Gender Disparity in Higher Education in Ethiopia
Quantitative and Qualitative Indicators from three Selected Universities

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Introduction
The question of gender in education began to intrigue research and policy attention since last four decades. The interest ever since was to reduce gender disparity in education by promoting equal erudition of females with males. Despite the advocacy and some promising scenario, gender disparity in education is still continuing in favor of males in many countries of the world, particularly in Africa (Bunyi, 2004; FAWE, 2002). As such, the MDGs, “To eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education [by] 2005 and in all levels by 2015”, would less likely be achieved. Therefore, the need for research is comprehensible.

The low participation of girls in tertiary education in Africa is attributed to many factors which include social and structural impediments such as sexual harassment and gender-blind institutional structures and leadership (FAWE, 2002). Sexual harassment stands for unwelcome and unwanted sexual behaviors which are judged by the recipient(s) to have resulted in mental, physical, and social discomfort and even interference with academic performance (FAWE, 2002).

The issue of gender disparity in education in Ethiopia has started to attract government attention very recently in spite of its prevalence across several educational ladders (Alemu, 2003, Seyoum, 1991 and Genet, 1991). The higher up the educational ladder in the country the wider the gender disparity in favor of males become (MOE Statistical Abstract, 2007). Nevertheless, the forms and sources of gender disparity in the country’s higher education got inadequate research consideration. This paper intends to understand these gaps by investigating the forms and causes of gender disparity in higher education in Ethiopia by focusing on succeeding educational ladders of three reasonably selected universities: Addis Ababa, Haramaya and Jimma Universities.

Some Theoretical and Conceptual Basis
Theoretically, gender is analysed through a socio-cultural lens (Collier and Rosaldo, 1981; Moore, 1986). This is because the power of gender stereotypes is not just in the mind; they have a perfect material reality. The material reality helps to reinforce the social and economic conditions within which they have developed and employed. Thus, gender disparity in the present context refers to the unfair treatment of females as compared to males in education, which is rooted in the way society and its culture works.

Culture either enhances or impinges academic performance as our performance in academic or otherwise is fed by our culture. Performance theorists like Matthews and colleagues (2000) subscribe to this assertion. Education and other integral parts of our culture explicitly value successful performance. In fact, performance is influenced by various contextual factors which involve the external environment, internal qualities of the person (e.g. the emotional state), and the task itself (Matthews et al., 2000).
Performance in academic or otherwise is the function of opportunity (the physical and social environment provided by the organization in which individuals perform tasks), capacity (all the basic characteristics that promote good performance such as intelligence), and willingness of an individual (motivational and attitudinal factors which may allow the person to use his/her capacities to full advantage, or, alternatively, hinder him/her to use his/her potential).

On any task, some people perform better than others, even when the amount of practice is controlled. This is because factors such as the intra-personal environment, nutrition, and early childhood experiences may affect the brain. Men and women may differ in cognitive function, because boys and girls are treated differently, exposed to different activities, and so may acquire different cognitive skills. Explanation of this kind refers to social and cultural factors which may influence the performance of men and women differently on different activities (Matthews et al., 2000).

In the Ethiopian educational setup, females have been largely excluded for long since the inception of modern education in the country to the last few decades. Apart from the patriarchal socio-cultural system of the country, the factors displayed in flowchart often appear to have been the major hurdle to female students’ equal participation with males in schooling in Ethiopia.

Flowchart 1: Conceptual model to understand gender disparity in education (Teshome, 2003)
Research Questions

• Is there gender disparity in higher education in Ethiopia in enrolment, dismissal, performance and graduation?
• If so, what quantitative indicators do exist?
• How does the gender gap behave across the successively progressing academic ladders in university education?
• Why does the disparity exist (if any)?
• What measures should be taken to reduce the disparity?

Materials and Methods

Target areas and population involved in this study were Addis Ababa, Haramaya and Jimma Universities and their student and staff communities. Sources of quantitative data were registrar offices of these universities. Qualitative data, however, were generated through interviews with officers, instructors, and students; observation of gender advocacy environments; and attention alluring individual case studies. Data analysis was made by entering Microsoft Excel to construct line graphs for informative data analysis, thematic analysis, quoting narrations, and individual case description.

Results and Discussions

Gender Disparity in Enrolment

Since the last few years there has been considerable increase in the number of students being enrolled for university education in Ethiopia. But gender disparity still lingers on behaving in favor of males (Figures 1 and 2). The disparity reflects its ugliest face in the postgraduate programs.

