



GENDER JUSTICE AND THE AIMS OF EDUCATION: A FEMINIST PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

This paper critically examines what a just educational system should look like in light of gender inequalities, drawing on philosophical frameworks from feminist theory, justice theory, and educational thought. It argues that gender justice demands more than equal access to education; it requires a fundamental rethinking of the aims, practices, and structures of education itself. By engaging with thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, Martha Nussbaum, and Paulo Freire, the paper contends that a genuinely just education must confront and transform the gendered power relations embedded in social and educational institutions. It identifies the limitations of mainstream liberal theories of justice in addressing gender-based disparities and proposes a reconstructive framework in which education is oriented toward cultivating critical consciousness, relational autonomy, and agency for all learners, especially those historically marginalized by gendered norms. Methodologically, the paper employs philosophical analysis using feminist and critical frameworks to interrogate the normative dimensions of justice and education. The argument is structured in three parts: first, an exposition of key theories of gender justice; second, a critical evaluation of their application to educational contexts; and third, the development of a normative framework for reimagining education toward gender justice. The paper fills a crucial gap in philosophical discourse by offering a normative account of the educational aims that are necessary for achieving gender justice.

Keywords: Gender justice, Education, Capabilities approach, Autonomy, Feminist Theory

Introduction

Education has long been regarded as a vehicle for justice, personal development, and democratic participation. Yet, even as many societies profess commitments to gender equality, the structures, content, and practices of education continue to reflect and reinforce gender hierarchies. This paradox – that education both promises liberation and perpetuates subjugation – raises fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of educational systems. What, indeed, should be the aims of education in a world marked by entrenched gender inequality? These questions are not merely theoretical; they have profound practical implications. Globally, while more girls are enrolled in school than ever before, gender disparities persist in terms of academic outcomes, access to STEM fields, representation in leadership roles, and experiences of violence and discrimination within educational settings. Moreover, beyond statistical inequalities lies a deeper concern: that educational institutions function as sites of gendered socialization, where stereotypes are reinforced and certain forms of knowledge and expression are systematically devalued. Thus, the problem is not only one of inclusion but of transformation, of re-imagining education in ways that challenge rather than sustain structural injustices. The philosopher of education, therefore, has a critical role to play. Too often, philosophical theories of justice in education, particularly those rooted in liberal traditions, abstract from the lived realities of gendered individuals. They focus on the fair distribution of educational goods without adequately interrogating the cultural and structural dimensions of inequality. Iris Marion Young's (1990) critique of distributive models of justice reveals their inadequacy in addressing forms of oppression such as marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism, all of which are deeply gendered.

This paper takes up the challenge of envisioning a just educational system through the lens of gender justice. It argues that gender justice demands more than formal equality; it requires a normative reorientation of the aims of education itself. To this end, the paper engages with feminist theory, the capabilities approach, and critical pedagogy to articulate a framework in which education serves as a transformative force,

cultivating critical awareness, relational autonomy, and agency among all learners. In doing so, it aims to bridge a significant gap in philosophical discourse on education, namely, the insufficient attention given to gender justice as a central normative concern in articulating the purposes of education.

To ground this theoretical inquiry in the concrete sphere of education, the paper situates philosophical discussions of justice and gender within the lived practices of teaching, learning, and institutional organization. The philosophical frameworks drawn from Young, Fraser, Nussbaum, and Freire are not invoked merely for their abstract insight but for the ways they illuminate and challenge educational realities. Young's structural critique of oppression, for instance, invites an examination of how schooling reproduces gendered hierarchies through curricular silences and power-laden pedagogical relations. Fraser's theory of participatory parity translates into the need for inclusive classroom practices and decision-making structures that empower all genders to contribute meaningfully to the educational process. Nussbaum's capabilities approach redefines the aims of education as the cultivation of human flourishing—implying that schools must nurture emotional, intellectual, and social capabilities equally for girls and boys. Freire's critical pedagogy, finally, demands a dialogical education that enables learners to question and transform the oppressive gender ideologies embedded in their social contexts. In this sense, the theoretical exposition serves not as an end in itself but as a framework for reimagining the aims, content, and methods of education so that they actively promote gender justice. The paper thus moves between philosophical reflection and pedagogical implication, ensuring that abstract arguments about justice are continually tested against, and enriched by, the practical realities of educational life.

