

Gender and Access in Commonwealth Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper is based on data from an international research project entitled 'Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education'. This project- funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York -is examining interventions for gender equity in relation to access, staff development and curriculum transformation in Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and South Africa.

The project has, so far, utilised three major sources of data collection. Firstly, it has explored the nature of writing on gendered change in higher education institutions and has analysed some of the issues that have emerged from scholarship and practice relating to women as students and staff in higher education in the Commonwealth (Morley et al., 2005; Morley, 2005). Secondly, key policy texts relating to gender equity - at national, organisational and international level -have been analysed. Thirdly, interview data have been collected from a sample size of two hundred including students, academic staff, managers and policy-makers in the five countries. This paper will focus on issues arising from policies and practices to enhance women's access to higher education in the five participating countries. There will be a theoretical exploration of the concept of access and an interrogation of enablers of constraints to women's participation.

Policy Activity

Globally, higher education is being aligned with the wider demands of economic development and competitiveness. This economic rationalism is increasingly linked to the imperative of modernisation (Fitzclarence and Kenway, 1993). Globalisation is often the metanarrative that justifies educational policy reform and indeed policy borrowing and convergence. There are now global networks of influence. Widening participation in higher education is a policy priority in many national locations. This has been driven both by national and international initiatives. For example, in South Africa, the transition from an oligarchic racial state to an inclusive democracy in 1994 has been a key driver in shaping higher education policy ((Fataar, 2003). Democratisation post militarisation in Nigeria (Eribo, 1996) has also led to more policy attention to inclusivity. Widening participation initiatives could be seen as a more state interventionist approach to steering the system. They appear to be working, as the proportion of girls and women enrolled in education is beginning to rise in many locations.

Table 1 *Proportion of women enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary education, 2000/01*

	Nigeria	South Africa	Sri Lanka	Tanzania	Uganda
Primary	42.9 ⁺	49 [*]	48.9	50	48
Secondary	47 ⁺	52	48.8 ⁺	45	39 [±]
Tertiary	39.9 ⁺	53 ⁺	53.8 ⁺	24 ⁺	34

Source: UNESCO, Institute of Statistics Global Education Digest 2003

⁺Data taken from Working Paper 1: Setting the Scene

[±]Data for 1999/2000

^{*}Planning Division Ministry of Human Resource Development & Cultural Affairs, 2002

The expansion of higher education is set to continue. We are informed by World Bank estimates (2002) that by 2015 there will be 97 million students enrolled in higher education and that half of these will be in the 'developing' world. This will involve more inclusive policies and practices to bring under-represented groups into the academy.

Women are one constituency that have traditionally been present in fairly small numbers.

The move to attract more women into higher education coincides with a range of initiatives to include, represent and empower women in all aspects of civil society.

Gender equity in education is increasingly viewed as an indicator of development and indeed of political maturity. The creation of a world polity means that states become more visible in their gender policies and statistics. There has been something of a policy force field on gender internationally in the past few decades. Some influential policies include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (UN,1979). This declared 'discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity and amounts to an obstacle to women's participation on equal terms with men in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries and hampers the growth of prosperity of society and the family' (p.3).

The UN Decade for Women (1975-85) had an impact on issues of gender in most countries. When the Decade ended in 1985, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was set up, a separate and identifiable entity within the UN system in autonomous association with the United Nations Development Programme. UNIFEM had three primary objectives: to provide direct support for women's projects, promote

women's participation in the decision making of mainstream development programmes, and support the economic and social objectives and equality of women in the developing world. Ten years later, the *Beijing Platform for Action* gave prominence to the establishment of national machineries for women, which were defined as the central policy co-ordinating unit inside government.

The Dakar Forum Framework of Education for All (EFA) (2000) towards the delivery of primary education for all by 2015 is an influential policy in all the countries. Targets refer to 'universal primary education in all countries by 2015' and 'no gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005' (DFID, 1998:3). These targets are essential for poverty reduction, sustainable development and indeed creating a population appropriately qualified to enter higher education.

The issue of women entering higher education came firmly on the global political agenda in 1998. The document *Higher Education and Women: Issues and Perspectives* (UNESCO, 1998) prepared for the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education specifically focused on the issues related to women in higher education. The document identified two central areas:

Women's lower enrolments in higher education to date; and

The absence of a gender dimension in the higher education curriculum.

While higher education policy is made within broader reconstituting social processes, there is often a struggle for alignment between policy discourses and organisational practices, sometimes referred to as an implementation gap. However, there were marked differences in the degree of discursive space for gender allowed in different countries. Whereas gender is a policy discourse in Tanzania and Uganda, it is not in Nigeria. Adeyemi and Akpotu (2004) bemoan the fact that the National Policy on Education (1998) has no special provision for gender. A Nigerian policy-maker in this study contrasts the international policy context with lack of national progress:

It is an acknowledged understanding all over the world, that women are disadvantaged in education and ours is not different. We have attended international meetings, conventions, listened to the people's responses. We discovered that we have not achieved much and like all other African countries, we equally have a socio-cultural barrier mitigating against the advancement of women and when we look at this issue, we find out that we should take it to every sector, talk about decision- making, talk about resources. Women are disadvantaged and we have come to believe that education plays a very useful role in anybody's life, be it a man or woman and we believe that if any woman gets proper education, it is like you have provided for her for life.

