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Engendering University Curricula in Zimbabwe: Barriers and Challenges in the Zimbabwean Government Universities

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that women constitute the majority of the population the world over, they have continued to be undermined in their quest to access education. This points to the rationale for gender responsive pedagogy in the higher education system in Zimbabwe. However, there continues to be barriers and challenges that impinge on the learning and teaching of women in tertiary institutions in the country, hence university curricula should be responsive to the gendered needs of society. The study made use of the interpretive paradigm and the qualitative methodology. Under the qualitative methodology, a descriptive survey research design was adopted under which data collection for the study was done through in-depth interviews with key informants, particularly those from the educational policy department. A purposively selected sample of fifteen participants was utilised. The findings of the study indicated that though inroads have been made towards engendering university curricula, numerous barriers and challenges continue to hamper its implementation. Such barriers were found to include poverty, inadequate availability of resources and socio-cultural values such as patriarchy. The study, therefore, recommended that while the provision of gender inclusivity is provided for under the current Zimbabwe constitution, there is need for inclusivity in the implementation of gender responsive university curricula in Zimbabwe.

Key words: curricula, gender responsive, barriers, women

INTRODUCTION

The topic of gender and education has been one of the most topical as well as problematic issues in the contemporary milieu. This is because over the years, women have padded behind men in educational attainment as epitomised by more boys going to college (Kadaba, 2013). This view is complimented by Vincent-Lancrin (2008) who observes that for many years, men have received a better education than women and in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries, more men than women went on to higher education and obtained more degrees. This is despite the fact that 49.55% of the global population are women (United Nations, 2017). In the same vein, Kadaba (2013) highlights that one of the most talked about issues in education, the widening achievement difference between boys and girls, has been debated vociferously for more than a decade. Larrondo and Rivero (2017) argue that issues relating to access to higher education; college experiences; and post-collegiate outcomes facilitate the gendering of university curricula. The degree to which women and men fare in these distinguishing areas, however, show different trends.

While Koda and Kabahamba (2011) acknowledge that university education is a catalyst for gender equality, and is capable of changing gender discriminatory norms, values and practices through a curriculum that provides gendered knowledge relevant to life in a gendered world, gender gaps still exist in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. This implies bringing gender equality into the mainstream of the higher education sector, by means of an adjustment of the educational issues, which are influential in society (Larrondo and Rivero, 2017). In the same vein, gender inequality has been argued to be a major factor influencing low female literacy (Dejia and Teherani- Kronner, 2010). Contextually, this paper's aim, therefore, was to advance the rationale for gender responsive pedagogy in the higher education systems in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that the continued existence of barriers and challenges that impinge on the learning and teaching of women in tertiary institutions in the country requires a responsive university curricula aimed towards addressing the gendered needs of society. Although the number of women accessing higher education in Zimbabwe has increased to become more than that of males, they have been lagging in science,

technology, engineering and mathematical disciplines.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although women represent a substantial majority of the world's population with over 52% (United Nations Population Division, 2017), the existence of numerous barriers continue to undermine their ability to access education. In Zimbabwe, curricula in higher education institutions continue to reflect gender biases and discriminatory norms that affect women's endeavours to learn. This has further impacted negatively on the women's experiences (that is, treatment by male lecturers which could lead to their abuse) at university as well as their performance in the same fora (Grunberg, 2011). Within this background, the study sought to explore the barriers and challenges that affect the learning of women in higher education institutions.

STUDY QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the impact of gender discrimination on learning and teaching in higher education in Zimbabwe and how effective are legal frameworks for achieving gender equality in the country?
2. What suggestions would be proffered towards the development of gendered curricula in Zimbabwe`s higher education system?