Gender and the Limits of Liberal Educational Justice

The liberal tradition in political philosophy has been a foundational influence in shaping modern educational systems. Its central commitments to individual rights, equality of opportunity, and procedural fairness have informed the

architecture of public schooling in many democratic societies. However, when it comes to gender justice, the liberal framework reveals profound limitations. While liberalism's emphasis on formal equality has facilitated important gains, such as coeducation, anti-discrimination policies, and increased access for girls and women, it has largely failed to confront the deeper, structural inequalities embedded in educational institutions and practices. The problem, as feminist theorists have pointed out, lies in liberalism's abstract and intellectualized conception of the individual. Young (1990), in her critique of the "distributive paradigm" of justice, argues that liberal theories often treat individuals as interchangeable, disembodied agents whose social positioning is irrelevant to their claims for justice. This abstraction obscures how gender, race, and class shape not only people's access to education but their experiences within it. In Young's perspective, justice must be re-conceived in terms of structural inequalities, group-based oppression, and the institutionalized power relations that reproduce them. He is thus arguing that justice should be re-conceived to focus primarily on domination and oppression rather than merely the allocation of goods. This shift requires moving the focus of normative evaluation from patterns of distribution to the structural inequalities and institutionalized power relations that generate and reproduce injustice. He writes:

... instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression. Such a shift brings out issues of decisionmaking, division of labor, and culture that bear on social justice but are often ignored in philosophical discussions. It also exhibits the importance of social group differences in structuring social relations and oppression; typically, philosophical theories of justice have operated with a social ontology that has no room for a concept of social groups. I argue that where social group differences exist and some groups

are privileged while others are oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in order to undermine oppression (Young, 1990, p. 3).

In education, this critique has powerful implications. Liberalism tends to reduce justice to issues of access and distribution, that is, who gets to attend school, who gets what resources, and how outcomes are measured. Yet such a distributive focus misses the relational and symbolic dimensions of inequality. For example, while girls may have the same legal right to attend school as boys, they often encounter curricula, pedagogues, and school cultures that marginalize their experiences, silence their voices, or subject them to sexual harassment. Liberal justice, in its narrow procedural form, lacks the conceptual tools to address such injustices.

Nancy Fraser (1997) adds an important dimension to this critique by distinguishing between two forms of injustice: maldistribution and misrecognition. Maldistribution refers to economic inequalities that limit access to resources, while misrecognition involves the devaluation of people's identities and cultural contributions. According to her, both operate on different dynamics:

In the first case, the problem is the class structure of society, which corresponds to the economic dimension of justice. In the second case, the problem is the status order, which corresponds to its cultural dimension. In modern capitalist societies, the class structure and the status order do not neatly mirror each other, although they interact causally (Fraser, 1997, p. 16)

Fraser's insight here reveals that injustice cannot be reduced to a single axis; neither the class structure of economic maldistribution nor the status order of cultural misrecognition alone suffices to explain the persistence of oppression. Instead, she points out that these two dimensions are analytically distinct but practically entangled, each shaping and reinforcing the other. For instance, women and racial minorities may be

excluded from high-paying jobs not only because of class-based exploitation, but also because of cultural devaluation that marks their contributions as inferior. Equally, their economic marginalization reinforces the stereotypes that justify their diminished status. Thus, Fraser calls for a “two-dimensional” conception of justice that simultaneously addresses both redistribution and recognition, while remaining attentive to their causal interactions.

In educational settings, both forms of injustice are deeply gendered. Girls and women often face economic barriers to education, but they also encounter curricular and institutional structures that deny them recognition as knowers, leaders, and agents. Liberalism’s emphasis on redistribution may address the former, but it tends to overlook the latter. Furthermore, liberal educational theory often privileges a model of the rational, autonomous individual as the ideal learner and citizen. This model, deeply rooted in Enlightenment thought, marginalizes other modes of being and knowing, especially those associated with care, interdependence, and emotion, which have historically been feminized and devalued. For instance, Jaggar (1989) argues that the so-called neutrality of epistemology actually functions to sustain gendered hierarchies of knowledge. As she puts it:

It functions, obviously, to bolster the epistemic authority of the currently dominant groups, composed largely of white men, and to discredit the observations and claims of the currently subordinate groups including, of course, the observations and claims of many people of color and women. The more forcefully and vehemently the latter groups express their observations and claims, the more emotional they appear and so the more easily they are discredited. The alleged epistemic authority of the dominant groups then justifies their political authority (Jaggar, 1989, p. 165).

Further, the author argues that:

The myth [of dispassionate inquiry] promotes a conception of

epistemological justification vindicating the silencing of those, especially women, who are defined culturally as the bearers of emotion and so are perceived as more ‘subjective,’ biased and irrational. In our present social context, therefore, the ideal of the dispassionate investigator is a classist, racist, and especially masculinist myth” (Jaggar, 1989, p. 165)

This obviously leads to educational contexts that treat abstract reasoning and detachment as superior, while sidelining embodied, emotional, and relational forms of knowledge. This epistemological bias reinforces gender hierarchies by treating male-associated traits as normatively superior. In practice, it leads to educational environments that reward assertiveness and abstraction while penalizing empathy, collaboration and embodied knowledge. Jaggar’s analysis of Nussbaum shows how even well-intentioned liberal projects risk silencing the very voices they claim to include. As she cautions: “Rather than recommending genuine consultation with others, this approach recommends that ‘we’ select among others’ expressed preferences in order to appropriate those that ‘we’ endorse for ‘our’ own theoretical and political purposes” (Jaggar, 2006, p. 319).

