Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education: Emerging Themes in Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on interim findings from a research project on gender equity in higher education in Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. The project, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and co-ordinated by the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the University of London Institute of Education, is investigating interventions for change in relation to access, curriculum transformation and staff development. It is also searching and analysing published and unpublished literature from low-income Commonwealth countries on gender equity.

Themes are emerging in the research. These include the international policy drivers for gender equity, representation of women in senior academic and management posts; access as a redistributive measure, gender violence, organisational culture, micropolitics and the gendered division of labour in academia. There are concerns about the current distribution patterns of women in universities as students, academics and managers and the qualitative experiences of women in Commonwealth universities.

The research project offers the opportunity to gain comparative insights across the Commonwealth. It aims to contribute to multilateral dissemination and scholarship in an area that has not been traditionally researched.

Policy Silence

The intellectual beginnings of this study were the observation that gender, higher education, and development have rarely been intersected, leading to a silence in terms of policy, literature and research studies. Gender scholars across the globe are trying to account for the persistent inequalities in dominant organisations of knowledge production. However, there is some unevenness in the data that are being produced.

High-income countries have produced a sizeable amount of published qualitative and quantitative data and critical literature (e.g. Blackmore and Sachs, 2001; Brooks, 1997; Currie et. al. 2003; Morley, 1999). Low-income countries have had to rely on some gender-disaggregated statistics, quantitative studies - often funded by international organisations and lone, unfunded studies remaining in the grey literature domain. This was the starting point for the current research project. There is considerable gender equity activity also in low-income Commonwealth countries. But the nature of gendered change in higher education has not been systematically mapped across the Commonwealth and there has been an absence of multilateral dissemination. This led to the formation of a partnership with gender scholars in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania to begin to document and evaluate interventions for gendered change in access, curriculum transformation and staff development.

Poverty and strategies for poverty reduction play an essential role in higher education policies in low-income countries. While there is a feminisation of poverty, there are also struggles to ensure that gender is kept on the agenda amidst competing claims for resource allocation. Poverty affects participation in education in all sectors.

The Changing Political Economy of Higher Education

HIGHER EDUCATION

Commonwealth universities have been characterised by 3 major phases: colonial rule during which many, including Dar es Salaam, Makerere and Ibadan were colleges of the University of London; post-independence reconstruction-during which several achieved their own charters; and more recently, the globalised massification of the knowledge economy (Morley, 2004).

Expansion has been a key word in recent developments in higher education. This has been achieved by increased state investment and also by the rise of private education and offshore and satellite expansion, increasing the number of students and providers. Distance education has also allowed more women to participate in higher education, as reported in the Ugandan paper.

In Nigeria, the first university was established in 1948. Now the country houses 53 universities; 26 owned by the federal government, 19 by states and 8 by private organisations. Private institutions are mostly religious and one is 1 military. Over a twenty-year period, 1975 to 1996, student enrolment grew from 26,000 to 236,261.

However, in Nigeria's case, expansion has been achieved without a significant state investment. In terms of state funding, the amount allotted for education as a percentage of the total budget is still far short of the UNESCO and World Bank recommendation of 26 per cent.

In the space of six decades, the number of universities in Sri Lanka has increased to 13. This has mainly been as a result of a demand to provide an opportunity for higher education for the increasing number of secondary school graduates who became eligible for a university education and also as a result of the demand for the establishment of a university per every province.

Although Makerere University remains the leading, oldest, most established and largest state university in Uganda, there are now three other similar institutions in the country, in addition to over twelve private universities. Of 28 tertiary level institutions in Tanzania, 16 are universities, both private and public.

