

Women in Higher Education: Gender Disparities, the Kenyan Experience

Catherine Ngina Musau
Machakos Teachers' College, Kenya.

Tecla C. Kirwa
Kenya Institute of Management, Kenya.

Paper Received on: 25/01/2012

Reviewed Paper on: 16/02/2012

Paper Accepted on: 16/02/2012

Abstract

Kenya introduced free primary education and affordable secondary tuition in 2003 and 2008 respectively. With these developments, there was increased enrolment both at the primary and secondary school level. There has never been a notable gender disparity at the primary school level, however at the secondary school level; the number of boys enrolled was more than that of girls (54.17% and 45.83% respectively for both boys and girls respectively). At the higher educational levels, the disparity in enrolment is even higher in favour of men. In the choice of subjects, it was realized that fewer women are admitted in science and technology based courses as compared to that of men. In some courses such as medical engineering, the gender disparity is so glaring such that for every woman enrolled, there are 32 men. This paper therefore discusses the reasons for women in higher education, the Kenyan situation with some data as evidence and the interventions put in place by the government and the higher educational institutions to reduce the disparity. Lastly some more suggestions are made on what could be done to rectify the situation.

Key Words: *Gender disparity, Higher education, Women*

Introduction

As a result of the introduction in 2003 of free primary education in Kenya, there has been a major increase in primary school attendance. According to Partnership for Higher Education in Africa (PHEIA, 2009) the primary school enrolment has increased by more than one million

since the introduction of free primary education. This trend has been hard to sustain, and achieving participation in higher levels of the education system remains a serious challenge. In Kenya, only four of every one hundred students will pursue higher education (Ibid).

In Kenya, there is no notable gender disparity in access to primary education, the attendance is more or less equal numbers for both boys and girls. With the introduction of subsidized secondary education in the year 2008, the transition rate from primary to secondary schools increased from 56.0% to 59.9%. In terms of gender, the transition rate from primary to secondary schools was 63.2% and 56.5% for boys and girls respectively and consequently gender disparity in gross enrolment. The table 1.0 shows the gross enrolment at primary and secondary schools during the 2007/2008 academic

TABLE: 1
Gross Enrolment in primary and secondary schools, 2009/2010

School Level	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary	4 258 616 (51.12%)	4 071 532(48.88%)	8 330 148
Secondary	639 393 (54.17%)	540 874(45.83%)	1 180 267

Source: EMIS Unit, Ministry of Education, Kenya

Why Higher Education for Women?

Women who have had a chance of higher education have been able to contain socio-cultural demands for larger families and instead go for smaller families, share information and gain self-confidence (Kabonesa, 2010). They also lower barriers to women access to higher education through collective action, political engagements, advocacy and mobilization (Ibid). Higher education exposes women to opportunities that increase their incomes and bring women in contact with each other and form social networks. Despite all these benefits for women in higher education, they continue to experience gender inequality in enrolment, governance, attendance and achievement patterns and curriculum reform especially in the developing countries.

The Kenyan Situation

In Kenyan higher educational institutions (tertiary institutions and universities), there is a disturbing gender gap both in gross enrolment and the choice of student courses. The gender gap in gross enrolment which is in favour of men is caused by certain cultural practices and beliefs

such as female genital mutilations, early marriages, and the preference for boy child education. Another cause is poverty and HIV/AIDS where the prevalence rate for women is almost double (8.0%) that of men which is 4.3% (Republic of Kenya, 2010).

Concerns about the under representation of girls in the fields of science, engineering and technology in Kenya have been raised and expressed by the government and various organizations for a long time. The major factors which contribute to this under representation have been identified to include; lack of relevant policies, inadequate curriculum content and delivery, biased teaching materials, lack of role models and negative socio-cultural attitudes and practices (MoHEST, 2010).

The total number of females and males enrolled in the national polytechnics was 39.46% and 60.54% respectively during the 2007-2008 academic year (MoE, 2007). Table 2.0 shows the students' enrolment per gender in the national polytechnics during the 2007-2008 academic year.