While Jaggar is right to highlight the danger of epistemic elitism, one may argue that some level of philosophical mediation is inevitable. Without criteria for filtering desires or intuitions, relativism or entrenched oppressive traditions could persist. Nussbaum’s insistence on a substantive conception of the good can therefore be read not as authoritarian, but as an attempt to prevent harmful cultural practices from being legitimized under the guise of “authentic voices.” In this sense, privileging certain epistemic traits, like rational scrutiny, may not always be hierarchical but necessary for protecting basic dignity. A more balanced position might be to integrate Jaggar’s demand for inclusivity and attentiveness to marginalized ways of knowing with Nussbaum’s concern for universal normative standards. Such an integration would recognize empathy, embodiment, and collaboration as genuine epistemic resources while maintaining

safeguards against relativism.

The problem with the liberal framework is that it also tends to resist affirmative measures that might redress structural gender imbalances, invoking the rhetoric of neutrality and meritocracy. But as Anderson (1999) contends, meritocracy itself can be a vehicle of injustice when it operates in a context of unequal starting points and embedded biases. Without attending to the social conditions that shape educational performance, liberalism risks legitimizing existing hierarchies under the guise of fairness. For example, she criticizes “starting-gate” theories, which assume that once individuals have an equal start, later inequalities are just. But such theories ignore how institutions and market structures continuously reproduce inequality. According to her:

Equality of fortune is essentially a ‘starting-gate theory’: as long as people enjoy fair shares at the start of life, it does not much concern itself with the suffering and subjection generated by people's voluntary agreements in free markets. The fact that these evils are the product of voluntary choices hardly justifies them: free choice within a set of options does not justify the set of options itself. In focusing on correcting the supposed injustices of nature, luck egalitarians have forgotten that the primary subject of justice is the institutional arrangements that generate people's opportunities over time” (Anderson, 1999, p. 309)

Here, Anderson exposes how appeals to meritocracy and choice can mask structural disadvantage. If children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive unequal investments in their talents, then the market will “reward” them less—not because of their choices, but because of biased starting conditions. She also insists that inequality should not be framed as compensation for “inferior” traits, since this demeans those at the bottom of hierarchies:

Equality of fortune makes the basis for citizens' claims on one another the fact that some are

inferior to others in the worth of their lives, talents, and personal qualities. Thus, its principles express contemptuous pity for those the state stamps as sadly inferior and uphold envy as a basis for distributing goods from the lucky to the unfortunate” (Anderson, 1999, p. 289)

From this perspective, liberal neutrality and meritocracy are inadequate because they fail to interrogate the very structures that generate unequal outcomes. By treating disadvantage as an individual deficit rather than a systemic issue, they legitimate hierarchies as “fair” results of merit.

The liberal focus on individual choice and agency often overlooks the social and institutional forces that constrain those choices. Girls may “choose” not to pursue STEM fields or leadership roles, but such choices are shaped by a lifetime of subtle and overt messages about what is appropriate, possible, or valuable for them. A justice framework that ignores these dynamics cannot be genuinely gender-sensitive. Thus, while liberal educational justice has contributed to important gains in gender equity, it remains an insufficient foundation for addressing the full complexity of gendered oppression in education. What is needed is a more robust philosophical approach – one that integrates insights from feminist theory, pays attention to structural and cultural dimensions of inequality, and redefines justice in relational and transformative terms. The next sections explore such alternatives, beginning with the capabilities approach.

The Capabilities Approach and Gendered Educational Aims

The capabilities approach, particularly as developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, offers a normative framework for addressing the aims of education in the context of gender justice. Unlike liberal egalitarian models that prioritize the distribution of resources or formal equality, the capabilities approach focuses on what individuals are actually able to do and to be. In other words, it shifts attention from inputs to real freedoms, from abstract entitlements to concrete opportunities for flourishing. For gender justice in education, this shift is pivotal.

Nussbaum's articulation of the capabilities approach centers on a list of central human capabilities that she argues should be guaranteed to every person by their political and educational institutions (Nussbaum, 2000). These include, among others, bodily integrity, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment. In educational terms, this framework insists that justice must ensure not just equal access to schooling, but the actual empowerment of all learners—especially girls and gender-nonconforming individuals—to lead lives they have reason to value.

