

Gender-inclusive higher education

How is Africa faring in this key area of university education?

Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)¹

As Africa advances into the 21st century, rapid change brought about by technological, scientific and economic advancements, globalisation and migration are transforming the continent's university environment, making it more dynamic and complex than ever before. Increasingly, gender-balanced human resource development is key to ensuring that higher education institutions at national and continental levels meet the challenges emerging from these transformations. Universities in Africa are, therefore, compelled to develop, sustain and nurture not just men, but equally women who are capable of generating the types of knowledge and competencies that will lead Africa into a new era. This would be in line with universal agreements on equal access to opportunities and outcomes, such as the African Union's *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (2003) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, as well as Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG 3), which relates to women's empowerment and gender equality at all levels of the education system by 2015.

The Beijing Platform for Action listed priority action areas vital to ensuring that women are empowered to contribute fully and meaningfully to social and economic development processes. Women's participation in decision-making in all sectors was amongst these priorities. Yet universities in Africa continue to be male-dominated and women, especially those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have a very low presence in these institutions.

A number of studies in the early part of the century showed this situation quite clearly. In 90 per cent of African universities, the majority of members of senior management in 2005 were men, even in institutions where 50 per cent of the staff were women, such as in the case of Lesotho (UNESCO, 2005). Out of 17 Commonwealth African countries sampled in 2002, only seven had over 20 per cent women academic staff at senior lecturer level and above in their universities (Singh, 2002). And the University of London's Institute of Education (2005) found that in four Commonwealth universities (Cape Town, Dar es Salaam, Ibadan and Makerere) the percentage of women at professor, associate professor and senior lecturer level was decidedly lower than the percentage of men. For instance, in Dar es Salaam University in 2003, only 5.2 per cent of the professors were female; while in Makerere University in 2004, only 6.1 per cent were. The same disparities were noted at the lower levels of academic appointments.

It is evident that African universities lack gender-responsive policies at macro and micro levels. The Association of African Universities (AAU) (2006) observes that women are ghettoised in the lowest rungs of the administrative ladder, often occupying clerical and secretarial positions. In academic tracks they tend to occupy junior, untenured positions, publish less and are only marginally present in managerial positions. The Institute of Education study mentioned above indicated that policies put little focus on gender equity and equality in recruitment of staff and staff development programmes in the institutions concerned. The study further found that the universities had little in the way of plans and policies for equal opportunity in employment, or against sexual harassment, racial, ethnic and sexual discrimination. Assié-Lumumba (2006) sees the persistence of structural gender inequality as one of the most counter-productive and self-destructive traditions in African higher education. She points to societal norms and constraints, policy priorities, and contradictions between the officially stated pursuit of development agendas and denying women the possibility to participate fully in these agendas.

As a consequence of the low number of women in policy decision-making bodies at universities in Africa, the capacity of women academics and administrators to influence change in a less-than-friendly environment is absent or weak. Thus, while the poor representation of women in managerial positions may reflect the unwillingness of top management to appoint women to these positions, Smulders's study on India (1998) points to an unwillingness on the part of women to put themselves forward for such appointments. Almost a decade later, Okeke (2005) argues that female academics in African universities are often afraid to speak out and to demand a transformation of university management. The situation is further compounded by the fact that many women academics at managerial level lack strong networks to encourage mentorship and to create a unified voice. Where changes are happening, they are slow to yield the desired outcomes for women in academia.

The challenge currently facing many higher education institutions is to institutionalise strategies and policies that reverse gender and socio-economic inequalities. Over the years, many African universities have gradually experienced substantial staff erosion. Most are experiencing difficulties in retaining and replacing experienced staff in academic and specialised support positions. It is projected that, in the next 10 to 20 years, most African universities will have an enormous staff deficit, in some cases as large as 40–60 per cent. This is due to staff attrition, retirement, slow replacement of staff, migration of the best educated (brain

drain or brain circulation), difficulty in attracting the best and brightest undergraduates to academia, low remuneration and, not least, academic and bureaucratic environments that are unfriendly to women.

If the staff attrition trend is not arrested, most African universities will continue to rely on experts from outside the continent. Moreover, and most importantly, Africa will continue to waste women's potential for contributing to knowledge creation and socio-cultural and economic advancement. It is thus imperative to improve gender equity in higher education to ensure that women's presence in institutions of higher learning is more visible and their contribution to both academic development and administration is counted.

To achieve gender equality in academia and in the management of universities in Africa, it is necessary to have a mix of gender-responsive policies and strategies, such as affirmative action and innovative women-focused recruitment and staff development. Deliberate efforts must be made, and targeted initiatives developed, so that African women can assume positions of responsibility in greater numbers within academia. This would not only address issues of gender equity and fairness, it would also contribute to the survival and thriving of higher education institutions on the continent.

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is thus *advocating* a number of gender-responsive measures that would enable women in higher education institutions to access equitable learning opportunities and outcomes as well as professional development and promotion. These include research, innovative advocacy strategies and leadership training. It is imperative to research the barriers to women's development in universities and to determine the impact of innovative approaches to furthering gender equality and promoting women in higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Innovative strategies for promoting gender-equitable recruitment, promotion and retention, especially targeting women, must be advocated for and spearheaded. Tracking systems must be developed and observatories established to document and monitor progress towards gender equality in African universities.

These measures can only be achieved by bringing like-minded organisation together – such as the Association for Strengthening Higher Education for Women in Africa (ASHEWA), the AAU, the African Gender Institute and the few gender-based research institutions and women's studies programmes – in order to work on strategies, develop roadmaps, lobby university administrations and highlight what hampers, but also what promotes, gender equity and equality for women in academia.

Furthermore, alliances must be formed with university chancellors, vice-chancellors, rectors and registrars, both female and male, for the purposes of moving key strategic issues and ensuring that they give serious consideration and make firm, long-term commitment to address the imbalances identified in recruitment and professional development of female academics and managers.

Encouragingly, male-dominated leadership and management at African universities has not gone entirely unchallenged. Since 2000, many African countries have opened new universities, increasing the chances that more women will join universities as students and in leadership positions. The number of women chancellors and vice-chancellors of African universities among FAWE's members is testament to this change. With regional organisations, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), taking up strong positions on gender policies and benchmarking participation of women in positions of leadership, further positive change is expected to take place. The measures proposed above will certainly accelerate this trend so that, by the middle of the century, women will not only have more choices and chances in academia, but a greater number of women will be in leadership and senior management positions at universities in Africa. This is not an ideal, it is a necessity if Africa is serious about putting all its resources to work for the betterment of the continent.

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Endnote

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