

The doors have been left ajar

Women in contemporary African higher education



Introduction

Why are we still doing the same thing (finding out determinants of gender inequalities in education) since we have known the causes for a long time? Why is the list of obstacles getting longer instead of demonstrating the gains made towards their elimination? Many organisations, many researchers, and the Government have been involved in this process for a long time. What has not been executed properly, as we seem to be going in circles instead of going forward?

(Uganda Minister of Education and Sports, 2003)¹

Access of women, and men, to higher education in Africa has reasonably widened in the last two decades. A key explanation is the current high demand for higher education. The liberalisation of educational sectors has led to a rapid growth of private universities and other tertiary institutions. Previously, state-funded institutions had failed to grow due to the constant decline in funding. Funding agencies have shifted from the position that higher education in Africa was not as cost-effective as the lower levels of education. It is clear that in the contemporary knowledge-based global society, higher education is as important for Africa as for other countries – hence the tremendous expansion. For example, until 1988, Makerere University was the only university in Uganda. Currently, there are three other public universities and 24 private universities. Student numbers have risen from 10,000 to over 75,000 (Uganda National Council for Higher Education, 2009). Similar developments are evident elsewhere in Africa in terms of the establishment of new institutions and actual student numbers (Varghese, 2006).

The changing environment has attracted different types of students – the regular school leaver, the mature student, the diploma holder and the up-grader.² New approaches to teaching and learning and better service delivery are in place.³ These developments are a clear move from elite to mass higher education. The new era has ushered in more competitive and market-oriented approaches with new academic programmes beyond the conventional disciplines. Despite this growth, however, average higher education enrolment rates in Africa are still low.⁴

These changes have influenced women's access to and participation in higher education, positively. Since gender issues intersect other forms of inequality within higher education, continued analysis to gauge the extent to which women are taking advantage of these changes and how the balance sheet of gender equity and equality stands is pertinent.

This paper examines the factors that hold women back as they try to open doors to higher education institutions in Africa. It is based on the author's own research and is informed by the author's practical experience as an actor in higher education. The paper discusses access factors and examines the 'pipeline' that female students have to get through to establish themselves in institutions of higher learning. The research is mainly related to Uganda but evidence shows that this experience is reflected across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The question of numbers

Access to higher education has to be examined from several fronts. The entry stage is very important, since the quantitative aspect demonstrates the openness of the institution. For a long time, there was no particular interest in increasing numbers of female students. In recent years, numbers have increased, but parity has only been attained in a few countries.⁵ Even where numbers of female students are lower, they are above one-third, which is regarded as take-off level for any minority.

Another aspect of access requires questioning the parameters of equal opportunity to take part in the system. Are the programmes on offer relevant to the needs of the female students? This has always been important to the African situation, since colonial times, and is a major explanation for the persistent gender disparities at all levels of education (Kwesiga, 2002).

The third area is the output/outcome of entry and participation, pertaining to equality of educational results or gains. Numerical representation has to be analysed alongside those of outcomes of inclusion. The measure of access is whether the system responds to diversity, and if there are disparities, the extent to which the ground can be levelled (Kwesiga and Ahikire, 2006).

Educational access denotes the existence of specific structures of discrimination within the institution, the broader environment or both (Kwesiga and Ahikire, 2006). Thus, the contemporary environment requires that the positioning of women in higher education in Africa be examined from multiple fronts to ascertain complete access – the ability to enter institutions, the ability to utilise that opportunity and the ability to enjoy the outcomes. While numbers are still important, gender responsiveness and equity are key.

The barriers

Outstanding issues that still hinder the sector from fully opening its doors to women in Africa are briefly examined.

- (i) **The small pool of female participants.** This is as a result of the dwindling numbers of girls as one goes up the educational ladder, because fewer girls, in comparison with boys, move up to the next stage.
- (ii) **The disciplinary divide.** By the time women go into higher education, the system has already 'demarcated' areas of entry for male and female students. This is particularly so for science, mathematics and technology. It is no wonder that even where there is affirmative action, science-based disciplines fail to realise the targeted female numbers.
- (iii) **The cost of education is more felt by the vulnerable.** Despite the recognised expansion in higher education, there is evidence that students drop out due to their inability to pay tuition fees (Kwesiga and Ahikire, 2006). State funding and other offers of scholarships rarely take into account students' background – thus disadvantaging further the vulnerable. It is for this reason that the more recent interventions have had to review funding criteria.
- (iv) **Inadequate strategies to receive and retain female students.** The teaching and learning environment, student and staff welfare, campus security, governance and administration, and the general organisational culture have not adapted sufficiently to attract and retain women participants; this is mainly because gender concerns have for a long time been ignored (Kwesiga, 2002; Morley et al., 2007; Kwesiga and Ahikire, 2006). How do institutions ensure good performance, retention, recruitment to graduate programmes and to staff cadres, and upward mobility of academics and managers? Failure to respond to women's needs along this continuum demonstrates inaccessibility.
- (v) **Few women in decision-making positions.** Educationalists have for a long time advanced the concept of role models to raise aspirations of female students and staff. To date, few female academics rise through the ranks. The support system required to eliminate such disparities – enabling female staff to do research, publish and get promoted, alongside their other responsibilities – is still lacking. Although a female Departmental Head or Dean is no longer rare, there are still very few women Principals, Vice-Chancellors⁶ and Chancellors,⁷ despite the 'mushrooming' of institutions. Females are also under-represented in student governing bodies. A few women are slowly taking up leadership positions in staff associations, but as a group, women are still passive participants within these institutions. Organisational culture remains the main inhibitor (Kwesiga and Ahikire, 2006).