Figure 1: Percentage of Female Students in the Regular Undergraduate Enrolment by Year and University (Compiled from AAU & HU Registrar Offices, December 2006).
As Figure 1 shows the enrolment of female students in the undergraduate regular program at AAU and HU has increased from nearly one-sixth to more than one-fifth between the 2003 to 2007 academic year. Although there is variation between universities in this regard, the percentage of female students in enrolment is still underrepresented in both universities. The rising scenario by itself was the result of the affirmative action given by the state for female students to join university education. This means that yawning gender gap (e.g. 40% at AAU and 60% at HU in 2007) in enrolment in the universities is still persisting. Within roughly five years (2003-2007) the enrolment of female students has almost doubled, i.e. it rose from 16 percent to 30 percent.

Figure 2: Percentage of Female Students in the Regular Masters Degree Enrolment by Year and University (From the registrar offices of AAU & HU, December 2006 & March 2007)

Figure 2 indicates that the gender gap in the enrolment of masters program at AAU and HU between 2002-2003 to 2006-2007 was extremely big, with the yawning gap being reducing over years. The overall gap in female students’ enrolment in the regular masters programs of these universities during the years selected for this study goes down from 86 percent in 2002-2003 to 80 percent in 2006/7 at AAU, while the gap at HU during the same year plummeted from about 96 percent to about 78 percent.

Figure 3 depicts that the gender gap in the enrolment of PhD fellows at HU was to some extent worse. Gender gap moves from worse to the worst in favor of male students as the level of education goes from Masters to PhD degree programs. The overall female students enrolment in the PhD program constituted 1.4% (only one female). The over all gender gap in this program was 97.2 percent. This implies that the PhD programs appear to be the exclusive domain of males. For AAU, female students’ PhD enrolment was about 11 percent in 2002/3 but immediately disappeared in the next year, of course, to rise to nearly 6 percent in 2004/5. Actually, the gender gap in this program did not show sign of significant decline as it remained absolute male domain (100 percent in 2002-2003 and 98 percent in 2006-2007).
Figure 3: Percentage of Female Students Enrolment in PhD Programs by Year and University

Figure 4: Percentage of Female Students in the Regular Undergraduate Enrolment by Year (Ethiopian Calendar) in Jimma University

Figure 4 shows that female students’ enrolment in the regular undergraduate program at Jimma University has been slightly increasing from 20 percent in 2000 E.C. to 31 percent in 2004 E.C. But these figures still demonstrate that the gender imbalance in favor of males is about 70 percent implying the fact the wide gender gap is more likely unwilling to offer hope of pragmatic resolution.
Figure 5: Percentage of Female Students in the Masters and PhD Degree Enrolment by Year (E.C) in Jimma University (JU registrar office, 2012)

Figure 5 shows that in masters and PhD programs enrolment of the last two consecutive years (2004/2011 and 2005/2012), the latter being just started, the share of female students was below 10 percent in average.

Overall, female students’ enrolment in the regular undergraduate degree studies of the universities under study went on increasing since the last few years mainly because of the affirmative action strategy given on the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Certificate Examination (EHEECE) at grade 12 for females by the Ministry of Education (MOE). However, there was still considerable gender gap in favor of male students. Gender gap in enrolment against females at the postgraduate levels is quite worse especially at PhD level.

Gender Disparity in Academic Dismissal
As compared to males, an appreciably less number of female students were being enrolled in regular undergraduate degree programs of the universities under study, which Figures 1 & 4 confirm. Quite amazing, however, a relatively larger number of them were being forced to leave their university education because of academic dismissal (Figure 6). Thus the numerical fact of gender disparity in this case is not in favor of males but female students though it is a catastrophic problem against their opportunity to survive their study in the universities.

Figure 6: Percentage of Female Students’ Academic Dismissal from Regular Undergraduate Programs by Year and University (Registrar Offices of AAU and HU, December 2006)
Figure 6 indicates, a relatively larger number (53% of the total 833) of female students were academically dismissed from AAU within two academic years (2004-2005 to 2005-2006 G.C). But the case of HU was different in that the share of academically dismissed students in these years was above 60 percent. In sum, it is only in academic dismissals that female students averagely outnumber their male counterparts in university academics. Thus, the gender disparity in this case is problematic not for males’ numerical superiority but for less number of females get enrolled and greater number of them get dismissed as compared to their male counterparts.

Generally, the gender direction of considerable academic dismissals from the two universities was reversed for the last few years. That is, female students began to embrace the greater percentage, unlike the situation before the last few years when males outnumber females in academic dismissals. This was especially because of the affirmative action strategy which favors female students to join almost gender blind universities even with free promotion. Besides their deprived academic base and their evolution from gender insecure socialization, female students are often victims of sexual harassment in universities by male community members of universities. The cumulative effect of these factors is highly responsible for the larger number of female students’ academic dismissal from university education. In sum, the reasons for gender disparity against females in university education in general and in academic dismissal in particular can be complex, but are often due to a range of socio-cultural, economic and political factors.