This emphasis on functioning and agency challenges the minimalist standards of justice that are often satisfied with enrollment statistics or gender parity indices. A girl may attend school, but if she is silenced in the classroom, discouraged from pursuing science, subjected to sexual harassment, or denied a curriculum that affirms her identity and aspirations, her educational capabilities are severely constrained. The capabilities approach demands that we ask: What are girls able to learn? What opportunities for self-expression, critical thinking, and meaningful participation are available to them? Crucially, the capabilities approach accommodates pluralism without falling into relativism. It recognizes that the conditions for flourishing will differ across cultural and individual contexts, but it also maintains that some capabilities are so fundamental that no just society can ignore them. This insistence on a threshold of dignity is especially important in addressing gender inequality, where cultural justifications are often used to legitimize exclusion or oppression. Nussbaum's feminist use of the capabilities framework resists such relativism by grounding justice in the moral worth of each person and their capacity to flourish.

The educational implications of the capabilities approach are extensive. As scholars such as Walker (2006, 2012) and Unterhalter (2003, 2009) have shown, applying the capabilities framework to education shifts the evaluative focus from mere access and achievement to the *substantive freedoms* learners enjoy within and beyond the classroom. If education is to promote gender justice, it must create the conditions for learners—especially girls and gender-nonconforming individuals—to

develop the practical reasoning, critical agency, and social capabilities necessary for full participation in public and private life. This means designing curricula that affirm diverse identities, challenge gender stereotypes, and encourage reflective engagement with moral and social questions. Pedagogically, it requires dialogical, inclusive, and participatory teaching methods that enable all students to voice their perspectives and exercise autonomy in learning. Institutional policies must likewise secure bodily integrity and control over one's environment by ensuring safe, supportive, and harassment-free learning spaces. Teacher education programs, moreover, should cultivate awareness of gendered power dynamics and equip educators to nurture students' confidence, creativity, and civic responsibility. In this sense, the capabilities approach provides not only a normative justification for gender-just education but also a concrete orientation for rethinking educational aims—from the pursuit of equality in enrollment to the realization of human flourishing and dignity through education.

Engaging critically with the capabilities approach, some feminist philosophers have raised questions about its implementation and assumptions. For instance, Serene Khader (2018) warns against a form of developmentalism that may inadvertently replicate colonial logics by imposing externally defined goals on marginalized communities. She urges a "decolonial capabilities approach" that is attentive to local knowledge, collective agency, and non-Western values. This caution is particularly relevant in educational contexts, where well-meaning interventions in the name of gender justice can sometimes erase the voices and priorities of those they seek to help. Nonetheless, the strength of the capabilities approach lies in its insistence that education must be judged by its capacity to expand substantive freedoms. It allows for a more textured understanding of inequality, one that accounts not only for economic deprivation but also for social stigma, epistemic exclusion, and psychological harm. In this sense, it provides a bridge between structural analyses of power and the lived realities of learners, especially those marginalized by gender norms.

In educational terms, Khader's (2018) critique compels a rethinking of how gender-just

education is conceptualized and implemented, particularly in postcolonial and multicultural contexts. A decolonial capabilities approach calls for participatory educational practices that respect learners' cultural agency and community-based knowledge systems, rather than imposing uniform models of empowerment derived from Western liberal traditions. This implies that curriculum reform should be dialogical and context-sensitive, integrating indigenous epistemologies and gender perspectives that resonate with learners' lived experiences. Teachers, as facilitators of agency, must cultivate pedagogical humility—creating spaces where students critically engage with questions of gender, identity, and power from within their own cultural frameworks. Policy interventions inspired by the capabilities approach should therefore prioritize collaboration with local communities, ensuring that initiatives for girls' education or gender equity reflect the aspirations and values of those directly affected. In this way, the decolonial critique enriches the educational implications of the capabilities framework by insisting that gender justice in education is not achieved through the universal application of external norms, but through processes that empower learners and communities to define and pursue their own forms of flourishing.

Moreover, when looked at critically, one could see that the capabilities approach encourages educational systems to broaden their aims. Instead of viewing education solely as a preparation for employment or a means of economic mobility, the capabilities framework promotes a richer vision that includes nurturing imagination, fostering social bonds, developing practical reasoning, and cultivating respect for difference. These are not secondary outcomes; they are central to a just and inclusive educational experience. Nussbaum herself has argued for a pedagogical approach that emphasizes Socratic questioning, the arts, and critical reflection as key to developing capabilities for democratic citizenship and gender equality (Nussbaum, 2010). Such an education resists rote learning, authoritarian discipline, and market-driven metrics of success. It instead prioritizes agency, creativity, and ethical engagement—all of which are crucial for gender justice.