METHODOLOGY

For the study, an interpretive research paradigm which attempts to understand the viewpoint of the subject being observed, rather than the viewpoint of the observer, was adopted. In line with this paradigm, a qualitative research methodology was used. This methodology was favoured given its recognition that understanding a social or human problem, is based on building a complex, holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducting the study in a natural setting. A descriptive survey design was further used for the study with selection of study participants being done through purposive sampling, which according to Mason (2002) allowed the researcher to select individuals who exhibited characteristics that suited the specific needs of the study. A sample of 15 key participants was chosen for this study. The collection of data was done through in-depth interviews with the chosen key informants, given their relative experience in gender equality and education. The informants included those from the educational policy department in the Ministry of Higher Education and Tertiary Education, officials

from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, the Gender Commission, International and local Non-Governmental Organisations in gender and education programming, civil society organisations in education, Academics and Educational Rights and Gender activists. Apart from the in-depth interviews, document analysis was used as a complementary data collection tool. Using documentary review, data were also collected from books, journal articles, policy documents and archives as well as reports and articles from the internet. For analysis and presentation of findings, thematic analysis was utilised.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the theories of Feminism and Liberal feminism as detailed below:

FEMINISM

Lorber (2009) argues that Feminism is a theory that purports that men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially. It aims to promote an understanding of the nature of gender inequality in societies. Lorber (2009) also notes that, the main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply rooted in the structure of societies. Inequality based on gender, she argues, is constructed into the institution of marriage and families, work and the economy, politics, religions, the arts, education and other cultural productions. Making women and men equal, therefore, necessitates social and not individual solutions. Such arguments guided this study in coming up with views to engender university curricula in Zimbabwe.

LIBERAL FEMINISM

According to Samkange (2015), liberal feminism asserts that gender differences are not based in biology, and therefore that women and men are not all that different - their common humanity supersedes their procreative differentiation. Central to the theory of liberal feminism is the notion that the main source of gender inequality is the "process of socialisation" (learning process by which you acquire the knowledge, skill, and motivations required to participate in social life). Within this context, Liberal Feminist Theory can be explained as an individualistic form which concentrates on women having their equality through being responsible for their actions and choices (Brookes, 2008). The circumstances that shaped women’s lives were the laws and prejudices (shared by men and women) that excluded them from the public sphere

and from the right to earn their own living on an equal footing with men. Women struggled for the right to higher education, entrance into the professions, the right to own property and hold public office, and for suffrage, the right that came to symbolise full citizenship. From the above views, it can be argued that the liberal feminist theory recognises the presence of inequalities in society that are gender related, but the onus is on the individuals affected to improve their situation hence auguring well with the purposes of this study.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptualising Gender

From the outset, it is imperative to conceptualise the term 'gender', as it is significant in contextualising the study, as well as to set the parameters for this paper. Over the years, there have been diverse conceptualisations of gender. Gender refers to the attributes associated with being male or female and the relationship between women and men and girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialisation processes. They are context- or time-specific and changeable… (UN Women, 2013). Similarly, UNESCO (2003) points to gender as referring to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in families, societies and cultures. Other conceptions of gender refer to it as the economic, social, political, and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being women and men (The Jhpiego Gender Analysis Toolkit, 2016). As such, the societal characterisations of what it implies to be a woman or a man differ among cultures and transform over time. Therefore, gender should be viewed as a socio-cultural notion epitomising certain characteristics and roles connected to different sets of persons with regard to their sex and sexuality. In this regard, the terms "gender" and "gender relations" were originated in the 1970's by American and English feminists (Bisilliat, 2001).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned definitions of gender, caution has to be exercised as most often, the concept is habitually used as a synonym for woman, or the female sex. It can, therefore, be reasonably assumed that it is this watered-down, almost "dulled" meaning of the word, which, by removing much of its epistemological and ideological force, vindicates its excessive use (Bisilliat, 2001). Furthermore, the afore-given definitions of the concept of gender indicate it is more than the biological differences between males and females. (Fung, 2017). Further, the