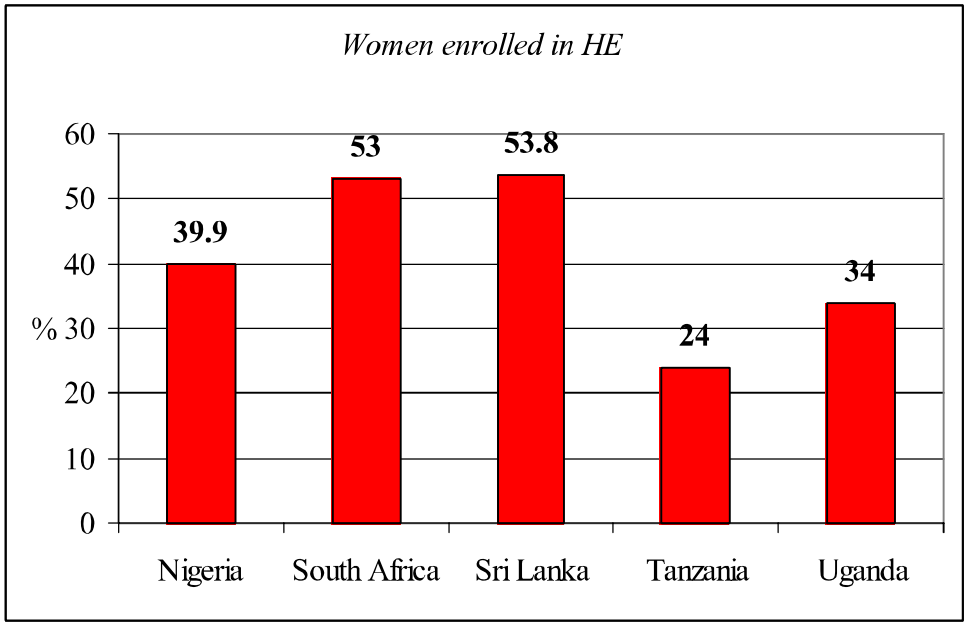
While student numbers are increasing in South Africa, there are plans to rationalise and reduce the number of providers. In the past, South Africa had 21 universities and 15 Technikons. In the next 3-5 years, the total number of publicly funded institutions in South Africa will be reduced from 36 to 24.

Hence, there is an overall trend to massify higher education while keeping costs down. The more-for-less approach to higher education is providing new pedagogical challenges and is increasing pressure on students and staff.

National interests in Commonwealth countries are frequently articulated in the context of global formations. The global political economy of higher education is changing rapidly. Moves towards audit, accountability, user-pay and the enterprise culture have been accompanied by debates on democratisation and the relationship of higher education with globalisation and wealth creation (Morley, 2003). Some Commonwealth countries have experienced major political upheaval, civil war and militarism e.g. Nigeria and Sri Lanka. Others have had socialist governments ostensibly sympathetic to issues of inclusion e.g. Tanzania. The general political trend, reinforced by the international donor community, is towards democratisation. Democratisation is accompanied by an emerging sense of rights and entitlements. Although the contexts of higher education institutions vary considerably in different regions, generally in all regions over the last ten years, there has been a movement to a somewhat more inclusive orientation in higher education.

Initiatives for promoting gender equality link to a range of developments in higher education and to different political frameworks and aspirations. There are some striking similarities across the five countries in this study. While the contexts of higher education institutions vary considerably in different regions, generally in all the participating countries over the last ten years, there has been a movement to a somewhat more inclusive orientation in higher education. On a less positive note, the under-representation of women in senior positions is a social norm in all of the institutions included in the study.

There are also some remarkable differences. In relation to gender equality and student enrolment across these five Commonwealth countries, differences do not map onto a matrix that relates to Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. Based on data from 2002, Sri Lanka has a considerably lower GDI than South Africa (US$850 and US$2520, respectively), and yet has an equivalent range of gender equality in student access (World Bank, 2004).



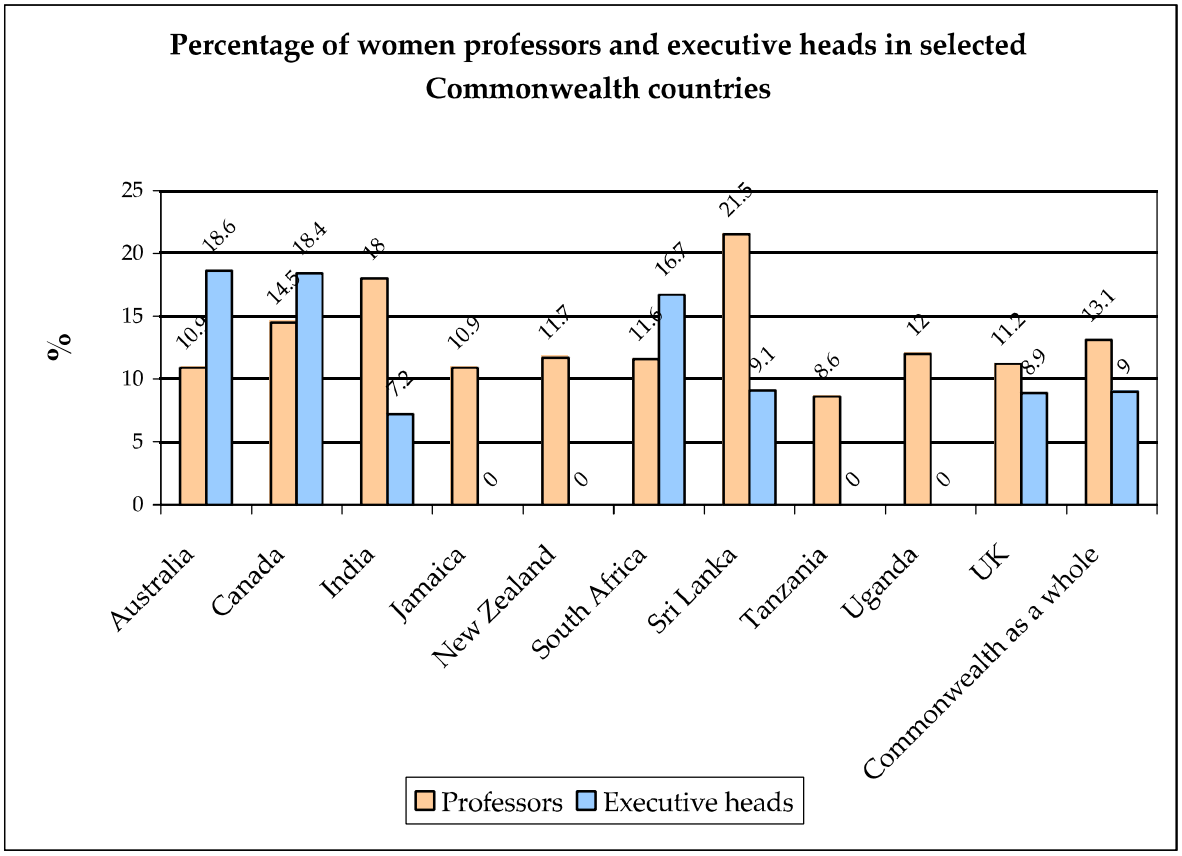
Sources: Nigeria – National Universities Commission. Annual Report, 2002
South Africa - Department of Education, personal communication, 2003
Sri Lanka - University Grants Commission, University Statistical Handbooks, 2001/02
Tanzania and Uganda – UNESCO *Global Education Digest*, 2003

