and the provision of income. The pieces also highlight the importance of lifelong counselling to support people in their careers and personal endeavours so they can become constructive agents of their own reality. Finally, it calls for co-creating the future by shifting inter-generational relations, and for the revamping of higher education to account for life-long learning opportunities to change global demographic patterns, in particular the increased longevity of humans. One think piece specifically calls on UNESCO to spearhead and guide this collective imagination by encouraging knowledge democracy.

Ideas for gender-transformative futures of education in the digital age

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The authors reflect on what it would take - both in classrooms and through higher education - to transform media and information and communications technology (ICT) to be more gender-responsive.

Feminist scholarship and feminist media educators in particular have dealt with issues of inequalities, violence and exclusion – as well as their intersections – for decades. We have conducted research on the causes and consequences of gender inequalities in and through the media; developed teaching programmes and developed thematic modules to raise students' awareness of the different forms of exclusion and their repercussion on the very fabric of democratic societies; and we have contributed greatly to the articulation of the nexus between gender-unaware (and too often sexist) media operations and the different forms of gender-based violence through the use of language that silences women, degrading images that objectify them and the imposition of societal models that constrain their autonomy and potential to become fully recognized citizens.

We find ourselves well into the twenty-first century, wondering how to deal with a media environment that has been profoundly transformed, yet continues to perpetuate persistent forms of gender inequality. We are witness to a reality that presents a mix of slow progress in making the media and ICT more gender-responsive combined with new challenges to gender equality emerging from the complexities of digital developments – from digital divides and big data to artificial intelligence and machine learning.

Persisting inequalities, violence and exclusion

Have we done something wrong? Have we not adequately prepared successive generations of media professionals and media managers to work with an awareness of gender diversity? Have we not helped them see it as an opportunity to make societies more equal and inclusive, hence better able to deal with the complexities of the present? Or do the problems reside elsewhere? What enables societies across the world to remain resistant to the many efforts carried out by gender-sensitive educators who have often also engaged as active

citizens beyond classes and courses in local, national and international contexts when media systems were being designed, developed and implemented?

The question today is: what would education in the future look like if all the acquired expertise (i.e. experiences of collaborative thinking and knowledge sharing, and lessons learned through teaching and learning), particularly in higher education institutions, could be translated into reflective, responsive and transformative gender-aware approaches and models to educate a new generation of media professionals, ICT developers and global communicators? To find clues, we can look to the past. As a starting point, let's take the First World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975 and review the progress made all the way through to the Beijing World Conference in 1995, celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2020. What inspires us today in spite of the very modest progress achieved over the past four decades or so are the signs of a current crisis, which also indicates a transitional phase.

Things are happening in our classrooms. On the one hand, students are genuinely interested in how gender inequalities characterize the world and, on the other, they are mostly oblivious to the concrete realities of such inequalities. This insight is drawn from the findings from any number of studies, assessments and monitoring exercises. Students know how things should be but have little knowledge of how things actually are and are therefore unprepared to face the challenges and determine how can contribute to make change happen. However, once students are exposed to the facts – the numbers, stories and histories of gender inequalities in and through the media and ICT – they experience what we call a 'critical moment,' which constitutes a combination of surprise, disappointment, outrage and/or call for (re)action.

These epiphanies may help them to move beyond an ambivalent attitude. This stance can be defined as an acceptance of irrelevance, which can be experienced, for instance, when confronted with the well-known practice of all male panels. Epiphanies may instil the desire to become part of the solution by adopting and applying a gender lens to critically view and interpret the unequal realities around them. Essentially, these epiphanies could mark a first step towards making change happen and these transitional moments carry a huge potential for change. We could be on the verge of a paradigm shift towards learning and educational experiences that may contribute to the transformation of the personal and professional realities of gender inequality, violence against and exclusion of women. This calls for a profound rethinking of educational approaches and methods as well as a review and possible re-booting of our role as educators.

Reimagining the classroom as a space to foster change

We believe that to foster and speed up the shift, rethinking should start with the classroom. It could be a teaching-learning space for students and teachers in which we exercise critical attitudes and develop critical skills, and through this process become capable of imagining alternative futures and human relations. Students should be encouraged to be imaginative and develop new visions of gender-responsive media through the elaboration of concrete projects. The classroom should also operate as a space to consider gender as a relational concept that involves and speaks to everyone. It should serve as a space that facilitates the recognition of the intersection of inequalities and axes of power, where personal identity

also incorporates characteristics, such as sexual orientation, ethnic background, age, class and religion. Students should be invited to elaborate, reflect and write about their own experiences of intersectionality.

