

# INCREASING ACCESS AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: GENDER ISSUES

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## **1. Introduction**

The paper attempts a review of gender issues in higher education. It starts with an exposition of previous undertakings on gender issues in general in order to contextualise gender equity in higher education within global positions. The next part deals with gender issues in higher education by outlining past and current effort to attain gender equity. Observations on the challenges or future action are advanced and a case for more concerted action made as a conclusion. Due to limit time in the preparation of the paper, however, experiences are drawn mostly from the Tanzanian context.

## **2. Gender Issues in General**

A discussion of gender equity in higher education today ought to be contextualised within past and existing global efforts toward creating a more gender balanced world. Education, at any level, cannot be isolated from the socio-economic context that has created the gender imbalances and the consequential underdevelopment in most parts of the world. It is necessary therefore, to pay attention to the global trends and expositions on gender issues in general in order to derive a meaningful perspective of gender equity in education.

Recognition is required of the serious and committed efforts by individual, non-governmental and governmental organizations and their success in pushing gender issues closer to the centre of the global development agenda. The United Nations has taken a leading role especially through its four World Conferences on Women (Mexico: 1975, Nairobi: 1985, Copenhagen: 1990 and Beijing: 1995) and the numerous other meetings and programmes through its various agencies. A host of other national, regional and global meetings, studies and programmes have proved beyond any doubt the centrality of gender issues to development. Indeed, by 1990 most major global attempts to address development have had no choice but to also focus on gender issues (Rio: 1992, Vienna: 1993, Cairo: 1994, Copenhagen: 1995).

The undisputable fact emerging from all these efforts is the fact that the world is characterized by gender imbalances in all facets of life, including education. The United Nations The Worlds Women: Trends and Statistics (1991, 1995) provides comprehensive data and analysis of these imbalances in a wide spectrum of life including work, power and influence, education and training, health and population. Numerous other documents and publications have been produced over the last two decades exposing in detail the gender disparities in various aspects. For example, in their annotated bibliographies of gender studies in Tanzania, Mascarenhas and Mbilinyi: 1993 and Mukangara: 1996 list over 1,200 studies, over 100 of which are on education.

## **3. Gender issues and Education in General**

Due to its centrality to human development, education has featured significantly in the above mentioned efforts. Not only has education been a major agenda especially in the global conferences, a significant number of major conferences on education have been held nationally, regionally and globally with a focus on gender. (Jomtien: 1990, Ouagadougou: 1993, Dakar: 1994, Seoul: 1995, Kampala: 1996). Comprehensive plans of action have emerged out of these conferences outlining what needs to be done to address the gender imbalances in education. These include The Jomtien Framework for Action to meet basic learning needs (1990), The Ougadougou Declaration and Framework for action (1993), The Education of Girls and women - Towards a global platform for Action: 1994, The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and The Kampala Declaration and Framework for Action (1996). In addition, at the 1995 Beijing UN Fourth world women conference every participating country submitted a country report outlining commitments and actions towards improving the situation of women in all areas, including education.

In brief, commitment from these efforts targets expansion of access to education at all levels, improvement of the quality of education for girls and women, removal of the various obstacles hampering girls and women participation in education, elimination of gender stereotyping in education, improvement of

performance levels for girls, retention, improvement of the learning environment, introduction of alternative approaches to education and provision of safety and security of girls in and out of school.

#### **4. Gender issues in Higher Education**

Similarly, considerable attention has been directed at higher education. Institutions of higher learning, especially Universities, have played a leading role in exposing gender imbalances in general. Most of the research or gender sensitization activities have had large inputs from Universities. Indeed, programmes to correct gender imbalances at primary and secondary levels have often been initiated by higher education institutions. But the studies have also focused on the gender disparities in higher education systems including enrollment, academic performance, recruitment, staff training, promotion and social relations. (UNESCO: 1993, Moshia: 1990, Mbilinyi et al: 1990, Koda: 1992 Karegero: 1992, UDSM: 1996).