These observations about the intrinsic and instrumental value of women's education summarise some of the discourses embedded in the access agenda.

Theorising Access

Theoretically, access is a mixed bag. The literature on widening access is embedded in economic and democratisation arguments. Discourses combine human rights, social justice and inclusion, affirmative action with human capital theory, economic and social development and international competitiveness. Hoggett (2001:44) points out that UK's current social policy 'under the cloak of social inclusion, places such tremendous stress upon making people fit for labour'. Concerns about inclusion have emerged at a time of the engagement of virtually all higher education institutions with issues of globalisation, marketisation, and increasing the quantity and quality of high level human resources because of economic policies concerning growth in particular sectors. Dollar and Gatti's study for the World Bank (1999) found that enhancing female educational attainment had a positive effect on economic growth. The relationship between equity and economic development is constructed via a logic termed as 'multiple payoffs' by Fitzclarence and Kenway (1993:93). However, it is questionable how far access is linked to social and organisational transformation and resource distribution.

Widening participation is frequently constructed as an unquestioned 'good', with assumed wider social and personal benefits. A current debate is whether the 'good' relates to the

private or public domains (Singh, 2001). Traditionally, upward social mobility via higher education has been perceived as an emancipatory form of personal and social improvement. The promise of a better life, income and social network has fueled motivation. Commenting on social mobility, Makhubu (1998) makes the point that education generally is seen as the mean by which aspirations may be met. In terms of the public good, she believes that modern universities in countries in transition have become the cornerstones of nation building. It is questionable whether there is consensus about shared values and objectives involved in nation-building (Gray, 1999). The emphasis on nation-building as a rationale in development theory assumes that men and women's interests are equally represented and that nation-building is a politically neutral process.

A key question is whether access to higher education contributes to gender equity in wider civil society. There are complex questions about whether widening access and participation are redistributive measures. Or indeed whether access is simply a part of the neo-liberal project of self-improvement and social mobility in which subjectivities, aspirations and desires are constantly aligned with changes in the labour market (Walkerdine, 2003). Paradoxically, in the UK, neo-liberal constructs of enhancing participation in an enterprise culture have produced some greater demographic shifts in higher education than equity interventions (Morley, 1997). However, it is also important to interrogate a range of related issues including the exchange value of educational qualifications in the labour market (Connor, 1999).

Widening access is also sometimes linked to wider social processes. In South Africa, enhancing access of traditionally disadvantaged groups is linked to social and organisational transformation and resource distribution. Institutional redress policy was endorsed by earlier policy documents including the White Paper on Higher Education (1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education 2001 (Riordan et al., 2004). In Uganda and Tanzania, access is accompanied by gender mainstreaming in the curriculum and management and gender sensitisation programmes.

There are at least 4 trends in the Commonwealth literature relating to the access agenda and incorporating practical and strategic approaches. The first documents and berates under-representation in higher education in general and in certain disciplines, including science and engineering. These arguments are framed in human rights or economic rationalities (Makhubu, 1998). The second deconstructs the social, organisational and material barriers (Alele Williams, 1992; Kwesiga, 2002). The third identifies strategies for inclusion (Nawe, 2002) and the fourth links access to wider social transformation and detraditionalisation (Boughy, 2003; Morley *et. al.* 2003).

A key question posed by some writers is whether enhancing educational opportunities for women is leading to detraditionalisation. Jayaweera (1997) points out how, in spite of being university educated, many Asian women continue to internalise negative gender norms and passively accept oppressive social practices including dowry deaths, and female feticide and infanticide. This corresponds with observations from a Sri Lankan academic in this study who

believes that women are entering the professions in greater numbers, but that this is not contributing to detraditionalisation:

So you wonder then what has education accomplished to this country socially. Professionally yes, we have achieved a lot but socially we are going back. So that's why I say it is a paradox.

Whereas Joshi and Pushpanadham (2001) describe how educational opportunities for women in India have brought transformational change in social and domestic relationships. Hence, there is a language of hope.

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is one type of intervention for change in equity driven political agendas. Programmes tend to consist of organisational goals for increasing the representation of historically excluded groups, timetables for their achievement and the introduction of strategies and practices to support the targets. Research in the USA (Bobo, 1998) and in Australia (Konrad and Hartmann, 2001) has investigated divergent interests, values and beliefs about affirmative action. As these programmes influence the distribution of important and often scarce material outcomes for different social groups, they tend to attract strong feelings. Less is known about affirmative action programmes in low-income countries. There are positive discrimination schemes in Uganda and Tanzania known as 1.5 schemes. This involves adding 1.5 marks to women's grades for university entrance. The 1.5 Points Bonus Scheme. Makerere

University in Uganda initiated this affirmative action programme in 1990. The scheme is now applied to all public institutions in Uganda at the tertiary level. At Makerere University, this scheme, along with bursaries and scholarships funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and by the government has helped to raise the enrolment of female students from 20 per cent to over 40 per cent (Kwesiga, 2004). A senior university manager in Uganda observes:

Yes, we used not to have many (female students) until 14 years ago when the university introduced a scheme to attract more female students at the university. The university took affirmative action to have 1.5-point scheme to help women to join the university that is 1.5 points above the boys. In addition, we have now sponsorships, which have come in to assist, to facilitate the education of girl child at the university like the Carnegie Corporation of New York to facilitate needy girls to join the university.

