

Enabling Instruments, Encouraging Results, and Unmet Challenges: Females' Higher Education Access in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study examined the policy environment available to enhance females' access to higher education in Ethiopia and the success stories as a result. Moreover, it explored challenges that defy international, regional and national instruments and efforts. A qualitative descriptive method was used and semi-structured key informant interviews, focus group discussion, and document review were employed to collect relevant data. Primary data were obtained from a State Minister, a Directorate Director and three experts (within the same directorate) of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education. Secondary data were secured by reviewing many documents, including the Ethiopian Constitution and the Education and Training Policy. The findings reveal that there is a favourable policy environment or there are many instruments that are aimed at addressing the issue of females' access to higher education. As a result, there are overall improvements in females' university enrolments but still there is a long way to go to declare victory. Deep-rooted problems remained deep. The issue of females' access to higher education is being side-lined even before satisfactory results are achieved. It is suggested that the issue should remain among the country's priorities since the problem can be solved, but only slowly.

Key Words: *higher education, access, females, policies, Africa, Ethiopia*

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Introduction

Unlike the remarkable assertion by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2009) that “Globally, the average participation of women in tertiary education is now greater than that of men” (in Leathwood 2013:134), unfortunately, the higher education gender imbalance is acute in virtually all African nations and in most disciplines (Damitew and Philip 2004). This appears to be a clear violation of Article 26.1 of the United Nations’ (UN) human rights declaration that higher education shall be equally accessible to all (UN 1948).²

In the twenty-first century complaints about lack of international proclamations, declarations, covenants, action plans, and frameworks that stand for the rights of females’ access to higher education are far-fetched. International instruments note that all appropriate measures shall be taken to ensure to girls and women, married or unmarried, equal rights with men in education at all levels with equal conditions of access to, and study in educational institutions of all types, including universities (UN 1979 Article 10 and 10.a) ³and no discrimination can be accepted in granting access to higher education on the grounds of gender (UNESCO 1998 Article 3.a).⁴ Besides, among many regional (African) instruments, one claims that regional, bilateral and international agencies and nongovernmental organizations are called to make the education of girls the number one priority in their development programs (UNESCO and UNICEF 1993).⁵ Many more international and African documents address the issue as follows.

²Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was adopted on 8 December 1948 in recognition of equal rights of everyone and is a milestone document in the history of human rights setting out for the first time the universal protection of human rights.

³Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) was adopted by all state parties reaffirming the equal rights of men and women and any form of discrimination is inadmissible.

⁴ World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: vision and action (1998) was adopted by the world conference on higher education in France on 9 October 1998.

⁵ The Ouagadougou Declaration and Framework for Action (1993) was adopted by a Pan-African conference on the education of girls organized by UNESCO and UNICEF in cooperation with the government of Burkina Faso held from 28 March-1 April, 1993 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

International Instruments

These documents state that higher education shall be equally accessible to all by every appropriate means and no one can be excluded from higher education or its study fields, degree levels and types of institutions on grounds of gender (UN 1948 Article 26.1⁶; UN 1966 Article 13.2.C⁷; UNESCO 1998 Article 1.a⁸). Similarly, UN (1979 Article 10 and 10.a)⁹ note that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to guarantee to women the same conditions for access to studies and achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories and the most urgent priority is to ensure access to education for girls and women (UNESCO 1990 Article 3.3).¹⁰

Furthermore, according to UN (1995 Article 80.c)¹¹, leaders vowed to collectively commit themselves to eliminate gender disparities in access to all areas of tertiary education by ensuring that women have equal access to career development, training, scholarships, and fellowships and by adopting positive actions when appropriate. Besides so as to ensure an equitable and non-discriminatory system of higher education, overcoming obstacles that continue to impede women's full access to this level of education remains an urgent priority (UNESCO 1998 Article 4.a).¹²

African (Regional) Instruments

The theoretical fight against gender educational inequity and inequality is not limited to the international forum. African leaders, too, inspired by and

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

⁷The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) was agreed on 16 December 1966 by the state parties in recognition of the human rights declared by the UN charter.

⁸World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: vision and action (1998)

⁹ Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)

¹⁰World Declaration on Education for All: meeting basic learning needs (1990) also known as Jomtien 1990 was adopted by the world conference on education for all meeting basic learning needs from 5 to 9 March 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand.

¹¹The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) was adopted by the fourth world conference on women in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995.