Major findings have shown problems similar to those at the lower levels. Indeed, in areas like access the problem is even bigger in higher education where the percentages are much lower than at primary or secondary levels. In Tanzania for example enrollment of girls compared to boys is almost 50% at standard one and 17% at higher education. (Ministry of Education: 1995). In Sub-Saharan Africa the average female enrollment in higher education is only 30% as compared to 68% at secondary school (UN 1995). Poor academic performance, concentration in non-science and technological disciplines, sexual harassment, discrimination in staff recruitment, training and promotion, gender-blind curricula, gender unfriendly environment are some of the issues that have been raised in most gender studies on higher education institutions.

It is clear from the above information that a lot of work has already gone into exposing gender disparities in education, including higher education, as well as into analysis and formulation of plans of action. It is not the intention of this paper to re-invent the wheel. Instead, we wish to echo the sentiments of many recent meetings and the spirit of the Beijing Fourth UN women Conference on the need to move beyond theoretical discussions and complaints to more concrete action. Concern has been raised that the commendable work of the past two decades at exposing gender imbalances has not been matched by adequate action. The entry into the 21st century should, therefore, see more action than words. This explains the action plans that have emerged out of the more recent conferences, as mentioned earlier.

Considerable action towards gender equity is discernible at higher education. Examples abound of various programmes towards expansion of access to higher education, improving performance, gender sensitization and elimination of various forms of gender discrimination.

For example, in order to increase access to higher education the Universities of Makerere in Uganda and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania adopted affirmative action. At the University of Dar es Salaam, female candidates are admitted at up to 1.5 points lower than male candidates but not lower than the University entry points. As a result the enrollment percentage rose from 17% in 1995/96 to 29% in 1996/97. Makerere's girls enrollment percentage is now about 30% after several years of similar admission approach.

Gender studies have also been introduced in such forms as the Women Studies Centre at Makerere University or the Gender studies Institute at the Cape Town University in South Africa. In other cases specific courses on gender have been introduced or a gender perspective adopted in the mainstream curricula. At the University of Dar es Salaam for example gender studies courses have been introduced in the Institute of Development Studies and Sociology while a gender perspective has been adopted from some courses in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences, Law and Education, and the college of Lands and Architectural Studies. The Institute of Finance Management and the Sokoine University of Agriculture also have a few courses with a gender perspective (UDSM: 1996).

Such studies have assisted the articulation of gender issues and the raising of awareness on gender for both staff and students.

To increase access and encourage excellent performance, scholarships awards and prizes have been introduced through various schemes. The Directorate of post graduate, studies of the University of Dar es Salaam offers graduate scholarships for female candidates which has benefited over fifty women in the last four years. Similarly the Gender Management Committee of the same University has sponsored female academic staff for Ph.D. training.

Activists groups on higher education institution campuses have played an active role to keep gender on the academic and social agenda. They have organized seminars, workshops, support groups to sensitize the communities and often to combat gender related problems like sexual harassment. The University of Dar es Salaam has quite a number of such groups including the Institute of Development Studies Women Studies Group (IDSWSG), Women Research and Documentation Project (WRDP), Women in Education (WED), Tanzania Women in Science and Technology (TAWOSTE) and The Gender Management Committee (GMC). In 1994 the University of Dar es Salaam formally established The Gender Dimension Task Force to operationalise the gender balance articulated in its Corporate Strategic Plan (1994).

The Association of African Universities (AAU) and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) both of which involve University Vice Chancellors, have adopted strategies and recommendations for addressing gender issues in African Universities. The AAU has even adopted a system of gender studies chairs.

The list of pro gender-balance activities may not be exhausted here. The point for noting is the fact that more attention is now directed at addressing gender issues in higher education than twenty years ago. Credit goes to local, regional and international activists and pressure groups as well as the realization that higher education must not miss the gender equity boat if it has to effectively fulfill its mission. We realize however, that at times pressure had to come from donors of higher education who put gender as a string to funding. It is also no secret that a lot of the research on gender was done because that is where the donor funds were.