The construction of beneficiaries as objects of charity will be discussed later.

However, affirmative action can acquire quasi religious undertones. A Ugandan academic uses the discourse of moral redress to justify affirmative action:

Yes, we haven't done any kind of study but I think the 1.5 is morally right because women as a whole have not had equal opportunities as men.

Goal identification was also thought to be of benefit to individuals and an enabler for progression. A Ugandan student argued that affirmative action programmes at tertiary level could act as incentives to girls at primary and secondary levels:

The rate of girls dropping out after primary is very high so it is important to redress that by encouraging those who reach 'A' levels to continue to university.

The role of the international donor community in effecting change is highly complex, with questions about contract compliance and causal relationships. A Ugandan academic believes that the international donor community has reinforced initiatives from the local state:

It has to be realized that boys have added advantage in secondary schools. The government saw it and said that there must be another way of enhancing enrolment of the girls and introduced the affirmative action. Carnegie Cooperation is one of the foundations in USA, which have come to assist

university education in Africa. Another one being McArthur.

However, an academic in Tanzania argued that affirmative action programmes should be indigenously developed and owned and not dependent of external funding:

The University itself should not entirely depend... the University should have its own affirmative action, because all these are foreign sponsored, so what happens if these foreigners go away?

Another Tanzanian academic shows concern about the potential for sustainability in a donor-driven policy environment:

Second is the sustainability challenge due to donor dependence that is, we may face 'donor fatigue' in future.

The effectiveness of affirmative action was also challenged. A Dean in Uganda questions whether the changes in quantitative representation of women would have happened anyway, as a consequence of social trends and detraditionalisation:

I don't really know. I think what we need to do is look at say

they would keep that straight line or whether that line has shifted up and is moving faster because of 1.5.

In Tanzania, some of the strategies introduced to facilitate the entry of more female students at the University of Dar es Salaam include: a 6-week pre-semester course for potential female candidates in order to raise their capacities for taking Science subjects; a Female Undergraduate Scholarship funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This scholarship for the last three years has benefited 50 female students each year under its programme; and an initiative for enrolment of female students in the Engineering disciplines (Lihamba et al., 2004). In Nigeria, Odejide et al., (2004) argue that affirmative action policies do not relate specifically to gender, but rather to the educationally less developed states in the northern zone. The absence of an analysis of structural gender discrimination was evident in several responses. A Dean in Nigeria argues against affirmative action policies on the basis that women do not need positive discrimination as they are flourishing anyway:

I believe both sexes are endowed equally. The fact that someone is a lady does not mean she is not endowed academically and intellectually. Over the years, because of tradition in this part of the world... we looked down on ladies, but we have discovered that if ladies are given the chance, they can do better than their male counterparts. Our experience ...over the past four years has shown that most

of the best results always come from ladies. Most of the prizes are captured by ladies.

Another Dean in Nigeria also commented on the potential for feminising the academy as women appeared to be more committed to academic work than men:

They don't even need to lower entry marks. Men are not as serious anymore they are just playing and ladies are just studying. Very soon, you will find out that the universities are filled with ladies because if this trend continues, we don't need to give them a lower cut off point. The only thing is that some parts of the country need to be well informed that their ladies should go to school.

This view articulates with research elsewhere on masculinities and education and the way in which boys, particularly working class boys are underachieving in schools (Epstein et al.1998). The explanation is that academic work is no longer compatible with the way in which masculinity is constructed,

Neither gender equity policies nor gender budgeting were features of Nigerian public policy. A Nigerian director of planning noted the lack of formal policies for gender equity in relation to university access:

I am not aware of any conscious effort to attract female students although what we were doing when we were in NUC was to commend universities and so when you have 24% female admission, they clap for them, but there was no serious effort in rewarding people who made effort in attracting female students to universities. So, to that extent, I won't say there is any serious policy governing the issue.

The applause was on an informal basis only and gender equity was not a formal performance indicator. Equity without resource allocation can be fairly tokenistic. A Nigerian policy-maker also comments that reinforcement exists informally and is not reinforced by resource allocation:

Actually all universities are advised to give more room, by that, I mean admission to the female students and we monitor it strictly. How do we monitor it? All universities come to the Commission every year. There is what we call budget defense. At that budget defense, we now analyze them particularly Federal Universities but starting from year 2000, we have included all universities, whether private, state, or federal. Now (we look at) what they do, particularly federal universities, the admission policy, what percentages have gone to where, catchment area etc. We

look at it and we calculate this thing and any university that

gives at le013 1 Tf17 0 T. , sometimes 47% admitt 90places for gi29 nded. Actually atecomm

Affirmative action policies and practices are invariably linked to desired quantitative changes. In Sri Lanka, Gunawardena et al. (2004) point out that the high representation of female undergraduates in their higher education system, though not in all Faculties or in some of the most prestigious disciplines, is perceived as proof of assurance of gender equity and as such any necessity for affirmative action or concessions for admission is not considered as important. Gunawardena is indicating the problems when a politics of representation is seen as the main driver for gender equity. This means that once the academic representation rates tally with the relevant population rates then no further action is required (Baez, 2003).