The classroom may also become a space that is attentive to the specific challenges of the locale while at the same time, maintaining an awareness of the linkages between that locale and the many others across the world. Students should be involved in collaborative transnational projects to explore, compare and discuss the different experiences of gendered inequality that exists. These encounters should make use of digital technologies – especially those platforms specifically designed to foster intercultural exchanges – and not simply comprise communication as a remote experience. Blended forms of learning could therefore translate into transcultural encounters and favour a direct experience of the educational power of cultural diversity to debate controversial and contested issues such as gender inequality. In such a context, teaching and learning for the media, ICT and communication professional would mean imagining a future of media making through diversity while jointly working on projects that highlight the gendered nature of language(s), the frames we use and the framing of issues. We could develop projects where issues of exclusion and inequality are addressed using a holistic approach while maintaining an awareness of the histories that have defined unequal relations and remaining attentive to the intersections of unequal power relations in society.

A holistic approach requires a host of diverse practices

Adopting and practicing a holistic approach would mean addressing the many issues that pertain to gender inequality in and through the media in syllabi content and class conversations. Such issues include unequal representation; limited access to media and decision making; gendered cultures in newsrooms and digital programming organizations; and harassment on and offline, particularly against women journalists, women who takes public positions and those who occupy roles of responsibility.

A holistic approach also implies a diverse set of learning practices combined to foster a better connection between theory and practice. This connection could help promote transformation using several knowledge sources, including acquiring an understanding of the complexities of communication realities by listening to women's and men's voices; entering into dialogue with different professional worlds and experiences; working hands-on, in mixed groups and connecting across cultures; critically reflection; and having the courage to engage in alternative thinking.

A multiplicity of practices should characterize and enrich the future of gender-aware education – theory and practice; local and transnational; listening and voicing; exploring histories and imagining alternative worlds. This would happen in classrooms imagined as dialogical settings where it would be possible to deconstruct the cultural and social sources of inequality through rigorous investigation and learning from available data. Such classrooms would be spaces for creative experimentation with alternative languages, vocabularies, images and genres – spaces enriched by international encounters where gender-aware storytelling from different geo-cultural contexts would parallel the

opportunities to learn from academic studies and research, including those conducted in other regions and cultural contexts.

Preparing our youth to assume a gender-transformative role

Creating educational settings that encourage young people to take some responsibility for changing the media through diversity implies addressing the question: who is in charge? This, in turn, requires a reconsideration of the very role of the teacher. Educators themselves would be required to perform different roles to facilitate dialogues and discover the many initiatives that, across decades, have been developed within and outside academia to deal with media-gender inequalities. They would be required to listen to emerging questions and proposals, thus supporting experimental approaches to address gendered and intersectional issues. They could also perhaps invite students to write for online platforms as well as simulate newsrooms to provoke deeper explorations and nurture critical questioning. This approach could help boost their courage to speak up in class and beyond, including engaging with media and ICT professionals in 'think sessions' where experiences can be shared. Thus, educators would learn alongside students and participate in the transformative educational experience.

Clearly, in such an educational environment, reflexivity emerges as a critical element. Assessment of learning would no longer be centred on the capacity to reproduce and replicate lecture content. Again, this would require a reconsideration of current evaluation approaches and mechanisms if we are to nurture the next generation of communication professionals to learn to question, critique and deconstruct media structures and mechanisms as well as languages and practices through a gender-aware perspective. This approach will help prepare young people to assume a gender-transformative role in society.

The challenges are broad and much thinking and experimental practice is needed to develop new models of critical education to promote gender-sensitive media and communication practices. As we begin to imagine different educational futures, we need to keep in mind the transversal relevance of gender-aware education, particularly in the field of media and ICT. Gender diversity and equal opportunities are crucial if we are to realize sustainable communication practices, processes and technologies. New ways of teaching and learning must be rooted in the many 'knowledges' that have been elaborated by women over the centuries in their different communities and contexts as responses to the multiple and intersecting forms of inequality they have experienced over time. By initiating reflections from personal experience and adopting an approach that acknowledges and values diversity in the classroom, everyone is invited to enter into a dialogue about their different skills and competences, lived experiences and stories. Such a process, in turn, is crucial to imagining something different, starting from the classroom setting. Ideally, the reimagined classroom would be a space that encourages the fundamental democratic principles of freedom of expression, pluralism and participation that are still not fully articulated from a gender perspective – all while encouraging women's empowerment. Higher education institutions play a vital role in this context as they are at the forefront of the paradigm shift to make gender equality a reality in the media and through communication in the digital age.