**Gender Disparity in Academic Performance**

It should be noted that the parameter utilized in this study to describe the academic performance of male/female students was their CGPA within the range of honorable achievements at the moment of graduation (a CGPA of 3.25 and above for Bachelor Degree and 3.75 and above for Masters and PhD Degrees).

![Figure 7: Academic Performance of Regular Undergraduate (3.25 at graduation) and Masters (3.75 at graduation) Degree Students by University, 2006 (Registrar Offices of AAU and HU, April 2007)](image-url)
Figure 7 shows that the number of female students found in the honorable academic achievements during the moment of graduation at AAU and HU in 2006 G.C. were very insignificant. This is, of course, not to mean that they were not entirely good in their academic work. It means that the honorable lists seem to be the reserved “right” of male students.

Only a diminutive proportion of female students, about 10 percent in average from both universities’ regular undergraduate degree students, were within the range of distinction and above. The gender gap in honorable graduates for the Bachelor degree was 86 percent and it was 90 percent in the Masters degree. With regard to the PhD graduates, these universities have got only male honorable graduates for this year so that it was not just gender disparity which was found but an exclusive privilege of males in this respect. Note that several attempts were made to obtain data for academic dismissal and achievement from Jimma University but of no avail.

Dealing about the reasons why female students perform less than that of males and why they outnumber their male counterparts in academic dismissal pertaining to university education is almost similar to talking about two sides of the same coin. In the undergraduate degree studies they were competing with their male counterparts in university education with relatively poor academic base which has a detrimental impact on their academic performance and/or academic dismissal. It is perhaps logical and persuasive that as the level of their academic performance decreases the level of their academic dismissal increases and vice versa, which in turn would have strong implication on the representation of female students in the postgraduate studies.

**Gender Disparity in Graduation**

Figure 8 shows that the percentage of female student graduates from the regular undergraduate, masters and PhD programs of AAU in 2006 was 16 percent, 10 percent and none respectively. The scenario in these programs at HU in the same year for female students was 12 percent each in undergraduate and masters programs and not any in the PhD studies.

**Figure 8:** Regular Undergraduate, Masters and PhD Graduates by University, 2006 (AAU’s Registrar Office, December 2006)
As Figure 9 clearly depicts, the percentage of female graduates from Jimma University within the last five years has remained below 20, with slight rise and fall in some years.

Figure 10: Masters Graduates from Jimma University by Year and Gender (JU registrar office, 2012)

Described above are the quantitative indicators of gender disparity in enrolment, academic dismissal, academic performance and graduation of the regular degree students of AAU, HU and JU. It can be discerned that the quantitative reality of gender disparity in these four forms (enrolment, dismissal, performance and graduation) entirely behaves against female students in the universities under study. This is not mainly due to the lack in policy in favor of females’ education as there is affirmative action policy implemented for females’ opportunity to join university education over the last two decades. It is because of culture in the most generalized term. In most parts of Ethiopian society the ways of life (in which patriarchy, differential gender socialization and marriage etc) highly impede females’ equal public activities (example, education in general and higher education in particular) with males. At the level of postgraduate studies it is marriage and the resultant family responsibilities that obscure females’ equal representation with males. Based on the qualitative data obtained during my fieldwork (see the next section), I can say that after getting graduated from their undergraduate studies most females prefer marriage to their opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies. Once getting married, however, their probability to pursue postgraduate studies could be very less partially because their husbands show unwillingness to encourage them for postgraduate studies. In sum, as Alemu (2003) found, gender disparity in university education is the cumulative effect of socio-cultural constraints (such as marriage, religion, patriarchy, differential gender socialization) against females’ opportunity to equally involve in different education levels with males.

Sources of Gender Disparity in Higher Education in Ethiopia
In-depth interview results show the prevalence of many factors behind the unequal engagement of females with males in higher education in Ethiopia. According to both focus group and individual interviews with instructors, students and university authorities the factors can be categorized into four major domains: vitiated family behavior, gender-specific problems of female students, sexual harassment and affirmative action.
1) Vitiated Household Behavior
Obviously, the family politics in Ethiopia has always been male dominated with male children cherishing household behaviour. This has resulted in many undesirable upshots against female members of the society, particularly producing deprived academic base for female students.