The capabilities approach offers a robust

normative basis for rethinking educational aims in light of gender inequality. It redirects our focus from surface-level metrics to deeper questions of agency, dignity, and empowerment. While not without its tensions and limitations, it provides a framework that is both ethically grounded and pragmatically flexible, capable of guiding educational theory and practice toward greater justice for all genders.

Education as a Site of Gendered Socialization

Education is never a neutral endeavor. Despite the common assumption that schools are spaces of equal opportunity and objective knowledge transmission, critical feminist theorists have long demonstrated that educational institutions function as sites of social reproduction, that is, places where prevailing gender norms are learned, internalized, and perpetuated. This realization shifts the philosophical question of education away from mere access toward the deeper issue of what kind of identities, values, and social relations education fosters. From early childhood classrooms to university lecture halls, gendered expectations are embedded in the hidden curriculum, the unwritten rules, routines, and social cues that govern school life. Peggy McIntosh (1983) was among the early scholars to show how subtle daily practices reinforce gendered hierarchies, from seating arrangements to classroom management strategies that unconsciously privilege boys' assertiveness over girls' collaborative behavior. In the same vein, Dale Spender (1982) argues that boys often receive more attention and affirmation in the classroom, while girls' contributions are undervalued or ignored. These micro-level dynamics accumulate over time, shaping students' sense of self-worth, confidence, and belonging.

This observation aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the internalized dispositions shaped by social structures, which explains how students learn gendered expectations not simply through instruction but through participation in a gendered educational environment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Through language, discipline, teacher expectations, and peer interactions, learners come to embody what is expected of them based on their

perceived gender roles. This embodied learning reinforces the division between public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres, a division that continues to structure both curricular content and extracurricular activities. Moreover, curricular choices themselves are far from gender-neutral. The traditional curriculum often centers male-authored texts, male historical figures, and masculine-coded disciplines such as mathematics and the sciences. Subjects associated with care, emotion, and aesthetics, often feminized domains, are relegated to the margins. As Jane Roland Martin (1994) observes, this exclusion of “the other half of the curriculum” reflects a broader devaluation of women’s experiences, perspectives, and epistemologies. Martin’s critique is not merely about representation but about the philosophical underpinnings of what counts as knowledge and who is authorized to produce it.

Feminist pedagogy responds to these concerns by challenging the hierarchical and androcentric structures of traditional education. Bell Hooks (1994), in her influential work *Teaching to Transgress*, calls for an engaged pedagogy, one that centers student voice, fosters mutual respect, and encourages critical reflection on power and identity. For Hooks, the classroom is not just a space of intellectual exchange but a site of liberation where dominant norms can be interrogated and transformed. Similarly, Paulo Freire’s (1970) notion of “conscientization” or critical consciousness resonates deeply with feminist goals, as it emphasizes learners’ capacity to perceive and act upon social injustice. Importantly, gendered socialization in schools is not limited to girls’ exclusion; it also constrains boys and non-binary students by imposing narrow models of masculinity and femininity. Boys are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability or emotional complexity, while non-binary or gender nonconforming students may face invisibility, discrimination, or outright hostility. Thus, gendered education is not a binary problem but a systemic one, embedded in the very logic of how identities are constructed and regulated within educational systems.

Beyond curriculum and classroom interaction, institutional policies also play a critical role in reinforcing gender norms. School dress codes, for instance, often impose stricter

regulations on girls’ clothing, implicitly sexualizing their bodies and holding them responsible for others’ behavior. Similarly, the under-representation of women and gender minorities in school leadership positions signals to students that authority and expertise are masculine traits. These institutional practices not only shape student behavior but also send powerful messages about who belongs and who leads. A gender-just educational system must, therefore, go beyond equal access and representation. It must dismantle the hidden curriculum, challenge epistemic exclusions, and create inclusive spaces where diverse gender identities and expressions are not only acknowledged but affirmed. This involves a re-imagining of teacher training, curriculum design, assessment practices, and school governance. Such transformation cannot be achieved through piecemeal reforms or tokenistic inclusion. Rather, it demands a philosophical reorientation of education as a project of social justice, one that sees students not merely as future workers or citizens, but as embodied, relational, and moral beings with the capacity to challenge and reshape the world they inhabit. In this sense, education becomes not only a means of social mobility but also a space of ethical and political formation. A gender-just education must teach students how to recognize injustice, how to name it, and how to resist it, not in abstraction, but within the context of their everyday lives and relationships. This pedagogical commitment requires courage, reflexivity, and an unwavering belief in the transformative power of learning.