¹²World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: vision and action (1998)

at times compelled to do so, have documented many instruments over the years. Every individual shall have the right to education (OAU 1981 Article 17.1)¹³, States Parties shall guarantee equal opportunity and access in the sphere of education and training at all levels (AU 2003 Article 12.1)¹⁴, and they shall take action to promote education for women in all disciplines, particularly in the fields of science and technology, fields traditionally dominated by men (AU 2003 Article 12.2.b).¹⁵

State Parties, as to AU (2006)¹⁶, shall make higher education equally accessible to all (Article 13.4.f), introduce scholarship and bursary programs to encourage entry into higher education for outstanding youth from underprivileged communities, especially young girls (Article 13.4.1), and guarantee equal access to and completion of higher education in order to effectively address the existing imbalance between young men and women (Article 23.1.e). Moreover, African leaders agreed to take care of the economic independence of women from an early age by ensuring that young women have access to secondary, tertiary, and professional education and training (UN-ECA 2009 Article 1.1.2)¹⁷ and inadequate access to education, training, science and technology is among the critical areas of concern that constitute the core of the African platform (OAU 1994 Article 22.b).¹⁸

In fact, having the international and regional instruments alone cannot warranty enhanced higher education access to females, unless they are

¹³The African (Banjul) Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981) was adopted by the 18th assembly of the heads of State and Government on 27 June 1981 in Nairobi, Kenya.

¹⁴Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) was adopted by the 2nd ordinary session of the assembly of the Union in Maputo on 11 July 2003.

¹⁵Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003)

¹⁶ The African Youth Charter (2006) was adopted by the 7th ordinary session of the assembly held in Banjul, The Gambia on 2nd July 2006.

¹⁷ The Banjul Declaration on the Strategies for Accelerating the Implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action (2009) was committed by the African Ministers responsible for gender and women's affairs on 8th African regional conference on women (Beijing +15) from 19 to 20 November 2009 in Banjul, The Gambia.

¹⁸ The African Platform for Action: *African common position for the advancement of women* (1994) was adopted at the 5th regional conference on women from 16 to 23 November 1994 in Dakar, Senegal.

implemented and further followed by and/or adopted to country-specific national instruments reflecting specific contexts. With regard to the first condition, although significant progress has been achieved to enhance the access of women to higher education, various obstacles continue to impede their full access (UNESCO 1998 Article 4.b). And as to the second condition, establishing the legislative framework for the reform and further development of higher education that higher education shall be accessible to all (UNESCO 1998 Article 1.a), defining and implementing policies to eliminate all gender stereotyping in tertiary education, and consolidating women's participation at all levels and in all disciplines (UNESCO 1998 Article 1.i) are among the priority actions that should be taken by each country at their national level.

These premises raise at least three basic questions: In Ethiopia, have the priority measures of establishing legislative frameworks and defining policies at the national or federal level really been taken? What encouraging results have been achieved as a result? And what obstacles and challenges remained unmet and continue to harm females' access to higher education? In fact, a study concluded that all major policy documents in Ethiopia clearly articulate the gender question (Tesfaye 2006). However, the issue here is since the severity and type of gender related problems vary at different levels of education, what do those major documents specifically note to address females' access to higher education, if there is any?

For over the period of 2010-2014, the higher education enrolment gender gap global rankings of Ethiopia remained more or less unchanged (127th in 2010 out of 134 countries and 136th in 2014 out of 142 countries) (World Economic Forum, WEF 2010 and 2014).¹⁹ The 2014 WEF report further unveils that the female-male enrolment ratios in 2014 were 0.91, 0.61, and 0.32 in Ethiopian primary schools, secondary schools, and tertiary education respectively (where 0.00 means perfect inequality and 1.00 means perfect equality or no gender gap) (WEF 2014). The fact that the primary school female-male enrolment ratio is closing in, and that of secondary schooling is relatively better while that of tertiary education is still the

¹⁹ Global Gender Gap report is a report published by the WEF every year since 2005. In 2001 the WEF created its Women Leaders Program to support the advancement of women to positions of leadership worldwide and to promote consideration of the issues affecting women's lives.

lowest; in short, the fact that the gender gap problem worsens as we go up the academic ladder, in addition to the poor global rankings of Ethiopia, necessitated this research. The numbers clearly show that females' higher education access is undeniably low. But, "If educating women produces clear social and individual benefits, why do they not constitute half of the school population?" (Samoff 1999: 409). Reasons could vary but from the very outset do we have the necessary policy environment?

