Enabling gender parity in higher education and the research sector: Learning from East Africa

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In 2018 and 2019, INASP and partners[i] facilitated discussions about enabling gender equity in higher education in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda. This paper summarizes the key findings and recommendations from across those three meetings.

Introduction

Over the last year, INASP has been gathering learning with a number of its partners in three countries – Ethiopia[ii], Tanzania[iii] and Uganda[iv] – to identify, explicitly, what needs to be done within the higher education (HE) and research sector to address the issue of gender parity in a systemic way and permanent way.

The dialogues identified a threefold strategy orchestrated largely by higher education institutions/ research institutes which address issues that are (1) internal to the university, (2) external to and influenceable by the university, (3) as part of a multi-university/research institution learning alliance such as the ones that were formed during the dialogues in the three countries.

Within each of these areas, participants mapped out what they felt needed to occur at different levels.

Within the university, activities need to focus on the following groups:

- Faculty
- Existing students
- Incoming students
- Students unable to access university education
- Those conducting research and scholarship on gender

External to the university, the following were identified as key groups for support:

- Primary and secondary school girls and boys
- Communities and community groups
- The media and the recruitment of high-profile, nationally known and liked artists as ambassadors of the message

Learning alliances

In every dialogue, the participants who attended the gender day agreed to form an "alliance of gender learners and doers" to support one another to affect their immediate environments in the ways recommended, and more broadly to drive the message home to society.

The main areas of work of these individual country-based alliances as a collective of individual researchers, institutions and other gender networks, are to:

- Engage with government to ensure that appropriate, supportive and enabling policies are in place at all levels of education for boys and girls growing up and in HE
- Lobby for the provision of appropriate facilities for boys and girls in schools
- Support the training and development of teachers via their curriculum and ongoing capacity development/mentoring/awareness raising to reflect a new national policy (and consciousness) on the subject and in their ways of teaching and engagement with their students
- Support the institutions of higher learning through advice and practically in the formulation and implementation of their gender equity plans and priorities
- Share, enable learning and provide support within the group.

Activities at each level

Specific activities were also identified by the dialogues for each of the levels discussed.

Higher education responsibilities conducted within the institution

For faculty:
1. Recognize and reward women academics of excellence, not only within the conventional awards of excellence but also separate ones solely targeting women's success

2. Expand avenues and opportunities for women and early-career researchers in their access to funds, training, being part of research teams and all other resources

3. Establish and implement affirmative action policies in grant giving, recruitment, training and student loan awards

4. Implement a monitoring scheme for academic leadership positions with a 50/50 divide between men and women – especially at VC and DVC levels

5. Establish mentorship programmes at faculty or departmental level

6. Adopt more gender-responsive HR and working policies ensuring that there is a balanced representation of men and women on these evaluative committees. Specifically, institutions should review HR policies, procedures, senate legislation, etc. relating to childcare, family/work life balance solution/ 50/50 targets on recruitment schemes – recognizing the multiple roles and obligations women have

7. Ensure there is a balance in senior researcher /PI and co-PI positions in research teams – actively seek to correct under-representation at all levels

8. Evaluate the successful implementation rate of existing policies to identify institutional barriers and blockages to policy implementation

9. Equip existing HEI gender units/centres with the necessary resources to implement gender policies

10. State, reinforce and widely publicise the institution's zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment, gender violence and other corruptive practices

11. Mainstream gender awareness into all induction and continuing professional education for all staff

12. Provide capacity development for teachers/researchers both men and women in a number of fields including research writing and gender-responsive pedagogy

13. Establish women's writing and peer-review groups to expand these capacities.

For existing students:
1. Curriculum revision in line with critical thinking, problem-solving and gender-responsive pedagogy including the appropriate and respectful referencing of men and women in the language, behaviours, teaching and learning materials of all teachers (e.g. case studies, contexts used, etc.) as well as a mix of male and female authors that reflect this orientation

2. Mainstream gender awareness and inclusion into all curricula, teaching and learning materials, approaches and classroom student engagement – for all subjects.