The Nigerian educational system vividly reflects many of these dynamics of gendered socialization. Despite policy frameworks such as the *National Policy on Gender in Basic Education* (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007) and increasing female enrolment in schools, the lived experiences of students reveal persistent gender asymmetries. Research by Aina (2013) and Okeke, Nzewi, and Njoku (2008) shows that classroom interactions in Nigerian schools often privilege boys through teacher attention, questioning patterns, and disciplinary practices, while girls are socialized toward docility and compliance. This mirrors McIntosh’s (1983) and Spender’s (1982) earlier observations, suggesting that the hidden curriculum operates with striking

similarity across cultural contexts. Moreover, subjects such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics remain coded as masculine domains, with female participation constrained by both overt and implicit gender biases (Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2009). At the tertiary level, institutional cultures often perpetuate androcentric norms through gendered expectations of leadership, mentorship, and career progression.

Dress codes and behavioral expectations within Nigerian schools further reinforce gendered moral codes. Girls are often subjected to stricter dress regulations under the guise of modesty, echoing global patterns of regulating the female body in educational spaces (Akinbi, 2015). These practices send implicit messages about femininity, respectability, and responsibility, while simultaneously absolving boys of accountability for misconduct. The underrepresentation of women in school leadership—whether as principals, vice-chancellors, or policy-makers—further entrenches symbolic hierarchies that equate authority with masculinity (Olojede, 2011). As Omolara (2019) argues, gender inequality in Nigerian education is sustained not only by socio-economic barriers but by deep-seated cultural narratives that define intellectual authority, moral virtue, and leadership through a patriarchal lens.

Critically, feminist educators and scholars in Nigeria have begun to challenge these epistemic exclusions by advocating for curriculum reform and gender-sensitive pedagogy. For instance, Oladipo and Babatunde (2017) propose the integration of indigenous feminist perspectives—such as womanism and motherism—into teacher education programs to foster inclusive, relational, and contextually relevant forms of gender justice. Such initiatives resonate with Hooks's (1994) call for engaged pedagogy and Freire's (1970) vision of education as conscientization. In this context, gender justice in Nigerian education must go beyond access to interrogate the cultural scripts that shape gender identities and expectations within classrooms, policies, and educational discourse. Addressing these embedded inequities requires a critical reimagination of schooling as a site of ethical and political transformation—one that empowers both educators and learners to challenge gendered

power relations within their own socio-cultural realities.

Rethinking Autonomy and Relationality

The concept of autonomy has long held pride of place in liberal educational philosophy. It is celebrated as the hallmark of moral maturity, the foundation of democratic citizenship, and the ultimate aim of personal development. However, feminist philosophers have persistently challenged the dominant conception of autonomy as individual independence, arguing that it reflects a masculinist ideal that marginalizes the lived realities of interdependence, care, and relationality (Nedelsky, 1989; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). In mainstream liberal thought, autonomy is often construed as the capacity for self-governance, the ability to reason independently, make informed choices, and act without external coercion. This model, inherited from Enlightenment rationalism, privileges traits such as detachment, self-sufficiency, and rational deliberation. While these are valuable qualities, their dominance in educational theory creates a distorted view of human development, one that ignores the essential role of relationships, emotions, and social embeddedness.

Feminist critiques have powerfully revealed how this atomistic model of autonomy is both normatively inadequate and descriptively inaccurate. Jennifer Nedelsky (1989) argues for a relational conception of autonomy, emphasizing that individuals are not isolated rational agents but beings whose capacities are shaped by their relationships, social contexts, and histories. Autonomy, in this view, is not the absence of dependence but the ability to navigate interdependence in ways that support one's agency and dignity. In educational settings, the implications of this re-conceptualization are profound. A gender-just education must reject the false dichotomy between autonomy and relationship and instead foster what Carol Gilligan (1982) called an "ethic of care." Gilligan's work, particularly in contrast to Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, highlights that moral reasoning based on care, responsibility, and context is not inferior to reasoning based on rules and justice, it is simply different, and equally valid. Yet educational institutions often privilege the latter,

subtly devaluing the moral voices of many girls and marginalized students.

This devaluation is not merely psychological; it is political and epistemic. Nel Noddings (2002), a leading proponent of care ethics in education, contends that educational institutions should be organized around the principle of caring. She argues that students learn best when they feel known, respected, and cared for, and that the cultivation of empathy, attentiveness, and responsiveness should be central educational aims. In a gender-just education, such aims would not be seen as soft supplements to academic rigor, but as integral to human development and social justice.

Moreover, the relational conception of autonomy opens space for rethinking power and authority in educational relationships. Traditional models of education often cast teachers as authoritative transmitters of knowledge and students as passive recipients. Feminist pedagogues, including bell Hooks (1994), reject this hierarchy in favor of a dialogical model where authority is shared and learning is co-constructed. In such classrooms, students are not only encouraged to think critically but are also invited to speak from their own experiences, challenging dominant narratives and validating alternative ways of knowing.