This study is deemed important because it can create awareness among Ethiopians in general, women in particular, and more specifically among female students about some of the international, African and Ethiopian instruments that stand for the higher education access rights of women; informs anyone interested about the fruits of the efforts exerted at the federal level; informs authorities at the federal level, at regional level for that matter, about challenges that resist their commitments and investments so that they can revise their practices accordingly and be cautious in declaring instruments to come; helps higher education institutions understand encouraging practices and remaining challenges; shows responsible bodies the direction for future policy making and implementation and helps them prioritize intervention areas. Finally, proper implementation of the findings and suggestions of this study can ultimately contribute for the fight to eliminate the gender gap in higher education access in Ethiopia and it can serve as a springboard for further research in the area.

Objectives and Method

This study predominantly aimed at exploring the females' higher education access policy environment in Ethiopia and the success stories registered as a result. Moreover, taking the huge gap in female-male tertiary education enrolment ratio in Ethiopia as revealed by the WEF reports and the admission indicated in the higher education declaration that there are impediments that continue to plague women's higher education participation (UNESCO 1998) into account, the study looked for challenges that resist international, regional and federal instruments and efforts.

To achieve these objectives, a qualitative descriptive design was employed. Detailed primary data were collected from purposefully selected high officials and experts in the federal Ministry of Education (MoE) of

Ethiopia. This ministry oversees the formulation and implementation of documents that are meant to enhance females' higher education access. It also determines the total number of students in general and female students in particular who can join each university every year. Secondary data were obtained from documents including the Constitution, policies, plans, regulations, guidelines and others that can reveal the policy environment and student enrolment in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Since the study focuses on females' access to higher education, only those documents and their component elements directly related to the issue were considered.

Semi-structured interview, focus group discussion (FGD), and document review were used to secure relevant data. More probing individual interviews were made with the State Minister for Higher Education²⁰ and the Directorate Director for Gender Affairs²¹. The FGD was made with four individuals (the director and three experts) under this directorate. Various federal level instruments were reviewed. After interview and discussion data were collected and organized, they were e-mailed to the State Minister and the Directorate Director individually for approval. Interviewees approved that the information included are their views. Based on the basic research questions and/or objectives of the study, interview and document review data were summarized, presented, interpreted, and qualitatively analyzed in narrative forms. Simultaneously numerical data were tabulated and analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. Finally conclusions were drawn inductively.

Results and Discussion

Enabling Instruments

Addressing females' educational problems, among other things, requires formulating enabling policies and that is why in many countries in a very short period of time women's experience in education has become a central focus of education policy and planning (Samoff 1999). In line with this, review of appropriate documents and informant responses revealed that many instruments have been developed at the federal level and their

²⁰ The Ministry has 3 State Ministers and in this study interview was made with one of them.

²¹ There are 28 directorate directors but one of the directors and 3 experts under it were involved as an interviewee and discussants respectively for this study.

contents in relation to females' higher education access are consistent with a multitude of international and African documents.

Signatories of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN 1995), among which Ethiopia is a part, agreed to take action to eliminate gender disparities in access to all areas of tertiary education by adopting positive measures when appropriate (Article 80.c). In support of this the Ethiopian Constitution notes the historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia. In order to remedy this legacy, women are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in public and private institutions (FDRE 1995 Article 35.3).²²

The education and training policy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE 1994)²³ in its specific objectives essentially reflects a similar view that education will be geared towards reorienting society's attitude pertaining to the role and contribution of women (Article 2.2.13). Giving special attention to the participation of women in the recruitment, training, and assignment of teachers (Article 3.4.10) and providing financial support to raise the participation of women in education (Article 3.9.5) are among the overall strategies of the policy. These strategies can play a significant role since society's gender stereotypes regarding females' education and their place in the society as a whole and financial constraints are among the problems that weaken their enrolment in education of all levels (Enguday 2008).

Different phases of the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP)²⁴ address the issue of females' access to higher education. ESDP I indicated that investments in higher education by the private sector from home and abroad will be encouraged (FDRE 1998). As the number of higher education institutions (public or private) increases, females' access opportunity will also increase. In the United States enhanced construction of colleges and universities, among other factors, has increased student

²² The Constitution (1995) was adopted on 8 December 1994

²³ The Education and Training policy of Ethiopia, FDRE, (1994) guides the overall Ethiopian education system. It has five general objectives and 15 specific objectives.