For in-coming students:
1. Create a pre-entry programme for qualified students to engage them prior to enrolment and prepare them for university life

2. Initiate a programme with schools to tutor, mentor and prep young people early on in their secondary education to ensure a successful application process to university and ultimately university life.

For students who are not able or choose not to access university:
1. Ensure that the shaping and teaching of the range of vocational skills are open and promoted to both boys and girls regardless of the type of vocation

2. Identify specific support needed by girls who drop out of school due to teenage pregnancies and address these needs via university policies and through the combined efforts of the Learning Alliance.

For the scholarship of gender research:
1. Actively fund and conduct empowerment/ "assets-based" research that demonstrate the positive and critical roles that both women and men play and have played historically in the survival and development of society, building any awareness raising/corrective action on the value, diversity and complementary roles of both men and women and what is positive in people's culture.

Higher education level responsibilities carried out external to the institution

Within primary and secondary schools in HEI's catchment area:
1. Conduct outreach programmes working across departments in the university to build greater awareness and understanding of gender inclusion as a desirable outcome for society

2. Establish female and male academic networks working with high school students

3. Work with schools to eliminate risky school accepted norms that take students out of school (particularly in rural areas) to "help teachers" in their homes; raise awareness around the unacceptability of sexual harassment

4. Provide awareness raising sessions and mentorship for young people in secondary and primary school, particularly in the HEI's catchment area

5. Contribute to school curricula review and revisions both through formal linkages to the responsible bodies and direct support to interested schools in the HEI's catchment area

6. Provide training to teachers in primary and secondary schools in the catchment area.

Within communities:
1. Establish programmes (run by university staff and students) with parents and family members within the university's catchment areas to raise awareness of benefits of gender parity – specifically encouraging equal and unfettered aspirations for both girls and boys

2. Anchor any community programmes on historical evidence of women acting with voice and power and other positive culturally traditions

3. Establish programmes with community leads to raise awareness of the benefits of gender parity – economically, socially and culturally – for their communities.

Engagement with the media:
1. Use of influential celebrities as a vehicle for awareness raising of the wider public. In Tanzania, for example, Ms Tanzania who holds a master's degree, well known musicians who are also PhD candidates can easily become advocates for societal change.

Higher education institutions within a broader Gender "Learning Alliance" or "network of researchers"

Gender Learning Alliances were formed at each of the national dialogues. These Alliances are comprised of individuals and sometimes existing networks of those active in the national gender discourse. Collectively, they potentially have enough influence to engage with government at the highest levels to bring about the desired changes.

With government

1. Conduct advocacy/influencing work with appropriate government bodies for the provision of appropriate and gender-responsive accommodation for both girls and boys, especially in rural settings

2. Ensure that appropriately non-discriminatory, supportive and enabling policies are available and implementable by the designated organization

3. Advocate for/support the enactment/ revision of laws in support of fundamental citizen and human rights for women and men, boys and girls.

Conclusions

The dialogues concluded that, while these areas of work are not exhaustive, they are both ambitious and wholly doable if driven with focus and commitment. The dialogues also concluded that everyone has a role to play in advancing this most crucial issue of gender equity in higher education and research – in recognition of the advancement of human rights, equity in society and national development.

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i Uganda Council for Science and Technology in Uganda; Ethiopian Academy of Sciences in Ethiopia; COSTECH in Tanzania
Work funded by Sida
ii What is needed for an equitable research system in Ethiopia blog.inasp.info/needed-equitable-research-system-ethiopia
iii Dialogue on research equity in Tanzania, blog.inasp.info/dialogue-research-equity-tanzania
iv Uganda dialogue event on enabling equitable research system – Communique,
blog.inasp.info/uganda-dialogue-event-enabling-equitable-research-system-communique