## **5. Challenges into the 21st Century**

All these activities, however, are just a scratch on the surface of what needs to be done to attain gender equity. A review of the existing resolutions, frameworks and plans of action show that a lot more action is required. There is no debate that gender imbalances are still very much in place. Africa will enter the 21st century with gender inequity still on the top of the agenda. In some cases, the gender gaps are widening and discrimination or intimidation gaining more ground. Despite the two decade long gender sensitization efforts, for example, sexual harassment on University campuses seem to be on the increase. Concern is also raised as to why adequate and appropriate action is not taken to eradicate gender imbalances inspite of the awareness on what the problems are and what action is required.

Different explanations have been advanced to explain this inaction including gender insensitivity, especially among the male dominated leadership, lack of commitment or interest, unavailability of funds, among others. Again numerous studies exist to explain this factor. We however, wish to contribute to this area by advancing some observations on what other factors impede action or are likely to impede or frustrate action towards gender equity in the future. The reference for the observations will, however, be restricted to the Tanzania experience even though we believe the situation may be similar to other countries in the region.

Tanzania, like most African countries is experiencing serious socio-economic crisis that have persisted for over a decade. These crises have greatly eroded the fabric of the Tanzanian society and created an environment unconducive to human development. A number of developments have emerged out of these crises which have or will negatively impact on education as a whole and on girls and women education in particular.

The Tanzanian economy has been characterized by falling production, high inflation, unemployment, growing foreign debt, donor dependency and increased control by foreign global forces especially the IMF and World Bank. The majority have been pushed to abject poverty with little hope in sight for better times. This failing economy has created other situations that have and will impact negatively on education.

The near collapse of the economy threw the country into chaos resulting into a loss of direction. A host of external forces came to salvage the situation but with conditionalities that eventually shifted the control of the Tanzanian economy into the hands of external forces. Meanwhile internal forces created survival mechanisms that replaced national interests with those of the individual. The nation lost its vision and with it the ability to direct its development towards the welfare of the majority of its people. Without a national vision for example it was easy for the country to abandon the Social Sector to its own fate when the external forces declared that education was not important to development.

This process of underdevelopment has led to a near collapse of the education system at all level. The underfunding of education of the 1990's (9.1% of total budget) has seriously affected the quality of education. It is difficult to enhance quality in teaching, research or training without adequate funding. The physical academic environment is not conducive to learning, staff who are poorly **remunerated have either**

left for greener pastures or are committing a large part of their work time to non-academic activities for survival, poorly funded students resort to frequent class boycotts, student academic performance is impaired leading to half cooked graduates.

The challenges in salvaging the education system at all levels are staggering. Yet the economy has not yet improved. Infact, one wonders whether it is not getting worse even though the economic experts continue the praise-singing for the IMF/World Bank determined structural adjustments. The big concern is whether gender issues have any chance of getting attention in the face of all these problems. Will gender issues be accorded a meaningful place in this overcrowded agenda? What chances do activities intended to bring gender equity have to be allocated funds in competition with acquisition of books, laboratory equipment or increase in staff remuneration?

The long battle to gain recognition of the necessity for gender equity and people willingness to take action is and will continue to be frustrated by the lack of resources. It is necessary to note here also that at the Beijing Conference one of the major battles was on the developed countries reluctance to commit additional funds to gender related activities in the developing countries. So the past generous donor funding for gender programme could see a reduction of funds in the future.

Cost-sharing and community participation in the provision of education at all levels has been adopted as a policy to overcome the government funding shortfalls and to create a new culture of non-dependency on the government. Indeed, examples abound of communities which have successfully run schools. Signs are already there of the ability of individuals, communities, organizations to run private schools, colleges and Universities. In Tanzania, there are three private Universities in the offing for 1997. More than half of the Secondary Schools in the country are privately owned and the last year has seen a mushrooming of private primary and pre-primary schools in urban areas although the issue of quality is yet to be established.