definitions imply the collection of all the acknowledged variances between men and women that are socially determined. In addition, the term *gender* indicates the presence of some rudimentary asymmetry and hierarchy between both, groups, sexes and genders - one of them dominating and the other dominated - which is the basis of male power (Bisilliat, 2001) and ultimately the overarching requirement to view men in relation to women, even though these relations are harmonious or skirmish. Bosch (2002) and Mazurana (2013) also agree that gender is a power dynamic which allocates roles, power and resources available to females and males in any culture. Thus, there exists uneven power relations in gender and as such, power becomes an essential factor for determining access, participation and grades in the higher education institutions. Such views facilitate an understanding of the intricacies surrounding the tertiary education sector.

Perhaps more significantly and in the context of this study, the concept of gender implies knowledge of the difference between the sexes. This, however, does not mean knowledge is static, but rather is a variable that is subject to change over time. As is with knowledge, gender is conceptually dynamic as social roles transform over time. Hence, this could be a feature that gives credence to the transformation of university curricula towards gender responsiveness.

GENDER IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ZIMBABWE

Flowing from the above-discussed conceptions of gender, the place of gender in education has always been precarious. This is perhaps what inclined Grünberg (2011) to assert that at its best, gender is marginalised within the area of Gender Studies – quite developed and institutionalised in the majority of the countries – but is rarely included in the higher curricula of other disciplines. International trends in gender inequalities in higher education can be determined by examining the changes in the composition of the student population in higher education, the relative share of degrees awarded to women each year, the levels of education attained by men and women and, lastly, the differences between the subjects studied by men and women (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008).

Amid the argument by Hooks (1994) that teaching gender within a mainstreamed paradigm is "teaching students to 'transgress' against racial, sexual, and class boundaries in order to

achieve the gift of freedom, is to educate as the practice of freedom," Grünberg (2011) posits that 'Why study gender?' and, 'What is gender?' should no longer be the questions. Focus, should now be shifted towards finding answers with regard to the question of 'How to study gender?' Answers to this question facilitate the development of a gender-inclusive curriculum in tertiary education (Grünberg, 2011). Pandelejmoni (2011) holds a similar view arguing that in terms of higher education studies, interest should be manifest in modernising the curricula. Since a (higher) education curriculum mirrors a certain structure of reality, a particular way of selecting and organising the vast universe of possible knowledge, gender is an important ingredient of any of these particular stories (Grünberg, 2011).

KIT (n.d.) puts emphasis on gender analysis in higher education aimed at making visible and explaining inequities in enrolment, completion and transition as well as a rights analysis to understand what lies at the root of these rights failures. This is founded on the perspective that activities and practices in the classroom, in educational establishments and in the broader community are entirely interconnected and they provide the basis for the ontological standpoint of students, as well as offer instruction in modes of interacting for the future (KIT, nd). Hence, focusing and changing university curricula engenders the basis for a more equitable economy and society.

Subsequently though, higher education still reflects areas of learning within which women are under-represented. The very few women that are fortunate enough to join higher institutions are characterised by lower academic performance and higher forced withdrawal (Atinaf and Petros, 2016). Effectively and more significantly, the existence of such inequalities affects the future lives of women in relation to their greater participation in the labour market, politics and other positions of decision-making.

The Zimbabwe education system is composed of numerous tiers that include primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. The tertiary education commonly offers qualifications at the following levels: certificate, diploma, post-graduate diploma and degree offered in polytechnics, universities and other institutions of higher learning. According to ZIMSTAT (2014), an overview of the structure of the Zimbabwe education system shows that each stage has objectives that should be met, but on the whole, each level serves to prepare a person for the levels beyond it.