Affirmative action practices have been met with contradictory responses. Although equity issues affect society as a whole, they can often be seen as special needs which only relate to certain groups (Naidoo, 1998). Affirmative action also implies changes in benefit streams. Hence backlash has been a dominant theme in this study. They can be perceived as a form of 'reverse discrimination' (Jordaan, 1995: 53). They can also reinforce hierarchies of oppression as members of a range of under-represented groups are placed in competition with each other. Black and white women, indigenous and exogenous, ruling and working class women are oppositionally positioned with men in the struggle to access opportunities. Several theorists have noted how affirmative action programmes are perceived as a form of charity or welfare benefit. It is constructed as a type of preferential treatment that automatically signifies inferiority (Fraser, 1997; Jordaan, 1995; Monroe, 1991). A student in South Africa comments on the negative equity of benefiting from affirmative action schemes:

I was told by a fellow colleague that I would not have such a problem getting a job because of affirmative action.

And I took that so harshly because I don't want to get a job because of the quota I am going to fill up, because of some tick that I am going to be on somebody's register. I mean, I really, that's what really disheartens me because at the end of the day I am going to fit into a position and think they are paying me this salary but they have got somebody under me doing my work.

Stigmatisation is one reaction, as women are seen as passive recipients of a welfare scheme and are allowed entry via identity rather than merit. This raises questions about the quality of the learning environment for traditionally under-represented groups once they enter higher education. There is a missing conceptual link between diversity and learning. The educational benefits to all students of creating a more diverse higher education population are frequently overlooked (Gurin et al., 2002). In the USA, Johnson and Lollar (2002) found that exposure to diversity positively enhances students' cultural awareness and democratic citizenship. In this study, nobody commented on the benefits to the wider population. They tended to focus on the advantages or dis-benefits to the recipients. An academic in Tanzania reports name-calling of women students who enter via affirmative action programmes:

First is social challenge. This is because the females entering through these programmes are dubbed names like “Viwango Duni -VD*” which may tend to make them feel inferior to other students and also discourage others to join the programmes.

* This means something below standard, of poor quality.

Power relayed micropolitically and informally is notoriously difficult to contest. Fears are that equity will collide with quality and that entrance and exit standards will have to be lowered. Many of our informants in Nigeria discursively located affirmative action in opposition to merit and indeed as a form of unfairness. A student argues against special treatment:

The thing is that if I were to suggest that university should do certain things for females, I would not want it; you know that there is this case of people treating you specially, you know, getting special treatment ... For instance, if I should say that because we are female students that we should be getting extra lessons or special treatment, it would not be fair, think about it, yes we are female and they are male but nevertheless, they also need to understand, they also need help. So, there has to be a line that is drawn between us; yes, we can do with some encouragement but we don't want it to go over board and all that.

This belief in individualism, the concept that people's life chances are determined by ability and effort, rather than in egalitarianism, the notion that inequality is harmful to all society, was noticeable in many Nigerian responses. According to Konrad and Hartmann (2001:420), 'traditional attitudes to women are likely to be associated with negative attitudes to AA'. A Nigerian student in this study believed that affirmative action programmes could make women passive and dependent:

...it will not be wise to now do everything for the female and think things will work out that way because in spite of everything, the female has to be independent to some certain level and if she gets to a place where everything is being done for her, the product at the end of the day will not be worth it. So they have to really think about it. Yes help us but don't go too far.

This attack on dependency culture exemplifies an emerging anti-welfarism. Elsewhere concern has been shown about who benefits from these programmes. A policy-maker in Uganda observed:

The 1.5 scheme has been a very positive contribution towards attaining gender policy in higher education because the number of girls have since increased. But in

my opinion, I feel that the scheme doesn't benefit the poor.

This is evocative of the Assisted Places Scheme in Great Britain that was introduced by the Conservative Government in the 1970s, and was phased out by the Labour Government in 1998. The aim was to enable academically able children, particularly from the inner city areas, with limited financial means, to attend private schools. In 1995, total public expenditure on the scheme was £104 million pounds. However, research on this scheme indicates that very few children of working class parents were able to benefit. Less than ten per cent had fathers who were manual workers, compared with fifty per cent with fathers in middle class occupations (Whitty, Power and Edwards, 1998). It appears that in many affirmative action schemes, students most likely to be selected are those who are perceived as being most like the mainstream and therefore reduce risk (Naidoo, 1998).

Ironically, affirmative action is purported to be an equity intervention. However, the programmes themselves can sometimes reinforce unequal power relations. A Tanzanian academic calls for increased transparency in affirmative action processes in order to avoid nepotism:

Yeah, first of all, it has to be well described and presented in a document kind of a thing, which should be circulated to relevant, whatever they call them stakeholders. That means

a University community, so that even if people talk about the Carnegie programme, other people also know what it's all about or the pre-entry and so on. So that they don't feel that these are few individuals who are being favoured by the people they know, that kind of a thing. So once they describe the programme, I mean they define it, put it in a document format, then make it available, disseminate that document to all stakeholders.