Other forms of inequality that short-change women

The rural-urban divide

Rural areas are more deprived than urban ones in terms of infrastructure (roads, basic amenities, etc.) and become less attractive even to teachers. They have a poorer scholastic support system (buildings, textbooks, exposure to reading materials, television, etc.). Rural schools lack laboratories and good libraries and related educational facilities. There is a clear gap between rural

and urban areas in Africa, and as a result where a person is born determines whether a boy or girl will complete the three stages of education. Rural-based pupils sit the same examination. Admission to higher education ignores the multiple systems within one system. Examination is the sole measure of ability within the sea of inequalities.

The regional divide

This factor, common across Africa, exacerbates other inequalities.⁸ Consequently, in Uganda, a few pockets take the 'lion's share' of state scholarships, illustrating little change, as 70 per cent of such students come from the more prosperous central region. Because of such inequalities, the Government of Uganda recently introduced a District Quota System.⁹

Type of school attended

There is clear dominance of particular schools, year in and year out. Students from less facilitated schools have no hope of accessing the few available state scholarships.¹⁰

Historical, economic and cultural factors create areas of inequality, and unless there are concerted efforts to change the trend, students, and especially women, from such disadvantaged areas continue to be deprived.

Positive steps

Some successful and home-grown interventions have gone a long way to open wide the doors for African women to enter higher education. Below are a few examples of such good practices, mainly from Uganda.

Affirmative Action Programmes (AAPs)

Varied forms of AAPs have been successfully executed across higher education institutions in Africa. As new strategies, some are more successful than others. The 1.5 Points Scheme for undergraduate female students in public universities in Uganda is one success story.¹¹ This scheme became the main lever in raising female enrolments rates from 20 per cent to 45 per cent, and helped females to gain access to professions in which they are usually under-represented (e.g., medicine, engineering, law).

AAPs in specific academic disciplines have also helped narrow the gender gap in science, mathematics and technology. A good example is the 'bridging courses', which help to upgrade female students to the required university entry level.¹² Related to this are the UNESCO Science Chairs in Kenya, Ghana and Swaziland, created to enable successful women scientists to run projects to inspire, encourage, and recruit more female students into science programmes and professions.

Scholarships

Scholarships in favour of women have transformed the lives of African women, many of whom would not have entered higher education. The Carnegie Corporation of New York has been key in the offers of these scholarships. The Corporation provides funds, while institutions decide on the form and management of scholarships. The Uganda programme has so far enabled over 700

girls to enter Makerere University. At the postgraduate level, scholarships for women are mainly through application of quotas by various donors. The lesson is that support for the deprived should not be limited to payment of tuition fees only. Students need to fit into the social fabric of the institution otherwise their performance levels will remain low. Sustainability of such schemes is vital.

Mentoring systems

Mentoring systems have often been recommended as a means of improving the situation of minorities. A recent mode of mentoring at Makerere University has been the Student Peer Trainers. This scheme has enabled those in charge of the administration of student affairs to serve students better, and has given students a sense of belonging and responsibility. It has also resulted in fewer drop-outs and averted poor performance due to social unpreparedness, as well as improved relations between staff and students.¹³

Changing our institutions of higher learning

Contemporary actors have demonstrated that if gender inequalities are to be eliminated, whether at family, religious, or state level, institutions must be adapted to meaningfully accommodate women's interests and needs (Goetz, 1997). In institutions of higher education, positive steps towards realising this cause can be demonstrated and analysed through three types of interventions:

- Introduction of Women's/Gender Studies in African higher education. Since the 1990s, this intervention has aroused much interest in the study of gender disparities. Studies take form of fully established academic units,¹⁴ or a network of individuals operating from varied disciplinary centres; or integration of courses within conventional academic programmes. Using the example of the Makerere University Department of Women and Gender Studies, established in 1993, one can discern the many ways through which the unit has changed the University.¹⁵
- Gender mainstreaming. This intervention consists of various non-academic programmes aimed at creating an all-inclusive environment for various stakeholders. Attention is paid to the full function of the university.
- The African Gender Institute. This institute at the University of Cape Town in South Africa is another form of positive intervention – cutting across the life of the academy – that stimulates intellectual debate and provides African-based publications. Its regional standing strengthens the higher education sector further.