²⁴ ESDP translates policy statements into a general education strategy and an action plan.

enrolments and the gender balance was reversed between 1970 and 2005, from mostly men to mostly women (Brock 2010).

In ESDP II, providing good quality higher education to larger numbers equitably was among the overall strategies to be followed (FDRE 2002). The program's focus on equity is a positive indicator to females' tertiary education participation since equity is one of the organizing principles in framing access policies (Clancy and Goastellec 2007). Besides as to this program the admission rates of girls was planned to equal that of boys, locally relevant measures were to be initiated to prevent social and cultural barriers to the education of girls, and the affirmative action for female students to join higher education institutions was expected to continue (FDRE 2002).

In ESDP III taking affirmative action to ensure equity of female participation in all education and training programs was one of the missions of the education sector (FDRE 2005). According to this document, female students were meant to be assigned according to their choices, and those who are married and have families were to be enrolled in institutions closer to their residence. The view in this program document supports world leaders' agreement to take actions to remove all barriers to access to formal education for pregnant adolescents and young mothers, married or unmarried, so that women will not be discriminated because of their sex (UN 1995 Article 83).²⁵

Improved access to higher education of traditionally disadvantaged groups such as females was one of the expected program outcomes of ESDP IV (FDRE 2010). This is a further clarification of the Constitution. Among the key outcome targets of ESDP IV was to increase the share of female overall enrolment from 29% in 2009/10 to 40% in 2014/15 and females' post graduate enrolment share from 10% in 2009/10 to 25% by 2014/15. The global goal for gender equality under ESDP IV was bound to be promoting equal access and success in education and training for women and girls (FDRE 2010). By now the implementation of ESDP I-IV is completed and based on the evaluation results of these programs, ESDP V is devised and the target is to make females' enrolment 43% of the overall intake.

²⁵ The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)

Besides, in every year's tertiary education enrolment, according to the Ethiopian Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP I), women were to constitute 40% of the undergraduate program by 2014/15 (from 29% in 2009/10) and 25% of the postgraduate program (from 10% in 2009/10) (FDRE 2010).²⁶ As the GTP I was prepared by taking into account the findings of ESDP III and side by side with ESDP IV (FDRE 2010), it was fully devoted to gender equity in higher education. Similarly a development package aims at ensuring equal participation and benefit of women in all sectors (FDRE 2006).²⁷

Expanding higher education services that are free from any form of discrimination on the grounds of sex is among the objectives of the Higher Education Proclamation in Ethiopia (FDRE 2003 Article 6.2).²⁸ According to this document entry assessment or admission procedures designed for any female student, among others, shall be different from the rest (Article 6.33). This is in line with the Constitution (FDRE 1995) and the international higher education declaration (UNESCO 1998).

Encouraging Results

Creating a conducive policy environment and its proper implementation must result with something encouraging. Affirmative action in different countries takes different shapes. An interviewee said the "affirmative action" pledged by the Ethiopian Constitution is a positive and rewarding measure to join universities, to select fields of study, and to provide tutorial support to enhance success; and MoE, for instance, gives priority to females whenever there are scholarships abroad, to those who want to join the teaching profession, and to select the field of study they need.²⁹ "As a consequence of concerted affirmative action (entry requirements, and

²⁶ Growth and Transformation Plan I (2010) was guiding the direction of all sectors for the past 5 years (2010/11-2014/15). By now, its implementation phase is over and is replaced by GTP II. In this new plan, women's higher education enrolment is set to reach 43% of the total intake every year.

²⁷ The Development and change Package of Ethiopian Women (2006), as the name indicates is a package meant to facilitate the economic, social, economic and political integration of women.

²⁸ The Higher Education Proclamation No. 351/2003 was proclaimed on 3 July in accordance with Article 55.1 of the Constitution of the FDRE.

²⁹ interview with the State Minister, 08.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

financial support such as a pilot scholarship program and tutorial support programs) and overall expansion, the gender parity index (GPI) has considerably improved in favor of females” (FDRE 2010:71). The increase in female graduates joining teacher education colleges from 36.5% in 2009/10 to 40.5% in 2013/14 (FDRE 2015) may have resulted from the priorities the Ministry gave to females. However, when female students are meant to be assigned into fields of their choice, as the State Minister and the discussants explained; it does not mean every one of them will get the departments they choose. First there is the 70:30 student assignment proportion. Second, the placement should not compromise quality. Thus, as much as possible, better than that of male students, the ministry tries to meet the first choices of females, otherwise their second or third.

