

Chapter 6

Gender Equality Policy, Elites and Women Empowerment in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Gender equality, and its resultant empowerment of women, is a recent phenomenon in Africa. This study examined two questions; 1) To what extent do the elites in Institutions of Higher Education practise gender equality to women empowerment? 2) What are the inhibitions of the contribution of higher education towards women empowerment? The study was qualitative and cross-sectional. Data was obtained from reports and semi-structured interviews, as well as 5 focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews respondents included 20 academic and 20 support staff. Findings showed that there is still a gap to enable women participate on the same footing as men. Women empowerment in Education takes leadership interest, networks, meritocracy as well as women assertiveness. Limitations to gender equality policy implementation among elites in higher education are individual, social-cultural and economic. Higher education is characterised by stereotypes and retrogressive cultural beliefs which are subtly reproduced throughout the education system. The gender equality policy (2009) has been implemented in favour of men; therefore, the situation has to be improved with concerted efforts by the various stakeholders. Gender disaggregated data should be used in Higher Education to assess women empowerment as well as tracking both quantitative and qualitative women empowerment outcomes in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is the process of being fair to women and men (UNFPA¹). Gender equality also refers to the process of allocating resources, programs and decision making fairly to both males and females without any discrimination on the basis of sex and addressing any imbalances in the benefits available to males and females (UNESCO, 2000). This chapter uses the words gender equality and gender equity synonymously. It serves to ensure merit per opportunity as far as gender is concerned. Gender equity, and its resultant empowerment of women, is a recent phenomenon in Africa. Women were mostly domesticated and known and accepted as cooks, only providing supportive roles to men. Men were continually regarded as the superior gender and enjoyed all the priorities while women remained marginalized. As a result Africa has lost centuries of progress due to underutilized efforts and capacity of women (Tuyizire, 2007). The international promotion of notions of gender equality and empowerment has entrenched all sections and sectors of society in Africa.

The women of Uganda face a wide range of challenges as a result of communal discrimination and low social status. Although the country is recognized as one of the world's developing countries that has made attempts to empower women. Makerere University, a leading Higher Education Institution in Uganda, for example, has implemented Gender Management Systems (Singh, 2002) by developing gender equality policies at institutional level to guide management in gender decision – making and give direction to women empowerment. The attempts made especially amongst the elites in higher education in implementation of the gender and equality policy are yet to be documented.

The promotion of gender equality and empowerment in Africa as a recent phenomenon is affected by systemic cultural biases against women (Tuyizire, 2007). This bias against women is also founded on a history of patriarchal family systems. The neglect of women in society had deprived Africa of capable and competent human resource that now appears apparent in all sectors including higher education where many women have risen to positions of responsibility on merit. The principle of gender equality and empowerment is the foundation on which gender equality policies in higher institutions of learning were laid (Gender Mainstreaming Division, MAK, 2007). This chapter explores literature on gender equality and empowerment and focuses on higher education where literature has paid little attention. The chapter presents the case study of Makerere University Business School (MUBS), a constituent College of Makerere University in Uganda. The college is managed by policies of the parent university, Makerere University. MUBS was chosen because it is recognized as a benchmark for management practice for other institutions both nationally and regionally (Ssonko, 2007).

This work contributes to the theme of empowering women in higher education in the developing world. The first part of the chapter presents an examination of the history of women empowerment and the emergence of gender equality in the developing world, and Uganda in particular. The second part of the chapter presents findings from a survey based on primary and secondary data. Semi – structured interviews were used to collect primary data and reports were used for secondary data collection. The chapter also addressed the following questions:

1. To what extent do the elites in Institutions of Higher Education practise gender equality to women empowerment?
2. What are the inhibitions of the contribution of higher education towards women empowerment?

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