The issue of sustainability relating to affirmative action was raised in relation to professional and organisational ownership, short-termism and remediation, as this exchange with a Tanzanian academic illustrates:

Q: Ok, what do you think about the affirmative action programmes?

A: I think that is a good direction, but that is almost you can call it a remedial action. It does not address the primary problem.

The remediation ethos was also conceptualised as a type of healing or act of recuperation by another Tanzanian academic:

Since they have shown positive results I think the affirmative action programmes are important. It is so because they build confidence for females. The programmes help them to understand that they can make it in higher education given the fact that they could not perform as male students in high school.

Another Tanzanian academic felt that organisational interventions for gender equity were limited and that sustainability was ultimately the responsibility of the state:

The only way that I see they can be sustained is by the government. The government in collaboration with other organisations or sponsors can create a mechanism that supports these female students from secondary level for example let's say by encouraging females to undertake science courses. Thereafter, if it happens that may be they were unable to join the university, then the government can assist them to join as well as supporting them when they are pursuing their courses.

Universities in many low-income countries are situated in towns and cities. Hence the issue of exclusion of rural communities is a matter of concern (Akpan, 1987). In Sri Lanka, District Quota Systems were introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1974 for the

purpose of university admissions (De Silva, 1974). The main aim was to favour candidates from rural and/or socially disadvantaged backgrounds. However, a policy-maker in Sri Lanka comments on how the district code initiatives only partially confront social class and gender disadvantages:

Though Mahapola Scholarships are given to women students too, some very low-income students who qualify and are required to be in residence cannot afford to live away from their homes. These students tend to drop out due to economic pressures or lack of family support to continue their education. Very low-income men students tend to supplement the “Mahapola aid, by undertaking part time employment. Women students tend to be “hostel” bound in their living quarters and are invariably “full time” students with no other income support.

While most of the students in Sri Lanka who had received district code scholarships commented that they would not have been able to enter university without this support for essentials such as food, books and accommodation, the occasional luxury item crept in, again raising questions about the social classes who are actually benefiting from affirmative action. A Sri Lankan student describes how she spends her allocation :

Q: Explain how you made use of this support during your University life.

A: Bus fare, photocopies and printouts. I also pay my mobile bill with it.

While not codifying gender in its educational policies, Nigeria does have some affirmative action interventions, particularly in relation to catchment areas. Adeyemi (2001) points out how Nigeria has over 150 ethnic groups, with significant regional variation in educational attainment and opportunities. Hence, the catchment area ‘as one of the admission criteria seems to be motivated by demand for increased access and participation in university by all sections of the country’ (p. 311). Quota systems exist throughout the Commonwealth. However, they are often problematic. Adeyemi (2001) notes how in most cases the educationally disadvantaged states in the north of Nigeria could not find the 20 per cent of suitably qualified candidates.

Women Entering ‘Non-Traditional’ Disciplines

One aspect of affirmative action that has been highlighted in this study is how well women do on access courses, compared to their mainstream educational achievements. This raises questions about the gender-appropriateness of mainstream pedagogy as a Tanzanian lecturer indicates:

...we find those who undergo this training it brings new idea, I think it brings new ideas these are other problems we thought differently but using affirmative action for example, pre-entry training, what we are seeing now is that there is something wrong

Before I applied ... my dad asked me what I was hoping to study. I told him Architecture but he did not really want me to go for it because he was of the view that ladies don't really get jobs in it nowadays, but in spite of that, I still saw the need for going for it because I love constructing...

There has been much debate in the literature on women's entry in science and technology on the privileging of certain academic disciplines (Bebbington, 2003). An academic in Tanzania appreciated an initiative to encourage more women into science, but believed that these should be extended to other academic disciplines:

maybe they should also extend not only to the science subjects to even other disciplines. And also I think of this time female students should also be taught ... there is no barrier to whatever subject you want to go to. Although we are promoting sciences but also I think it should extend to other Arts subjects discipline.

A Nigerian senior manager discusses how state policy to construct a 60:40 ratio of science to arts is a way of discriminating against women:

The government wants 60-40 science versus Arts. Basically, we know ladies tend to like Arts field disciplines more than Science in

which case, by the time you allocate 60% of admission to science, you are already limiting the number of ladies that can come in because you have only 40% for that group out of which boys will also compete there with the ladies. So it is as if the 40% is meant for the ladies. You have smaller groups for the ladies to compete, I mean, smaller percentage for the ladies, so already, they are at a disadvantage because that's the area where they specialise, where they are interested and the area is small.

The gendering of academic disciplines was noted by many informants. Women entering 'non-traditional' areas were seen as transgressing socially prescribed rules on femininity as a South African student noted:

like engineering, there are more guys than girls, and you get stereotyped as a girl. I know the engineering girls they always said they are butch, the ugly ones you know.

It appears that even when women are slowly entering 'non-traditional' disciplines certain embodied identities are irreconcilable with the subject matter. Therefore, the embodied image has to be aligned to the discipline. In the current binary thinking associated with the disciplines, this means masculinisation if women enter science. This hostility is evocative of essentialised arguments used early last century to keep all women out of all disciplines in higher education (Dyhouse, 1995). Many of the irrational arguments were

based on damage to women's reproductive systems, the growth of excess body hair, sterility, and disruption to the menstrual cycle. In other words, loss of womanhood! Nowadays, in the absence of codified structural barriers, the students themselves police the boundaries of what is considered gender-appropriate behaviour and this includes the choice of academic discipline.