2) Gender-Specific Problems
As member of university population, female students also suffer from gender-specific problems. Focus group discussion with female students of the universities under study exposes the fact that the image of female students in academic excellence quite deteriorated. Even instructors were unwilling to recognize self-contained honorable academic performance of their female students. One top ranking female student, for example, narrates this: "መምህራኖችና እንዳንድ የለምሼኔ እና እንዳንድ የነበረልቸው ይሳል" (instructors and some students call me, ‘she performs like a male). The message is that males’ gender in our society is often associated with a dominating power while that of females’ is traditionally recognized in all subordinate spheres of life not only in academic issues. Another female student narrates, "Instructors indict our excellent work as if we were copying our performance from axerera". A xerera is one of the many university campus based emerging terminologies denoting short note or a piece of paper which students use as a folder of the gist points of their lecture and other relevant notes. From male students, one student validates the above assertion by stating “Dubartiin dheertuu malee beektuu hingabdu” (there is no knowledgeable female but tall). Close to the gate of female students’ dormitory on all of the campuses of the universities under study there is a special social space named “በግ የራ” (to mean female sphere, though the literal meaning of the former term is sheep and thus sheep sphere). At this space, females and males hotly interact with sexual mood. It serves as a suitable scene for making conversations centered in the order of sexual advances slowly leading to ultimate disparaging situations for female students. One of the terrible cases was observed at Haramaya University where on an average seven female students per year give birth to babies from hasty sexual gambling while in their university education. The problem exacerbates when they imagine the social exclusion to prompt post-labor dates and insecure university accommodation for such incidents. The remedy they opt for this kind of occurrence has always been either undergoing abortion or murder of their infant. In few cases the victims of undesirable pregnancy on the campus were reportedly interrupt their education only to hide themselves in nearby hotels and restaurants. They never feel to return to their parents as the social stigma would have been so much.

3) Sexual Harassment
Triggering factors for this category of impediment involve pornography, sexually oriented emotions and expressions, natural beauty and academic talent of female students, fashionable dress styles and need for cosmetics. During the interviews, female students echoed that five clearly identified factors usually result in sexual harassment of female students in universities: peer-pressure, threatened downgrading of marks, apprehension of dismissal as a result of the refusal of sexual advances, creation of an intimidating environment for female students, female students’ physical and mental beauty. The latter means outstanding academic performance.
4) Affirmative Action (AA)

The affirmative action in use for female students in Ethiopia is more likely a brilliant policy measure executed to reverse the longstanding absence of females from the world of education in Ethiopia. Evidently, during the imperial era the share of females in education was zero even at primary and secondary levels, and it remained below 10 percent and 14 percent during the period of Emperor Haile Sillassie and Derg respectively (Alemu 2001). But the measure had been vitiated at the base and apex. During male students’ focus group discussion one strongly argued, “The affirmative policy measure has no leg and head”. This is to mean that female student were not being benefited from this policy package at pre-high school and post-high school levels of education. The government provides differential mark for females and males to pass from grade 10 to 11 and then from 12 to join university education. No more differential treatment before these levels and afterwards.

Conclusion

Although the current trend demonstrates increasingly growing percentage of female students' participation in university education in Ethiopia, they have still lopsided representation in relation to their male counterparts. The disparity against female students reveals its ugliest face in the graduate programs, especially not the PhD programs.

Gender gap in enrolment has been understood as greater than 50 percent in Bachelor degree, greater than 80 percent in the Masters degree, and greater than 90 percent in PhD degree. It is only in academic dismissal that female students outnumber their male counterparts. This has negative implication on the number of female students who want to pursue postgraduate studies. Indeed, female students' lower academic performance has a detrimental implication on their opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies as this level of studies admits relatively few students on strong competitive basis. Keeping the story of temperature and altitude, the number of female graduates decreases as the level of education increases.

The present study indicated four major factors: vitiated family behaviour which has been depriving the academic base of female students, gender-specific problems wherein female students feel discomfort in their academic life, sexual harassment which paves the way for their academic dismissal, and affirmative action which is vitiated to fully serve its desirable intervention measure.

Suggestions

Strategies which let both males and females fairly engage in the cumbersome domestic chores need to be designed, anti-sexual harassment policy should be adopted and strictly implemented in the universities under study and the current affirmative action policy need to be reconsidered to be implemented appropriately just with genuine commitment. As the most impinging hurdle against female students’ equal participation, retention and performance in university academics with their male counterparts more likely lies in the early educational foundation stage in the family institution, appropriate intervention strategy need to be devised and executed. The existing autonomous gender affairs ministry could be further enhanced and expanded to the very grassroots level the way the institutions of agriculture and health have been doing over years in the country. That is, the gender affairs ministry should not act merely rhetorically. It should develop mechanisms such as having a package for gender extension workers like health and agricultural extension workers to revisit the family domain...
in rural areas of Ethiopia. If appropriate mechanisms will not be employed and the current
gender disparity in education remain unresolved, the problem will not only result in sustaining
gender imbalance in education but will sustain impoverished domestic development which in
turn hamper the national impoverishments since the component individual households
together make up the whole national scenario.

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