The interviewees’ and discussants’ responses also reveal some female students are relieved from “cost sharing”³⁰. Financial support framework is also established and thus some relatively poor students are supported.³¹ Progressive introduction of free education is, of course, considered as one of the appropriate means to make higher education equally accessible to all (UN 1966 Article 13.2.c).³² Moreover, economic support can contribute to educational success at all levels as meaningful student achievement differences are related to the socio-economic status of learners (Sternberg and Williams 2002).

In line with the premises of ESDP IV and GTP I, in its annual plan the MoE targets a 40% females’ higher education participation each year and when the MoE determines the actual total number of students that will join universities based on their intake capacities, without compromising quality issues, it determines the number of female students in line with the plan, so that they will constitute 40% of the overall intake.³³ In fact, as Table 1 below indicates, females’ enrolment has shown an annual increment. However, the 40% target of GTP I appears unachievable because GTP I covers the five years period between 2010/11 to 2014/15. But as the trend of female students’ enrolment in this table reveals, three years after the implementation of this plan their university enrolment grew just by 2.3

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Interview with the Directorate Director 09.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

³² The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966)

³³ Interview with the State Minister, 08.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

percentage points (from 25.6% in 2010/11 to 27.9% in 2012/13). Thus an increase in 12.1 percentage points in the remaining two years implementation period of this plan to reach 40% is more or less unrealistic. Nevertheless the State Minister and the Directorate Director stressed that females' higher education participation reached 39% in 2014/15. So these contradicting explanations may have resulted from the types of institutions and the modes of delivery considered by the study and the interviewees. In this study the enrolments of female students in government institutions for the undergraduate regular program are taken into account. But it seems that the interviewees are considering enrolment in government and non-government institutions in the regular, summer, evening, and distance modes. Because socio-economic factors highly determine the level of females' higher education participation in non-government institutions and evening modes, claiming an increase or decrease in enrolment could be misleading.

An interviewee said there is an ongoing affirmative action of lowering higher education entrance points for females who take preparatory school** leaving examinations and the result is that female students' access to tertiary education has improved significantly (In government higher education institutions, it reached "39%" for the 2014/2015 academic year. It was "38%" the previous year. The plan was to make it 40% every year, so this means, the target is not far)³⁴. According to FDRE (2015), however, the participation of females in government undergraduate programs of all modes (regular, evening, summer, and distance) in the year 2013/14 is 28.1% and it is 28.6% for the regular program alone. So the target is still too far. In any case, it is undeniable that such an affirmative action increases females' enrolment. A research by Damitew and Philip (2004) concluded that the affirmative action of lowering the cut off in the grade point average required for higher education admission in Ethiopia has improved the admission rate of female students.

In 2013/2014, more than 50% of students who were promoted to preparatory schools were females. Thus, the Ministry expects females'

** The formal schooling system of Ethiopia involves primary and secondary levels. The secondary level has two stages: general secondary (grades 9 and 11) and preparatory (grades 11 and 12).

³⁴Interview with the State Minister, 08.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

higher education access to further increase in the coming years, starting from the 2016/17 academic year.³⁵ FDRE (2015) shows by the year 2013/14 the percentage of female students who scored greater than or equal to 2.00 points in the general secondary school leaving examination (grade 10) is 39.4%. The claimed more than 50% promotion is possible if the cutoff point to join preparatory schools for females is less than 2.00 (through affirmative measures). Nonetheless, there is a considerable increase in female's preparatory school participation. For instance it was 35.7% in 2009/10 and grew to 45.1 in 2013/14 (FDRE 2015). Unless any unforeseen factor intervenes an increase in the percentage of females' participation in preparatory schools can result in the same in higher education. Equity of access to higher education must begin with the reinforcement and/or reordering of its links with all other levels of education, particularly with secondary education (UNESCO 1998 Article 3.b).

The postgraduate females' participation target of 25% is "nearly achieved"³⁶. Achieving this target can be a challenge. Because according to FDRE (2015), the 2010/11 participation of females in postgraduate programs (Masters and PhD) in both government and non-government institutions was 13.8% and in three years' time it has increased by 5.7 percentage points in 2013/14 to reach 19.5%. So an increase in 5.5 percentage points in one year (the end of GTP I) to reach 25% participation by 2014/15 is improbable, if not impossible.