TABLE: 2
Students' enrolment per course per gender during the 2007-2008 academic year for national polytechnics

Course	Male	Female	Total
ICT	209 (59.04%)	145(40.96%)	354(100%)
Chemical technology	377(55.77%)	299(44.23%)	676(100%)
Health and Applied sciences	1262(39.69%)	1918(60.31%)	3180(100%)
Business studies	1070(56.12%)	837(43.88%)	1907(100%)
Mathematics, surveying and mapping	90(79.65%)	23(20.35%)	113(100%)
Building and civil engineering	743(77.88%)	211(22.12%)	954(100%)
Medical Engineering	161(96.99%)	5(3.01%)	166(100%)
Electrical/ Electronic Engineering	1144(77.72%)	328(22.28)	1472(100%)
Mechanical/ Automotive Engineering	1041(70.91%)	427(29.09%)	1468(100%)
Information and Liberal arts	93(36.05%)	165(63.95%)	258(100%)
Institutional management	835(78.33%)	231(21.67%)	1066(100%)
Graphic Arts	172(77.48%)	50(22.52%)	222(100%)
Instructor Training	34(64.15%)	19(35.85%)	53(100%)
Education	7(10.45%)	60(89.55%)	67(100%)
Totals	7238(60.54%)	4718(39.46%)	11 956(100%)

Source: Directorate of Technical Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, Kenya

From the table 2.0 the observation is that there is a gender disparity in favour of men. In some courses such as medical engineering, the gender disparity is so glaring such that for every woman enrolled, there are 32 men. It is only in arts and social sciences such as education and information and liberal arts, and in health and applied sciences (which is more of a social science) where the number of women registered surpasses that of men. The situation is not different from any other type of middle colleges.

TABLE: 3
Gross Enrolment per Gender in Public and Private Universities 2003-2004 through 2007-2008 academic years

INSTITUTION	2003/2004		2004/2005		2005/2006		2006/2007		2007/2008	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nairobi	16991	9720	21268	11706	21940	11765	22513	12426	23513	12826
Kenyatta	10753	5023	11252	4803	10896	4787	8845	7891	10172	8425
Moi	5804	4643	6796	5214	6831	5314	8604	6059	8674	6158
Egerton	6908	2444	6351	2246	6262	2236	8163	4006	8262	4205
Jomo Kenyatta	3203	1454	4315	1959	4207	1673	4460	1845	5450	2512
Maseno	3429	2178	3413	2168	2826	1878	2778	1937	3487	2199
Masinde Muliro					775	287	1154	656	946	278
Private Universities	4412	5128	4597	5453	5068	5571	11828	9064	10271	10861
Total	51500	30590	57990	33551	58805	33511	68345	43884	70775	47464

From table 3.0, it can be observed that there was a gender disparity in favour of men in the five public universities for the five academic years. In the private universities, there were more women than men in all the years other than the 2006/2007 academic year. The reason for the disparities could be attributed to the fact that most of those who qualify to enter public universities are men. The case of higher enrolment for women than men in private universities is because most of the private universities offer courses that are arts and social sciences based hence most women do enroll for that. In the choice of courses, just like in the national polytechnics, there is gender inequality biased against women. As pointed by the Partnership for Higher education in Africa(2009), nowhere is this disparity more evident than in mathematics

and science, where, depending on the department, there are between three and ten times as many men as women. A major obstacle for female students is the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education exams, which require a minimum grade of C+ for university admission, and which women are far less likely to pass than men.

Interventions to narrow the gender gap in higher education in Kenya

There have been efforts to narrow the gender gap both at the enrolment and choice of subjects for study. This is done through initiatives by institutions of higher learning and the government.

i) Institutions of Higher Learning driven initiatives

Higher educational institutions in Kenya can play an effective role in the equalization of education by advocating for equal opportunities for all in the pursuit of education. They can also hold public forums that emphasize on the value of education. Through various strategies, public universities, as the highest institutions of learning and research can help in the realization of gender equality within learning institutions. Attempts have been made by public universities and other institutes of higher education to address the gender disparity in higher education through implementation of a number of initiatives towards mainstreaming gender into their core functions of teaching, learning, research and administration systems.

For instance, the Joint Admission Board of Kenya (JAB) for public universities in 2002 lowered the cut-off points for girls to B+ of 68 points instead of 69 points to accommodate an extra 224 female students in public universities. This raised the initial number of female students from 2,547(25.63%) to 2,771(27.27%) (Njihia, 2005). This was against a population of 7,392 male students who had acquired B+ grade of 69 points (JAB Sub Committee, 2002). Although the lowering of one point in university admission for girls has since become a policy, gender disparities are still visible within universities (Kanake, 2007).

Kombo and Kimani (2011) identify other initiatives by universities as university community outreach projects which help to alleviate rural poverty, distance education and open learning programs which allow men and women to work and study. It is also pointed out that university students have a role exposing gender inequality through research work and awareness creation (Ibid). University and college students have also utilized skills and drama to pass messages to

communities on the need to support women education. There is a proposal by universities to work hand in hand with educational policy makers in devising strategies to address gender disparity in higher education.