This rethinking of autonomy also has significant implications for how we approach gender in educational practices. A relational understanding of autonomy emphasizes the importance of nurturing agency within supportive communities. It helps us see that girls' and boys' developmental trajectories are shaped by relational networks that must be critically examined and ethically nurtured. When autonomy is equated with separation and control, girls who value connection are seen as lacking independence, and boys who express care are deemed weak. A gender-just education must dismantle these binaries and support all students in developing a sense of self that is both autonomous and connected.

Additionally, relational autonomy underscores the importance of listening and responsiveness in teaching. Teachers who practice relational pedagogies attend to the individual needs, aspirations, and contexts of their students. They recognize that students bring

diverse backgrounds, cultural resources, and gendered experiences into the classroom, and they adapt their pedagogy accordingly. This attentiveness is not a concession but a condition for justice that ensures that the educational experience is meaningful and empowering for all learners.

Let it be quickly noted that the relational turn in autonomy invites us to question the broader purposes of education. If the goal is not simply to produce autonomous individuals in the liberal sense but to cultivate socially responsive, ethically engaged, and relationally grounded persons, then educational aims must be redefined. Such a shift would entail moving away from narrowly defined academic achievement toward more holistic indicators of human flourishing—indicators that include emotional intelligence, capacity for care, civic engagement, and critical self-reflection.

In sum, rethinking autonomy through a feminist and relational lens redefines the fundamental aims of education. It challenges the liberal ideal of the self-sufficient learner and replaces it with a vision of education that cultivates both agency and connectedness. Education, in this view, is not merely about fostering independent reasoning or preparing individuals for competitive participation in society; it is about nurturing the capacities for empathy, dialogue, and ethical responsiveness that make democratic and caring communities possible. The aim of education, therefore, must include the development of relational autonomy, an autonomy sustained through care, respect, and mutual recognition. Such a framework positions education as a moral and transformative enterprise: one that prepares learners to act with critical awareness, to engage justly with others, and to build relationships that affirm the dignity and interdependence of all persons. In this way, the feminist re-conceptualization of autonomy enriches educational philosophy by aligning the pursuit of knowledge with the cultivation of human flourishing and social justice.

Toward a Reconstructive Framework for Gender-Just Education

The preceding discussions have made clear that a genuinely just educational system must do more than ensure equal access and distribute resources

equitably. It must interrogate and transform the deeper epistemological, structural, and relational dimensions of education that reproduce gender hierarchies. In this final analytic section, I propose a reconstructive framework for gender-just education—a framework that moves beyond critique toward normatively grounded, philosophically coherent, and practically transformative educational aims. To reconstruct education in the light of gender justice, we must start by re-imagining its fundamental purpose. Education cannot be understood merely as preparation for the labor market or as a mechanism for individual advancement. Rather, it should be seen as a moral and political enterprise, a space in which learners are equipped to participate meaningfully and ethically in shared social life. This vision of education is inherently relational, deeply democratic, and committed to the flourishing of all, especially those historically marginalized by systems of gender oppression. A gender-just education must be anchored in five interrelated aims: critical consciousness, epistemic justice, relational autonomy, transformative participation, and embodied learning. These aims are not only philosophically robust but also responsive to the complexities of gendered experience in educational contexts.

1. *Critical Consciousness*

Following Freire (1970), education must cultivate learners' ability to critically interrogate the norms, values, and structures that shape their world. This means fostering not only analytical skills but also emotional intelligence, ethical judgment, and a sense of historical and social awareness. In the context of gender justice, critical consciousness involves helping students recognize how gender norms are constructed, how they intersect with race, class, sexuality, and disability, and how they can be challenged and reimagined. Such awareness is not a given; it must be deliberately cultivated through curricula that center marginalized voices and pedagogies that invite critical dialogue.

2. *Epistemic Justice*

Education must also be committed to epistemic justice—the fair distribution of epistemic resources and the recognition of diverse ways of knowing (Fricker, 2007). This requires

challenging the masculinist bias embedded in dominant epistemologies and valuing knowledge grounded in lived experience, affective insight, and embodied understanding. A gender-just curriculum would elevate texts by women, queer scholars, Indigenous thinkers, and others whose knowledge has historically been excluded or devalued. It would also train students to critically examine whose knowledge is validated, who gets to speak, and whose experiences are taken seriously in academic discourse.

3. *Relational Autonomy*

As previously argued, autonomy should be understood not as independence but as the capacity for self-authorship within supportive relationships. A gender-just education fosters this kind of autonomy by creating learning environments where students feel safe, valued, and connected. This requires pedagogical practices that are inclusive, dialogical, and responsive to students' diverse needs. Teachers must be trained not just in content delivery, but in relational ethics—how to care, how to listen, and how to model mutual respect.