Direct and implied responses of all the informants to the question of the success stories appear to revolve around one main issue: their higher education access and/or enrolment increased. The significant increase in the number of public universities (from 2 to 33 universities) and private higher education institutions with almost proportional distribution across the country has increased females' access to tertiary education including the chance to attend universities in their own families' surroundings³⁷.

A review and summary of the education statistics annual abstracts for regular undergraduate enrolment of female students in government higher education institutions over the ten years period (2003/04-2012/13), as

³⁵ Interview with the State Minister and the Directorate Director, 08.and 09.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

³⁶ Interview with the State Minister, 08.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

³⁷ Ibid

indicated in the table below, appear to support their responses. In fact, the table shows that there is an obvious improvement in the number of females joining higher education. In ten years' time, there is a 70,886 or a 7.5 points percentage difference in the enrolment of females between 2003/04 and 2012/13 academic years. But authorities and those responsible and the society as a whole need to be cautious not to exaggerate and over interpret their understanding of the achievements so far for at least four basic reasons.

Table 1: the trend of females' enrolment (2003/04 –2012/13)

Ministry of Education			
Year	Both Sexes	Females	Percentage of Females
2003/04	56,072	11,415	20.4
2004/05	78,232	17,579	22.4
2005/06	93,689	20,911	22.3
2006/07	107,960	25,321	23.4
2007/08	127,033	30,058	23.6
2008/09	157,429	45,517	28.9
2009/10	190,043	49,921	26.2
2010/11	211,197	54,159	25.6
2011/12	250,229	66,203	26.4
2012/13	294,357	82,301	27.9

Source: MoE Education Statistics Annual Abstracts 2003/04– 2012/13

For instance, from this table one can take females' 2008/09 higher education enrolment where the achievement appears to be at its peak. First, the improvement is not consistent and continuous. This years' enrolment is better than that of 2012/13. Second although the raw numbers show that there are visible improvements, the tertiary education gender gap in female-male enrolment ratio, as witnessed by the WEF, is still huge. It was 0.34 in 2009 and 0.43 in 2013 (WEF 2009 and 2013) (where 0.00 means perfect inequality and 1.00 means perfect equality or no gender gap). According to FDRE (2010:72) too, "the gender gap in education prevails at all levels of the system. The gap becomes more visible as one goes higher up the educational ladder". And regardless of the proclamations and practical measures, the gender disparities continued unabated (Habitamu 2004).

Third, the overall higher education student population expansion (both males and females) is not a trend limited to Ethiopia. A worldwide population boom and an increase in the global demand for a qualified tertiary education graduate push the student population up and the expanded enrolment is to continue into the foreseeable future (Davies, Maldonado, and Zarifa 2014). And fourth, a 27.9% Ethiopian females' participation in 2012/13 when compared to the global picture is still low. The average participation of females in tertiary education these days is greater than that of males and there are renewed claims that females are taking over the universities (Leathwood 2013).

Unmet Challenges

With the success stories, there are also challenges. Although considerable progress has been achieved to enhance the access of females to higher education, obstacles continue to impede their full access (UNESCO 1998 Article 4.a). Because the number of students to be admitted to universities is "based on intake capacity", there is no fixed cutoff point in this regard³⁸ which implies that an entrance point adequate for a female to join higher education last year may not be sufficient for the years to come. Moreover, this interviewee added, due to factors like teachers' quality at the general secondary school level, many female students fail to be promoted to the preparatory school level and in turn to higher education institutions. Most teachers from the primary to tertiary levels are unqualified or under qualified (Tekeste 1996) and this undoubtedly affects the performance of students.

The same interviewee went on to explain that as a problem of self-perception, although some female students do have the required examination result, they think they will not be successful in universities and instead join teacher training colleges. In addition, with the lowered cutoff point some of them get frustrated to attend higher education and fail to use the affirmative measures. Self-concept affects academic performance. "A student's perception of his/her own academic ability is the only aspect of the self-concept that correlates moderately or highly with academic achievement." (Crowl 1997:214). And the problem is no research study yet has found girls to have a better self-concept than boys (Desforges 1995) and

³⁸ Interview with the State Minister, 08.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

women believe they are less capable and men believe they are more capable (Sternberg and Williams 2002). This self-concept disadvantages females more than males because “students who believe they are not capable but who have high ability, generally perform less well than their ability would predict” (Sternberg and Williams 2002:371).