In terms of courses that women get enrolled into, there have been efforts to narrow the gap by individual universities. For example, with partnership support, Kenyatta University has developed an ambitious plan to increase women's participation and strengthen their performance. The university has employed a variety of successful strategies, beginning by raising administrators' awareness of the value of this effort. They have trained mentors and role models for women in science, created science students' associations and offered career workshops for secondary school students (PHEA, 2009). According to the vice-chancellor of the University Olive Mugenda, outreach to secondary schools helps instill confidence in female students. She argues that this was a major omission in the past and that working directly with secondary schools had a significant impact on girls considering science as a real option for the future (Ibid).

Many public universities in Kenya have also established women and gender departments, and gender institutes. The purpose of these departments and institutes is to create gender sensitization and ensure compliance to national and international gender policies.

ii) Government initiatives

The Kenya government has made efforts to narrow the gender gap in higher education. In the year 2008, the government introduced subsidized secondary education, where the government caters for tuition fees for all students enrolled in public secondary schools while the parents cater for boarding costs. This has in a way helped to reduce drop-outs whose cause is poverty. There have been sustained efforts to increase transition rates from primary to secondary schools by increasing the completion rate.

Policies and strategies to reduce gender disparity in higher education have also been formulated. These include policies which facilitate the re-admission of young mothers after giving birth, affirmative action in higher education management and special undergraduate scholarships for women only for science and technology based courses in middle colleges.

The Government of Kenya supports gender parity in general through its Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development. The government has gone further to ensure that the gender mainstreaming in science, technology and innovation (ST&I) is handled separately by the Ministry of

Higher Education Science and Technology (MoHEST). The Ministry in collaboration with Women in Science, Technology and Innovation (WOSTI) has organized several National Workshop on Gender Mainstreaming in Science, Technology and Innovation (ST&I). These workshops have created awareness, provided an insight to the special roles women play and the problems they encounter in the community and the family that makes it even more important to invest in ST&I.

Conclusions

There is a notable gender disparity in women participation in higher education both in enrolment and the choice of courses in Kenyan. Although there are initiatives which are pioneered by the government of Kenya and higher educational institutions, much needs to be done. All educational stakeholders should partner in coming up with appropriate strategies of correcting the imbalance both at the basic and higher educational levels.

Suggestions

Other initiatives that can be implemented to narrow the gender gap in higher education in Kenya include the following:

- 1) Increasing the number of women in positions of decision making.

The number of women in policy making and decision making positions in higher education is still low. There is need to make the number higher, probably to be at par with that of men through necessary policies and legislation.

- 2) Creating awareness and skills development at the basic levels.

For any meaningful participation of women in higher education, then there is need to create awareness at the primary and secondary school levels on the need for the support of the girl Childs' education.

- 3) Mainstreaming gender in the curriculum

The curriculum across the school system is structured such that it is suited to each of the gender. For example, many of areas in the sciences and technology have contents whose application is biased to men's cultural roles e.g. bicycle riding which is a man's activity in Africa.

- 4) Advocacy and lobbying

Advocacy by both professional and opinion leaders is necessary for parity in higher education.

The women themselves should also lobby for equal representation in higher education.

References

- JAB. (2002). *Joint Admission Board Sub-Committee*,
- Kabonesa, C. (2010). *Mainstreaming Gender in Institutions of Higher Learning: Approaches, challenges and lessons*. A paper presented at the ministerial conference on Higher Education in Agriculture in Africa: Gender Side Meeting, 15th November, 2010, Munyonyo, Kampala, Uganda.
- Kanake L. (1997). *Gender Disparities among the Academic Staff in Kenyan public Universities*. Nairobi: Lyceum Educational Consultants.
- Kombo, D.K. & Kimani, E. N. (2011). *The Role of Kenyan Public universities in Addressing Regional and Gender Disparities in Education: A case Study of Kenyatta University*. An unpublished research, Kenyatta University.
- MoE (2007). *Education Statistical Booklet, 2003-2007*. Nairobi: Ministry of Education.
- MoHEST (2010). *Women in Science and Technology and Innovation: Developing Strategies for a Competitive workforce*. A Report of East African regional Workshop held in Mombasa, Kenya on 25th -26th February, 2010.
- Njihia M. (2005). 'What is the Role of a University in Society?' *Daily Nation*, July 28, 2005:IXX
- PHEA (2009). *Seven Nations, Six Foundations, One Mission: Africa's Future*. Retrieved on December 12, 2011 from www.foundation-partnership.org/pubs/pdf/brochure.pdf
- Republic of Kenya (2010). *Kenya Aids Indicator Survey*. Nairobi: National Aids and Control Council.