At the time of Zimbabwe's independence, the University of Zimbabwe was the only national university in the country. Nevertheless, over the years, there have been numerous other universities that have been instituted as reflected by the 22 recognised universities, 9 recognised polytechnics and 12 recognised teacher education colleges that are present to date (ZIMSTAT, 2014). The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education oversees the activities within the higher education sector in the country. At university level, both academic higher education and higher professional education are offered. The universities offer both degree programmes and non-degree programmes. In university education, degrees such as Bachelors (General) undergraduate, postgraduate degrees and diplomas, Masters' degrees and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) are offered. The minimum requirement of EP-Nuffic (2015) for admission to a university bachelor's programme, is that the student should hold a Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education at Ordinary Level with at least 5 passes, or the Zimbabwe General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level with at least 2 passes. Higher requirements can be set depending on the degree programme. Most universities conduct a selective admissions policy, which means in practice, good results should be achieved.

Given the foregoing, and while there has been an affirmative action policy in place in relation to the admission of students to universities, the number of female students that have been enrolled is still way below the expected. Data from ZIMSTAT (2014) confirm that figures of enrolment in universities between the period 1997 and 2012 show fewer females being enrolled as compared to males. For instance, in 1997 there were 13 489 males enrolled as compared to 5 796 females. In 2002 there were 22 811 males compared to 12 795 females. In 2007 there were 32 977 males compared to 21 867 females, and in 2012 there were 33 264 males compared to 26 891 females. However, Madzimure (2016) notes that in recent years, the number of women in universities has surged to surpass that of men by 12 %.

GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK IN ZIMBABWE

As the gender concept developed through the early 1980's (Nairobi Conference, 1985), in English-speaking and Latin American countries and also within all international organisations, its usage would be facilitated by the holding of a succession of important conferences such as the Cairo Conference (1994) and

the Beijing Conference (1995) during which the term definitively established itself (Bisilliat, 2001). Such an expansion in the usage of the term gave rise to a multiplicity of frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality. The existence of legal and policy frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality in all spheres is an essential facet of a rule of law system. While gender-sensitive public policies are an essential complement to this legal framework, it is national and international-level laws that are enforceable in a court of law and against which any actor (individuals, corporations, organisations and governments) can be charged (Organisation of American States (OAS), 2017). Zimbabwe is, therefore, guided by numerous legal and policy frameworks, which are detailed in the ensuing discussion.

Internationally, Zimbabwe is party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979. As a framework, CEDAW offers a broad structure to direct all rights-based action for gender equality. The underlying basis for this convention is its emphasis on the notion that gender inequality is an upshot of discrimination against women. In the light of this, CEDAW advocates for equality in outcomes rather than simply equality in opportunities. Focus should be placed not only on crafting anti-discrimination, but also on the effectiveness towards guaranteeing equality.

Furthermore, Zimbabwe recognises the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and its twelve points. As an international equality framework, the Beijing Platform for Action sets out "an agenda for women's empowerment" signed by all governments that is seen as a "necessary and fundamental pre-requisite for equality, development and peace." The Platform provides a blueprint for women's empowerment that is exceptionally clear, straightforward and actionable. In addition, the Platform provides the first global commitment to gender mainstreaming as the methodology by which women's empowerment will be achieved.

Other instruments aimed at enabling gender equality include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (Mutasa and Paterson, 2015). These help in consolidating previous agreements, including those on women's rights, women's empowerment and gender equality, into a single set of core goals, targets and benchmarks for the

development community. They emphasise that gender equality is equally a right in itself and an enabler of development. Specifically, MDG 3 reflected this emphasis on gender equality. This is further reflected in the subsequent SDG's which also underscore the need for issues relating to gender to be addressed across all facets of life.

Noted as the first international human rights instrument to exclusively and explicitly address the issue of violence against women, the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women is a significant instrument for the promotion of gender equality. Essentially, it renders support to the view that violence prejudices the fundamental human rights of women as well as their enjoyment of the same. For this study, it is significant to end violence against women as it impacts on their access and enjoyment of higher education. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo weighs in by asserting and globally prioritising the equality and empowerment of women both from the perspective of universal human rights and as an essential step towards eradicating poverty and stabilising population growth. Hence, a woman's capability to access education and rights is a cornerstone of her empowerment. It is also critical to sustainable development.