For those who live in rural areas, the chance to join universities is very low since the support they receive from families and the society at large is poor (due to economic and cultural problems).³⁹ When it comes to rural females’ access to schools and their opportunity to join higher education, the lowest education enrolments of girls and so the largest gender gaps are inevitably in the poorest and least economically developed areas, especially in rural communities where educational provision and support is poor (Leach 1998). For instance, in 2013/14, only 383 female students from the Gambella and 424 from the Afar regions sat for the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Certificate Examination (EHEECE, Grade 12) while those in Addis Ababa were 14758 (FDRE 2015). The number of female students from Addis Ababa clearly far exceeds that of Gambella and Afar regions.

There is no shortage of policies, the problem is their implementation.⁴⁰ Other challenges, as to the directorate director and experts include: other than criticisms and blaming, no practical measures are taken for failing to implement documents; the most significant challenge is what can we do to bring attitudinal change towards females’ education as the problem is deep rooted in the society for a long time?; no one openly resists or says “no” to address gender issues. But in practice, there is visible lack of interest which leads to implementation gap. It is a common global challenge that traditional cultural prejudices and socioeconomic status continue to affect females’ higher education access in general and that of rural in particular (Xie, Wang, and Chen 2010; Adeyemi and Akpotu 2004; Clegg et al. 2000). A woman is being identified with - or if you will, seems to be a symbol of - something that every culture devalues” (Ortner 1992:253). A study in Ethiopia also indicated that some individuals responsible for the implementation of affirmative actions are not well convinced of the need for

³⁹Ibid

⁴⁰ Interview with the Directorate Director and experts/professionals, 09.02.2015, MoE, Addis Ababa

the approach and thus they fail to provide the necessary support to the students (Habitamu 2004).

Responses also show that there is a problem of sustainability of all efforts including the support, monitoring, and evaluation process and the problem of sidelining the issue of gender⁴¹. Now, gender issue is not as hot an issue as it was some years ago although the time invested to address gender issues, compared to the depth of the problem, is still too short to see “defining” improvements⁴². This may be one of the reasons why the tertiary education gender gap in female-male enrolment ratio got bigger in 2014 (0.32) than the one in 2013 (0.43) (WEF 2014 and 2013 respectively). Females’ percentage enrolment in 2008/09 (28.9%) is also better than that of the 2012/13 (27.9%) (MoE 2010 and 2013 respectively). Sidelining the issue even before satisfactory results are registered can derail previous achievements because existing gender gaps are likely to change but they need time (Booth and Kee 2011) and thus overcoming the obstacles for ensuring an equitable and non-discriminatory system of higher education should remain among the country’s urgent priorities (UNESCO 1998 Article 4.a).

Conclusions and Implications

Legislative and policy frameworks are vital to fight problems that affect females’ access to higher education. Like the international and African policy environment, there are many instruments in Ethiopia and higher education inaccessibility to females cannot be attributed to lack of policies, but their implementation. The annual education abstracts of the MoE and the annual global tertiary education enrolment gender gap rankings of Ethiopia provided by the WEF clearly reveal the theory-practice gap. In fact, everything is not doom and gloom. There are improvements and encouraging results but compared to the global picture there is a long way to go. Key challenges remain: deep rooted traditional, cultural, personal, and attitudinal problems remain deep. The documents are there but not properly implemented and failure to implement them does not have visible consequences.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

The implication is that although formulating policies is necessary, it is not a guarantee to close the national gender gap in higher education. Future instruments should identify priority areas of intervention. They need to show specific strategies that help to tackle centuries-old problems. Monitoring and follow up techniques as well as the consequences for failing to effectively implement the instruments must be indicated clearly. Final documents should be adequately communicated to all beneficiaries, including women. More importantly formulating policies should not be an end by itself. Proper resources must be allocated and plans be translated into action accordingly. Regular theory-practice gap analyses must guide every endeavor. In addition, it is clear that the mass mobilization and huge investment in primary education following the declaration of 'Education for All' helped Ethiopia to close the gender gap at this specified level. The effort should be replicated at the secondary school level so that the number of female students joining tertiary education can be maximized.

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