



## Re-Engineering Gender Equality in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Discussion of gender inequality in education is not new and has been on the research and political agenda of democratic countries for years, nonetheless equality is still achieved. In both formal and informal education, its known that invisibilisation of woman in official curricular, a gender stereotype in text book girls achievements and boys academic failures at school, difficulties for women teachers in accessing senior posts within school training in gender equality in education( co education) continues. There are also new emphases of gender issues emerging concerning violence in school, multiple inequalities or intercultural topics.

There are countries with a long history of gender or non sexist policies in education where the implementation of these strategies have been a bottom up process initiated by famine movements such as the United Kingdom, France .Germany and the Scandinavian)

There are other countries where question of gender equality are known mostly as directions from the EU such as Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovenia and Poland.

Also other countries outside Europe like Australia and Brazil are very much involved in developing programs for promoting gender equality and to empower women.

The level of higher education institutions can be significant sites for the reproduction of gender equalities. Equally they have the potential to challenge them. The project identifies arrange of good practices to promote gender equality including effective national implementation strategies for gender equality for example; in Uganda and Tanzania, international networks for example; the association of commonwealth universities program on women in management, organizational gender audits in Uganda, effective institutional responses to discrimination in south Africa and staff development program for women in south Africa and Uganda.

In all cases, gender equality initiatives have faced criticisms that either they are not needed or they do not work.

### Enablers and Constraints to Promoting Gender Equality

#### a) *Gender Violence/Harassment / Abuse:*

Gender violence is reported in many countries including name calling and informal initiations rituals known as ragging in Sri-Lanka, sexual harassment in Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda. At the most serious end of the continuum is rape and this was reports in Nigeria and South Africa with numerous comments in about how fear of rape, attack and harassment structures women's behaviors and reduces their confidence and mobility.

#### b) *Male Domination:*

The domination of time and space in classrooms and boardrooms is widely noted in all countries except South Africa. It is also related to domination of decision-making, resource allocation,



knowledge production and transmission research and opportunities tier international work and professional development.

c) *Organizational Culture And Micro Politics:*

The culture of an organization is encoded in languages, symbols. Artifacts, dress code, gender of staff and students, communication systems, relationships, informal practices and groupings. While there is often a formal commitment to promoting gender equality, informal practices such as exclusions, humor, sarcasm, coalitions and non transparent decision making can operate to exclude or undermine women, e.g. women not receiving information about opportunities for professional development or international exchanges and women not being invited to apply for promotion.

d) *Structures And Agency:*

There is always a deficit model of women's preparedness for higher education as students and for seniority as staff in higher education. This means that explanations for women under representation are frequently framed in terms of women's lack of self esteem, their unwillingness to put themselves forward or their prioritizing of their personal rather than professional lives. This view means that structures like child care facilities, promotions criteria and selection procedures are over looked.

e) *Lack Of Understanding Of Diversity:*

This view seems to suggest that if women were entering and achieving in higher education, then no further attention is required. This is noticeable in Sri-Lanka and Nigeria. There is an assumption the women will assimilate into existing modes of provision and that no review of the curriculum or pedagogy is necessary. Lack of attention to difference and diversity can also mean that when women are considered, they are treated as a homogeneous group, undifferentiated by socio economic background, race, ethnicity and religion, age, sexual orientation or disability.

f) *Low Numbers Of Women In Senior Academic And Management Positions:*

For instance, there may be fewer role models for women students and junior women staff, the association of knowledge with male authority and the ongoing belief that only men could be leaders. There may be concerns that women interests are not represented at senior levels, that appointment and promotion procedures favors men and that woman will be rejected if they put themselves forward. There is also the issue of status injury as women's intellectual and professional capital appears to be undervalued in the knowledge economy.

g) *Gender Neutrality /Blindness , Rather Than Gender Awareness:*

Research terms in all countries note how academics and managers often claim not to discriminate against women or notice gender. In this sense, they purport to be gender "blind" or neutral. However this often means that women's specific needs and experiences are over looked so long as women assimilate and do not draw attention to their difference, there are not problems. However, this approach does not actively promote gender awareness or equity.



## Gender Equity is being Promoted by:

1. *New constituencies in mass higher education:*  
More people are being encouraged to enter high education as part of the globalization knowledge economy and the need to increase the supply of highly skilled workers. While this is often the result of a commitment to human capital rather than social inclusions, more women are entering higher education.
2. *Internationalism*  
This takes the form of profession and academic networks and enhanced mobility of students and staff across national boundaries. It provides opportunities for policy transfer and borrowing and communication of ideas and program for gender equity. It also takes the form of international policy initiatives and conferences to promote gender equity, for example, the impact of the fourth world conference on women in 1995, where gender mainstreaming was one of the agreed critical areas of concern and the UNESCO world conference on higher education in 1998 in which women enrollment and curriculum change were highlighted.
3. *Policy development and implementation:*  
This is taking place at international level via initiatives including the UNESCO world declaration on higher education in 1998 and at national level for example; transformation policies in south Africa. These policies help to put gender on national and organizational agendas and allocate resources to implementation.
4. *Links with the community:*  
This takes a variety of forms including out reach program between universities and schools, networks between non governmental organizations concerned with gender and with gender scholars in higher education. The links between gender activities and policies in primary, secondary, and higher education are essential to ensure progressive raise aspirations and prepare women for higher education.

## Gender Education and Economic Development

The economic value of higher education is a subject of considerable debate- particularly in low income countries (task force on higher education and society. 2000). Higher education is repeatedly positioned by the international community as central site for facilitating the skills, knowledge and the expertise that are essential to economic and social development in low income countries (UNESCO, 1998. World bank 2002,2005, commission for Africa 2005) higher educational institutions are pivotal in the globalised knowledge economy , the initial and continuing training of professionals , national wealth creation, international competitiveness and innovation in science technology.

Additionally the economics of gender equity are well documented. Gender equality is often an essential strategy of poverty reduction goals (Shabaya and Konadu Agyemang, 2004). Macro level research stresses the links between girls and women's education and economic development. Nations with higher levels of female enrolment in education in general have higher over all levels of economic productivity (Klasen 2002).

World bank research 2001 shows that countries with smaller gaps between women and men in areas such as education, employment and property rights not only have lower child malnutrition and mortality



but also more transparent business and government and faster economic growth, which in turn helps to economic growth, which in turn helps to narrow the gender gap.

Therefore in order for new knowledge societies not to recreate and reinforce systematic social inequalities, some consideration of how higher education is gendered is important

## Conclusion

As long as girls do not have equal access to education, gender equality is but a pipe dream. But beyond merely having equal access to education, true gender equality means that schools are gender sensitive environment that promotes equal participation and empowerment.

Gender equality requires adapting equally to the needs and interest of girls and boys creating a school environment that is friendly to both sexes and ensuring that women are equally represented in teaching administrative and educational leadership roles.

Indeed gender equality is an essential strategy for ending discrimination and achieving justice in societies. UNICEF for example is committed to taking action where it is needed most and its priorities reflect this core value, e.g.; equal access to education and universal primary school education, empowerment of women through girl's education and gender equality, education in emergencies and post – crisis education and enhancing quality in primary and secondary education.