Regionally, Zimbabwe has acceded to the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2008. It is also part of the 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender and Equality in Africa, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development (2008) and its addendum on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Children. Zimbabwe is also part of the COMESA Gender Policy which fosters gender equality and equity at all levels of regional integration and cooperation (NGP, 2013).

These international and regional instruments have largely been domesticated in the country through the enactment of laws that promote gender equality and equity. The laws encompass Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982, the Labour Relations Act (1985).

The government has also put in place the National Gender Policy (2004) (revised version (2013-2017) which perpetuates the vision of having a society in Zimbabwe where there is economic, political, religious and social equality and equity among women and men in all spheres of life and at all levels. A national Gender Commission has also been

instituted to enhance gender equality in Zimbabwe. Additionally, the Zimbabwe government has created the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development with the chief mandate to front, in particular, the coordination of the country's gender programmes. This is all capped by the provisions of the 2013 Zimbabwe Constitution, which unequivocally discerns between the rights of men and women to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.

Zimbabwe has further put in place several other measures to address gender inequalities such as the use of Affirmative Action in several sectors, higher education included. Affirmative action is thus aimed at promoting female participation given their prior marginalised position in society. According to Malaba (2006), while affirmative action has been used to bring about some degree of progress in addressing gender inequalities in accessing higher education and employment, a mammoth challenge still exists in these two areas. This affirmative action has only worked in as far as access is concerned, but has not dealt with issues of engendering curricula which impact on academic performance.

While Zimbabwe (as with most countries of the region) has embraced international and regional legal and policy frameworks that uphold gender equality in all spheres, significant gaps continue to exist in the higher education sector in terms of access and quality. These stem from barriers and challenges that hinder the participation of women in particular, in higher education in the country.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study indicate that issues of access, participation and college experience and outcomes of higher education in Zimbabwe are affected by numerous barriers that largely impinge on the female sex. For the purposes of presentation, these barriers have been grouped into demographic, socio-cultural, economic and political factors.

Demographic factors

Among the demographic issues, the lack of fecundity management and women marrying early and having children early, have impinged negatively on the participation of women in higher education. In an interview with the director from the Ministry of Higher Education, it was revealed that these factors have largely increased the rate of college dropouts in the tertiary institutions. The Director said:

> *...the fact that the majority of women in the country marry early and have children thereafter, has*

> *led to reduced numbers of women participating in higher education. In fact, it has also led to an increased number of college students dropping out of university.*

The size of the family in Zimbabwe has also influenced the narrowing of participation of women in higher education. In an interview with an academic from the University of Zimbabwe, it was said that,

> *In big family sizes, parents tend to prefer to educate boys at the expense of girls as they would say that women will marry and leave the family, but the boys will stay and take care of the family.*

Thus, in terms of access to higher education, the size of the family and culture both impact on women and men. This resonates well with the views from literature where it was found that in the United States, particularly in past decades, the chances of women participating in higher education were narrowed by the larger family, and the more masculine the family was (Averett and Burton, 1996). This is also true of what transpired in Japan and Turkey as noted in studies by (Ono, 2004; Tansel, 2002). Essentially therefore, demographic factors stemming from the age at marriage and the family size have been a challenging factor that has impacted negatively on the access and participation of women in higher education in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, it must be realised that these demographic factors are not universal and, therefore, vary from one culture to the other.