While these are good signs, over enthusiasm on the ability of the community to take over a large part or the full cost of education would be unrealistic. It is already clear that cost sharing is affecting access to education of children from poor families. For Tanzanian rural area there is also considerable apathy towards community projects arising out of past experiences of mismanagement of many such projects by village leadership. For example, there are many cases where people made contribution to build, rehabilitate or expand primary schools but the funds were misappropriated and no action was taken against the culprits. As a result people are not willing to contribute again. This explains the dilapidated school building across the country even in economically capable areas. Time will be required to regain people's trust in self-help community schemes. Within such a context greater mobilization efforts will be required to marshal community participation in activities to correct the gender imbalances in education.

The effect of cost-sharing on gender is that it poses a danger of more girls from poor families not getting access to education, as compared to boys. With the cultural attitudes that put more value on the boy than the girl-child still prevailing, limited resources will lead to the choice of the boy being sent to school rather than the girl (Katunzi & Suleiman: 1991). The successes gained in increasing access of girls to education will be significantly undermined by the cost sharing policy. It is for this reason that a World Bank support programme is financing girls secondary education in some

valued and remunerated careers, the Faculty of Education of the University of Dar es Salaam embarked on the Project to strengthen girls education in Science and Mathematics (Galabawa: 1996). The Mathematics Department in collaboration with the Mathematics Association of Tanzania and FAWE also have several projects to promote mathematics for girls. The Department also has two scholarships for female University applicants with the best performance in Mathematics. The Faculty of Science is introducing in 1997 a crush programme for form VI leavers to upgrade their A-level science grades in order to qualify for University entry.

These efforts, however, will not achieve much if they are not matched with serious action to improve the teaching of the sciences at the lower levels. The sciences should not be handled in isolation to the overall condition of the education system. In fact not only has the neglect of the education system affected all the academic disciplines at primary and secondary levels, it has also eroded the self confidence and creativity of the students and is now producing rote-learners whose academic outlook is not anchored on the search for knowledge critical thinking or creativity. Students, both male and female enter the University not only with marginal grades but with little skills or motivation for critical thinking or the search for knowledge and truth.

This situation deals a double blow to girls who are normally raised in an environment that deliberately suppresses their self-confidence and for whom education is supposed to be a process of empowerment. The poor academic environment, the apathetic teachers, the financial deprivation have significantly

and other forms of cultural degeneracy which are negatively affecting the academic performance of girls in higher education. The matter gains more significance considering that the numbers of girls in higher education are already very low.

Institutions of higher education should be interested in addressing issues of sexual harassment not only to improve the performance of girls but also the institutions' own image locally and internationally. The University of Dar es Salaam has, for example, gone through several crises where international student exchange programme have threatened to withdraw their students fearing for the safety of their female students. Similarly the image of the University's Engineering Faculty which is said to be academically the best in the region, is threatened by the behaviour of its students who have taken a leading role in sexual harassment. Indeed, the assessment of the academic excellency of a faculty cannot ignore the social environment for both its students and staff.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we wish to state that it is clear that gender equity, in all its facets, has not yet been attained in the education sector at all levels. The problems have been adequately articulated over two decades of serious studies and discussion. Plans of action have been advanced charting out clearly what needs to be done. Action taken so far is far from adequate. It is undisputable that concerted action is required but unless that action is contextualised within the forces of the socio-economic crises Africa is facing, gender equity in higher education may be a long way off. But it is our belief that it can be done and it should be done. And in the words of the Secretary General of the 4th UN Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, Ambassador Getrude Mongela, "The Revolution has begun, there is no going back." As far as gender equity in higher education is concerned, there will be no sitting down during the 21st century.

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