The above interventions have resulted in the acceptance of the essence of gender equity and equality. Once the institution starts to appreciate the rationale for change, it begins to open up the doors wider and faster, with less questioning about relevancy. The need to make such interventions 'visible' (Shirin Rai, 2001; Goetz, 1997) leads to legitimacy – an essential part of institutional change – and intellectual engagements on gender studies. Evidence of gender inclusiveness must be demonstrated in practical terms. The Makerere experience has been translated into national practice but,

as expected, pockets of resistance by some leaders and individuals, even where regulations are in place, still persist.

Change agents

The process of change is always driven by various factors, from within and externally. The State factor is important because of its widespread legitimacy; the women's movements have been crucial as a catalyst for change; and the influence of the global arm through a combination of pressures from international movements, human rights advocates and the United Nations have had an impact on the promotion of gender equity in Africa.¹⁶ Even where ideas are locally generated, funding from international organisations has made a big difference.

Conclusion

The situation of women in higher education in Africa has improved. Some view such changes as 'big strides', especially in various professions (law, the social sciences and education) where female students constitute half or more of total numbers. However, the disciplinary divide still remains a challenge, and has to be tackled from many fronts, including policy inputs from Ministries of Education, as well as institutional and community-based strategies.

There is still a need to translate numbers into real 'presence' in terms of participation and decision-making. Support systems are essential, because institutional cultures do not encourage female students and staff to develop their careers and to feel and act as true participants. In particular, making all levels of educational institutions women-friendly has to become a priority.

A glaring weakness of educational sectors in Africa is that different components of the system are viewed and treated as completely independent units. What happens at the primary level has no direct link to secondary and tertiary levels. This makes it difficult for reformers to effect relevant changes due to lack of linkages.¹⁷ Policy issues are often ad hoc and not adequately piloted.

AAPs need to go beyond the provision of cash alone and pay attention to non-school factors; for example, by working with communities for transformational changes, especially on cultural practices. Constant engagement of society is a powerful weapon.

Historically pedagogical issues have not taken centre stage in higher education. More inquiry in this area is overdue. Orienting or re-orienting teachers with values of gender responsiveness and inclusiveness is essential.

Keeping women's interests on course, while raising their aspirations at all levels will ensure increased numbers of empowered female students and decision-makers, thus enabling women to reap better results from career development.

...differences in economic endowments and social norms that perpetuate subordination form a foundation upon which new types of inequality build.

(Kakuru, 2006, p.24).

Similarly, the growth of higher education in Africa has exposed new areas of focus for women. Unless these are addressed, the doors will stay ajar.

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- 4 Enrolment rates are generally below 5 per cent for most African countries – with a few such as South Africa (15 per cent) and Nigeria (10 per cent) demonstrating better statistics. Some countries are below 1 per cent (e.g., Niger, 0.8 per cent).
 - 5 For a long time, such countries as Botswana and Swaziland have had higher female numbers at secondary school level, thus further confirming that the lower levels of education affect what happens at higher education.
 - 6 Such leaders are found in many African countries but this is a recent development.
 - 7 Only one in Uganda and Kenya.
 - 8 Across African countries, there have always been marginalised regions in terms of educational facilities due to inaccessibility, culture, etc.
 - 9 Analysis of annual public admission figures (Academic Registrar's Department, Makerere University) shows that performance levels in national examinations vary so much that some districts sometimes fail to produce enough qualified students to take up their quota.
 - 10 In fact, admission through scholarship is principally concentrated among 25–30 schools out of the total of 800 schools (Office of the Academic Registrar, Makerere University on 2007/2008 admissions).
 - 11 An additional 1.5 points is awarded to the scores earned by each qualified female student at the Advanced Secondary School level for purposes of admission to state-funded universities, since 1994.
 - 12 This has been successfully carried out at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to increase the number of female science students.
 - 13 From personal testimonies from former students who meet the author from time to time.
 - 14 Uganda and Cameroon were the first to establish such units.
 - 15 The Department has produced students at undergraduate, and graduate levels, including PhDs, run short courses for various gender practitioners, and has published widely.
 - 16 A series of International Conferences on Women (1975, 1980, 1985, 1995, 2000 and 2005) has influenced member states to comply with the UN agenda for the advancement of women.
 - 17 For example, the need to popularise science-based disciplines should commence at the primary level through to secondary and university, if gender disparities across academic disciplines are to be eliminated.

Endnotes

- 1 Statement by the Honourable Geraldine Namirembe Bitamazire during an interview by the author researching on Uganda's prospects of meeting the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on Gender Parity.
- 2 The up-graders go through 'bridging' courses to bring their basic qualifications up to the required levels of entry into higher education institutions.
- 3 Distance education programmes have sprung up; evening and weekend classes and the provision of in-service programmes are such new areas of emphasis. These include the upgrading of school teachers to undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes during school holidays, which is particularly common in East African universities.

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