Sociocultural factors

From the study findings it also emerged that there are socio-cultural factors that impact negatively on gendering the higher education curricula. These factors range from the continued discrimination of women in higher education to the decision of parents to invest in boys rather than girls and to the inferiority complex of women with regard to the choice of university disciplines. All these attributes stem from the continued existence of patriarchy in the Zimbabwean society. A programmes officer with a United Nations organisation argued that,

> *What I have noted is that the Zimbabwe social environment is reflective of male dominance given the prevalence of patriarchal values in society. This leads to discriminatory norms that tend to favour men at the expense of their women counterparts.*

In concurring with these views, an officer from the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development said that,

> *...in Zimbabwe, patriarchy hinders the participation of women in higher education as families tend to prefer educating their sons as compared to daughters.*

The major struggles of female students in higher education were also found to be stemming from the current economic situation persistent in the country. An official from the Ministry of Higher Education said that,

> *From the perspective of the Ministry, we have noted with concern that the economic situation in the country has constrained female students' access and performance in higher education as they are unable to acquire learning materials and sanitary ware. They end up being uncomfortable and therefore are forced to indulge in immoral activities for them to earn a living.*

In agreement with these views, a Programme Manager with a local NGO focusing on women and education said:

> *These young women's study time is consumed by these immoral activities and so affect their performance.*

Such notions are corroborated in literature, particularly by Atinaf and Petros (2016) who noted that economic constraints seriously affect female students' academic performance; such constraints span from the very limitation of purchasing the necessary educational materials to those involving behaviours which can affect their health. As a result, to get away from such traps, female students may get engaged in different immoral and risky behaviours, such as engaging in sexual affairs and exposing themselves to irreversible problems. These may include HIV, AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. As a result, they drop out of university and have extended consequences in their future life (Atinaf and Petros 2016). These arise because they get disowned by their parents and so find themselves with no resources to educate themselves. However, it must be noted that the Zimbabwe government position is that no student should be expelled from university or school for having fallen pregnant and the onus will be on the parents to support their girl child.

Political factors

The political factors affecting the advancement of gendered curricula in university education have been revealed to encompass the lack of political will from the top management of the universities and government. This is despite the existence of multiple frameworks for the promotion of gender equality in the higher education sector as highlighted in the preceding sections of the paper. This is supported by Kittilson (2016) who opined that inequalities in political involvement undermine the quality of deliberation, representation, and legitimacy in the processes. A confluence of several interrelated factors (resources, economy, socialization, political context) works together to account for these differences (Kittilson, 2016). Thus, while there can be a certain level of political willingness to support this endeavour, the fiscal space is also a hindrance because of the current economic standing of the country.

CONCLUSIONS

The rationale for this study was to consider the barriers and challenges that hinder the participation and academic performance of female students in higher education. This was done with a view to suggesting possible solutions that may help to promote female students' access, experience and academic performance in higher education. It is, therefore, the conclusion of this study that, engendering university curricula in university education is affected by demographic, socio-cultural, economic and political factors all converging in debilitating the access, participation and academic outcomes of women. The study clearly shows that the objective of any gender interventions should not stop at gender equality, but should seek the promotion of positive synergies that will act throughout the educational system as generators of development, in which all actors become stakeholders and all actors benefit. Acquiring equality in educational spheres should be seen within a dynamic system of relations embedded in a development process that seeks to empower both women and men. There remains a great deal of work to be done as it appears that it is taking time to get to that stage due to the various challenges that confront women in public spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the study findings and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are proposed to facilitate the increased participation and academic performance of women in higher education:

1. There should be attempts to get rid of barriers and challenges that affect the access, participation and academic outcomes of women through effective policy implementation.
2. There is need for inclusivity in the implementation of gender responsive university curricula in Zimbabwe, and its neighbouring countries. Thus, both males and females should exert their influence in the development of university curricula.
3. The Government in collaboration with the private sector and other donor institutions should introduce scholarships aimed at accommodating both financially poor students and meritorious students. This strategy can enhance greater participation of female students in higher education as well as reduce dropout rates. Additionally,

engendering university curricula can effectively be done through the establishment of non-patriarchal curricula for women. Only this can help improve women's understanding of issues at least from a non-masculine perspective, but a gender-neutral one.

These suggestions compounded, will certainly facilitate increased participation of females in higher education.

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