Gender Violence

The Panos Institute Report (2003) observes that sexual, physical and psychological violence causes as much of a burden of ill health and death among women aged 15-44 as cancer- and more than malaria and traffic accidents and that sexual violence in the educational sector is an unaddressed issue. Yet it can impede participation and achievement and contribute to drop out, illness and in some instances suicide. Studies demonstrate how gender violence is normalised in many African schools (Leach *et al.*, 2000) and thus continued in higher education. Gender violence takes on different forms across the Commonwealth. Violence was widely reported in this study. At one end of the continuum is the serious violence of rape cultures. A Nigerian student relates a most disturbing incident:

One of my fellowship members had an experience last year. She was sleeping and the guy came in and told her to open her legs...The guy really beat her up and all her face was swollen, he used blade (razor) on her for not obeying when

telling her to open her legs. He wanted to rape her and she said no, she was pleading and shouting, there was blood all over her, but God saved her that day. Because of the way she was shouting, they had to run away because they knew people were awake. There have been cases like that in the female residential hall that they had successfully raped ladies. ... No one knows whether they are occultic people that need blood, they will want to use the scissors to cut the lady. Some of them were students ... It was suspected that they have duplicate keys and so they could be the security men. So we don't even know the integrity of the security men although the school is trying as much as possible. They have always told us to make sure we lock our doors, don't walk on the corridors in the night, go to the toilet before you go to bed and so on. These are just precautions but the danger is there for female students.

Not only does this horrific incident illustrate the lack of safety for women on campus, but it also indicates how the burden of avoiding male violence falls on women. A Nigerian dean identifies the advice that is given to women without elaborating on what interventions are used with male students and staff:

Once in a while, we've had cases of rape. ... We've also had attacks on campus. Some people attack ladies who walk alone at night and rob them of their handsets and other valuables. As safety measures, we've advised the ladies not to walk alone at night and to avoid unlit or poorly lit places on campus. The campus security unit has also been put on alert. So all these hoodlums will not attack them.

Gangsterism and cultism were also reported by many of our Nigerian informants. Another Nigerian student believed that the existence of cults could act as a barrier to women's access:

Some parents may not want to send their female children to school so that they will not be influenced.

As well as being a massive violation of human rights, the dangers of violence on campus severely impede women's mobility and freedom to study. Public spaces are not public at all, but highly gendered. It is unsafe for them to stay late in libraries and computer labs. It is even unsafe for them to start work early in the morning as a Nigerian student reports:

the girl was going to class very early in the morning and she was assaulted.

A South African student also notes:

the type of terrain and environment you work in. It is often not safe for a woman to walk and to work in.

Another South African student suggests that the university campus is a site of danger.

At the moment we have a big design assignment...The ideal would be to work on campus, but it is not safe.

Another South African reports the rapes on campus and how they have left her feeling unsafe, but personalises her response:

Well, I don't know if you know about these rapes in toilets and stuff. That is quite scary that people get raped on campus. I've never felt, really the only time that I've felt unsafe on campus, was at night and it's empty. But that is just a personal thing you know.

Another South African student politicises the debate to include a sense of collective responsibility:

And the university has had issues with rape, you know in

It has really affected the access of female students to higher education. When some parents think of what their children do when they come to school, they would not want to send them to school. When they think of the sexual harassment that the students pass through, they have second thoughts.

At the other end of the continuum, are the initiation rituals involved in ragging in India and Sri Lanka that are more serious than they appear (Jayasena, 2002). A student comments on how ragging affected her engagement with academic work:

The ragging went on for 1 month. During that time I didn't feel like coming for classes.

Gender violence is a ubiquitous area of gender power. It appears to be one of the many prices that women are expected to pay for entering traditional male reserve spaces. It marks out and reinforces gendered territory and can deter women from applying to enter higher education. It is rife on campus, and is either mentioned or specifically studied in reports from across the Commonwealth (Bajpai, 1999; Durrani, 2000; Gender Study Group, 1996; Hallam, 1994; Mlana 1998; Omale, 2000; Simelane, 2001; Tete-Mensah, 1999). While urgent policy attention is essential, there is also a need to confront it via the curriculum.

Women's Bodies

The academy has been traditionally constructed as elevating the life of the mind. Dominated by a Cartesian dualism, there is a sense that the body and emotions are pollutants in the culture of abstraction. In the wider social terrain, women's reproductive functions have long been seen to account for women's marginalisation from production processes. Throughout this study, the issues of pregnancy, marriage and motherhood recurred as offering explanatory power for women's under-representation as students and staff. A Ugandan academic reports:

Many graduates who are working far from Kampala find it difficult to pursue masters' programmes. I did some research and these women teaching in the village were saying, we still have to look for firewood, to look for water, cook for children...They still have problem of producing many children. People say that with education, fertility might reduce, but you still find primary school teachers getting 6 or 7 children. They do not have domestic workers and with UPE {Universal Primary Education}, all their bigger children are in school. They lack baby sitters. All these are problems hindering women from moving up.