4. *Transformative Participation*

Education must prepare students not only to navigate existing institutions but to transform them. Gender justice demands more than access to the status quo; it requires the reimagining of social arrangements in ways that promote equity and dignity. Schools should thus be sites of participatory democracy where students learn to deliberate, organize, and advocate for change. This means incorporating civic education, community engagement, and activist pedagogy into the core of the curriculum. As Iris Marion Young (2000) argues, justice is not merely a matter of distribution but of voice, recognition, and political inclusion.

5. *Embodied Learning*

Finally, a gender-just education must take seriously the role of the body in learning. This means recognizing that learning is not a purely cognitive process, but one that is also physical, emotional, and affective. Gendered bodies experience schools differently—some feel safe and affirmed; others experience surveillance, control, and violence. Educational practices must

address these realities through policies that affirm gender diversity, promote bodily autonomy, and challenge objectification and shame. Embodied learning also includes the validation of non-verbal, artistic, and performative forms of expression, which often hold particular resonance for marginalized groups.

It is pertinent to note that these five aims are not exhaustive, but they provide a coherent normative scaffold for re-imagining education as a site of gender justice. They call for radical shifts not only in what we teach but in how we teach, whom we listen to, and what we count as valuable learning. They challenge educators, philosophers, and policymakers to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and toward deep structural transformation.

Implementing such a framework will require more than isolated reforms; it calls for systemic change across curricula, pedagogy, assessment, teacher training, school governance, and policy-making. It also requires ongoing critical reflection and responsiveness to the evolving understandings of gender and justice. Education, as Maxine Greene (1988) reminds us, must be animated by a sense of the possible—a commitment to what might be, rather than resignation to what is. A gender-just education is not a Utopian fantasy; it is a moral imperative and a political necessity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that any attempt to define and pursue the aims of education without reckoning with the realities of gender injustice is incomplete, if not complicit in the perpetuation of inequality. Gender is not a peripheral concern to educational philosophy—it is central to the very structure of how knowledge is produced, shared, and embodied in our schools and societies. By engaging critically with liberal theories of justice, integrating the capabilities approach, and drawing insights from feminist epistemology and pedagogy, we have charted a path toward a more just and inclusive vision of education. Education, we have seen, is not simply a neutral good to be distributed equally among individuals; it is a complex process that shapes identities, norms, and possibilities. As such, it is a site of both social reproduction and social transformation. The challenge—and indeed, the

moral obligation—is to ensure that education functions as a force for liberation rather than domination, for inclusion rather than exclusion.

This inquiry has called into question the adequacy of traditional liberal educational aims, which often privilege individualism, rational autonomy, and a narrowly defined meritocracy. In their place, we have proposed a reconstructive framework grounded in critical consciousness, epistemic justice, relational autonomy, transformative participation, and embodied learning. These aims are not abstract ideals; they are philosophical commitments that speak directly to the lived experiences of gendered subjects in education. Importantly, gender justice in education is not a static achievement but an ongoing struggle. It requires vigilance, critical reflection, and collective action. As educators, scholars, and citizens, we must continually ask: Whose voices are heard? Whose bodies are safe? Whose knowledge is valued? And who gets to imagine the future? Ultimately, the pursuit of gender-just education is not merely about reforming systems—it is about re-envisioning the world we want to live in. It is about nurturing generations of learners who are not only informed but also empowered to challenge injustice, to care deeply, and to participate meaningfully in shaping a more equitable and humane society. In this light, education becomes not only a matter of justice but also an act of hope.

The philosophical insights developed in this paper carry urgent implications for educational policy and curriculum reform. To translate the pursuit of gender justice into practice, education policy in Nigeria and beyond must institutionalize gender mainstreaming, not as an administrative checkbox, but as a guiding ethical principle shaping curriculum design, teacher education, assessment, and governance. Curriculum reform should move beyond token representation to integrate feminist and decolonial perspectives that affirm diverse experiences, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote critical engagement with issues of power, care, and justice. Teacher education programs must be restructured to cultivate gender sensitivity, relational pedagogy, and reflective practice, equipping educators to recognize and disrupt gendered dynamics in classrooms and institutions. Moreover, policies must ensure safe, inclusive, and participatory

learning environments through mechanisms that address sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and structural exclusion. At the institutional level, the promotion of women and gender minorities into leadership roles should be seen as a moral and developmental imperative, not merely a matter of equity. In this way, the normative commitments outlined in this inquiry, that is, critical consciousness, relational autonomy, and transformative participation, find their realization in concrete educational structures that empower all learners. Only when theory informs practice, and when policy embodies justice, can education truly become the transformative force it is meant to be.

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