It is interesting to note how increasing girls' entitlements to enter school is sometimes perceived as reducing their mothers' entitlement to domestic labour.

The cultural practice of early marriage in many developing societies was discussed with considerable frustration. A Nigerian policy-maker comments on the way early marriage and motherhood cannot be accommodated in the current structural arrangements for education in her country:

The course of (girl education)... is so frustrating, the girl will finish secondary school; the next thing that comes to her parent's mind is to marry her out. Again by the time

she starts to finish (in) a lot of commitment

they are extremely embarrassed. Many of them step out of school because they can't stand the stigmatization that would be generated among fellow students. Even when they come back, they are overly apologetic and overly embarrassed. So these must affect their performance.

Women's bodies are characterised as forever changing and unreliable. This makes them unstable educational consumers. It also contributes to a gendered educational pyramid with fewer women in tertiary than primary education in many countries. Retention problems caused by pregnancy were noted by a Ugandan academic:

One thing is the usual biological problems, sometimes girls get pregnant and fall by the way side. I don't know if there could still be inhibitions due to culture, because most people have grown up in that. May be I am assuming too much because I have stayed in Kampala (the capital) since 1971, but generally when you look around in primary schools you find girls are very many. Sometimes they are even more than the boys, but most times because of what I called the biological problems, they tend to drop out.

There also appear to be beliefs that link women's sexuality to education. Higher education is thought to produce a certain type of sexuality that is

perceived as undesirable or dangerous. A Ugandan senior manager relates an interesting juxtaposition:

The different cultural practices performed by different societies in Uganda impinge on the girl-child education opportunities e.g. among the Karamajong of northeastern Uganda, a learned woman is considered to be a prostitute, so girls from childhood grow up without desire for higher education.

The wide range of complex socio-economic and cultural barriers- some of them rational or material, but others highly irrational - raise serious questions about the role of policy interventions for promoting gender equity. So what works?

Enablers

Bernstein's earlier observation (1970) that education cannot compensate for society can usefully be recalled in relation to the myriad challenges involved in encouraging more women to participate in higher education in low-income countries. As I have already argued, there is an international policy field, sometimes reinforced at national and organisational level, with a range of structured interventions for change including affirmative action programmes. However, several of our informants commented on

micro or individualised interventions that made a difference, suggesting that policies need effective and sensitised change agents. The role of the school and role models were frequently noted, especially gender-sensitive teachers. A South African student comments on the important role of curriculum reform by an informed headteacher:

We had such a dynamic headmistress. ... she was not interested in this traditional female subjects, at all. She did away with subjects like home economics and typing ... She did away with all those sort of stuff. She was a really interesting woman.

The inseparability of the home and school were also noted, with numerous observations about gender inequalities in the distribution of schooling. A Tanzanian academic emphasises the need to strengthen interventions at earlier educational stages:

That is at primary level because in some areas parents need to be educated to send girls to school although not considered economical in their villages. At secondary level, girls' school number is low. This should be increased. So due to those problems at primary and secondary level, as a result, at university stage there is no pool from which to choose.

An academic in Dentistry in Tanzania commented on the vicious circle of disadvantage for women in relation to the different education sectors:

In our school and in our departments, talking of students, the situation is that because of larger male student pool in secondary school. Automatically we have a large proportion of males applying to do our course so that may ever reflect that we have more males than female in our courses. But it is not by intention, it is because of the whole sector in a society. But then even if our school is trying as among its strategy to have gender balance in student intake. For that reasons we give a special priority to females to join the DDS courses, if they have the minimum qualifications to join the courses. So we give them that priority in order to have equity and gender balance.

The issue of the supply of suitably qualified candidates is highlighted in much of the empirical data and in the literature. For example, Adeyami (2001) argues that women's under-representation in higher education is not necessarily about gender discrimination, but linked to lower enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education. Changing quantitative representation requires a nuanced understanding of social context. Kwesiga (2002) reveals the importance of understanding the specific contexts in order to identify localised solutions to women's access to

education. She too argues that change must begin at the familial level, involving parents and extended family. Also important is change at the social level, including policy change and transformation of the educational system itself. One way that the higher education system has attempted to transform itself in some national locations is via its links with the local community. Outreach programmes where the university went into the local community were also seen as highly influential in raising and focussing aspirations. A South African student records her experiences:

(A woman) came to give a talk at our school about Geomatics. And it sounded interesting. At school I was good in maths and geography, and this course links up with both maths and geography. And so I decided to do it.

The imperative to raise aspirations also finds its way into popular culture. Nigeria's burgeoning film industry (Nollywood) culturally reinforces upward social mobility via higher education.

Moran (2004: 14) writes:

Most Nollywood films are about young people going to university or rich people having affairs. Part aspirational, part Dynasty.

These aspirations have been around for quite a while. Back in 1987 Akpan observed:

The achievement of higher education is perhaps one of the greatest desires in the hearts of most young Nigerians today (Akpan,1987:545).

In this study, high educational aspirations were a feature of the Nigerian students. A young woman student recognises that personal ambitions are reinforced by the educational capital of family networks:

Because from my childhood, I had been nursing the ambition to enter university and besides I don't have any other option than to enter university.... Like I have many relations that are in or have passed out of the university. They are like role models and I know that there is something about having higher education and the way Nigeria is today, university degree is the best.

Affective and material support from the family were seen as essential components of participation. A student in Sri Lanka related the financial sacrifices that her family – particularly her mother- made to send her to university:

I had a lot of financial obstacles. Coming to Colombo meant a lot of expenses. My mother pawned most of her things to send me here. My family was very supportive. They all encouraged me to attend university.

A Ugandan female student explains how the state, rather than her family, helped her to realise her desire to enter higher education:

I really wanted to attain a degree. I strived to get to Makerere. Luckily, I got a government sponsorship and so I couldn't opt to pay for myself.

Accessing higher education is not an end in itself. Whereas Nigerian female students in this study displayed considerable educational drive, Biraimah's study (1994) argues that educational ambition is gendered and notes that, once entered in universities, Nigerian men and women's career aspirations are vastly different. Male students, regardless of class, maintained extremely high educational goals, while females, who came primarily from high socio-economic status families, held less elitist goals. Taking an individual/ agentic, rather than a social/ structural stance, a female Nigerian student berates women for their poverty of aspiration:

The problems lie more with the female; then I don't think that they are being denied any access, just that most of them

do not aspire beyond secondary school level or some get pregnant along the way and drop out of school.

Whereas this informant reformulated social concerns as individualistic dispositions, the social capital of immediate and extended families in the form of knowledge of educational systems, the entry requirements for high-status professions and emotional and material support was noted by informants throughout the five countries. A female student in Uganda rehearses parental messages about the importance of educational investment:

It was personal morale coupled with advice from parents that encouraged me to join University. Without education it's difficult to have good jobs and income.

The home can also play a negative role and impede women's access. Girls and young women are often expected to take considerable domestic responsibility. An academic in Tanzania describes how the gendered distribution of housework disadvantages girls educationally:

you know the female students are the disadvantaged especially at the lower end of learning at Primary School, Secondary School because they are the people who work hard at home more than what boys do. So they have little

time to study and a consequence of course is that they will score less marks.

A Dean in Uganda laments the limited aspirations from some parents for their girl children:

Women have been given a very narrow agenda and then very many of them think science is specifically for the men. So they don't even try it. Okay? And then the demands placed on women. Many parents do not tell their women children that for example "I want you to be a doctor". They're telling them "I want you to become a good wife". So the pressures are different.

It is hard to theorise barriers to access without resorting to deficit models. The access agenda combines an invitation to women to belong to a new place, which, according to Walkerdine (2003:238) is also an invitation to 'feel shame about what one had been before'. The poor, whether classified as the working class in industrialised countries such as the UK, or uneducated rural communities in Africa, are seen to be part of the problem. They are frequently represented as impeding social modernisation and gendered change. Material poverty is conflated with poverty of aspiration. Poor families are negatively implicated in the educational failure of their children. A Sri Lankan student notes the age-

old cultural practice of investing in boys as they are perceived as ‘agents of genealogical sustenance’ (Adeyemi and Akpotu, 2004:362):

I feel when it comes to girls, parents worry about marriage. So, parents tend to discourage girls from doing higher studies. I think if families are poor, boys get priority over girls. They think boys are the best, they will give the back-up to the parents.

This feature was also noted by a senior manager in Uganda:

Increasing poverty levels in households contribute in shaping attitudes and perceptions of men and women e.g. amidst scarce resources a boy child will be preferred to go to school and study while a girl child will be recommended for marriage in order for the parents to acquire bride price. That is the reason why there are so many early dropout cases for girls from schools. Girl-children have difficulties in accessing education because of problems associated with their biological nature e.g. poor sanitary facilities in schools discourage girls from going back to school;

peer pressure leads to early pregnancies hence
dropping out of school etc.

While social disadvantage offers the initial explanatory power for this informant, the recurring theme of women's bodies as problematic creeps back into the discourse. Hence there is a constant two-step between gender as a social construction and gender as an essentialised and biological destiny.

Conclusion

The political economy of higher education is changing. However, there are still major barriers to a reconstituted higher education and inequalities between the participants. Globalisation implies new rules of eligibility as a global market of purchasers and providers of higher education products expands. There is an increasing connection between education, employment, productivity and international trade. However, the literature on globalised education policy frequently overlooks gender as a category of analysis (Blackmore, 2000). Paradoxically, higher education policy can often exclude attention to social inequalities while simultaneously advocating massification and inclusion. Affirmative action programmes only exist when there is a discourse and policy context to challenge discrimination. Economic rationalism has implications for women's entry into education and the labour market. They are sometimes allowed entry as economic units, rather than as a consequence of social justice campaigns. When social justice is factored in, there are dangers of overlooking the complex social contexts that construct both actors and organisations. As the narratives of informants in this study

indicate, there are multiple contextual challenges involved in widening women's participation. Access can be a form of personal and social upheaval. Furthermore, when quantitative change does occur, informants relate the many gendered and discriminatory processes that are reproduced in everyday social and organisational practices and that interrupt the democratic possibilities of higher education.

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