Policy drivers for gender equity have varied across the Commonwealth. It has been driven by post-militarism democratisation programmes in Nigeria (see Odejide, 2003); by post-apartheid reconstruction in South Africa (see de la Rey, 1998); by socialist

aspirations in Tanzania; by post-independence progressive policies in Sri Lanka (see Gunawardena, 2003); and by a range of internationally backed programmes in Uganda.

There have been some tangible successes, for example, in increasing the number of women participating as students in higher education. However, there are also frustrations and concerns about the fragility of initiatives to secure equality in higher education. There is sometimes a contradiction between the declared official discourse of gender equality and human rights and the sociological and feminist analysis of persistent inequalities (Fogelberg *et. al.* 1999). A commonly expressed concern is that gender is not seen as a priority in the context of what is regarded as more pressing. This takes a variety of forms-restructuring higher education is a policy priority in South Africa; quality assurance and student unrest and employability are dominant policy concerns in Sri Lanka; religious and ethnic divisions are preoccupying policy-makers in Nigeria. The implementation gap between declared policy intentions and action for organisational and social change is an ongoing source of disappointment and despair. While governments or higher education institutions make policy commitments to equal opportunities, which are sometimes monitored internationally under instruments such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), these do not always translate into changes in organisational practices. International agendas are not always adhered to nationally. For example, while Nigeria is a signatory to CEDAW, and has put in place some projects for the implementation of the articles of the Convention, they have not enacted the domestic laws for their enforcement.

A striking commonality across the study is the under-representation of women in academic and management posts. Lund (1998) saw that there is no significant difference between high-income countries and low and middle-income countries in the Commonwealth regarding the percentages of full time women academic staff employed. While women are entering the academy as students, women staff are still concentrated in the care giving and service areas and are a minority in the areas in higher education where power is exercised and decisions are taken (See Singh, 2002). Examples from across the Commonwealth demonstrate that women comprise less than a quarter of professional and executive heads.



(Singh, 2002).

The issue of vertical segregation and persistent under-representation of women as academics and mangers is noted throughout this study. The staff strength at the University of Ibadan, the oldest of Nigerian universities, shows that at the three levels of academic, other senior staff and junior staff, there is a consistent mix of roughly 75 per cent males to 25 per cent females. In South Africa, women comprise 37 per cent of all academics and just 9 per cent of senior management. The National Plan for Higher Education drawn up by the Department of Education explicitly comments on the under-representation of black and female staff in higher education. At 20 per cent Sri Lanka has a relatively high rate of female professors (compared to the 12% in the UK). Tanzania reports a reduction in the number of female academic staff at the University of Dar es Salaam with numbers decreasing by 1.5 per cent from 12.5 per cent in 1997/98 to 11 per cent in 1999/2000. Nationally, of the countries in this study, Tanzania has the fewest number of overall female staff (14.2%), with no female staff in positions as executive heads. Similarly, in Uganda, a national survey found that 17.8 per cent of all university staff were women, however, none were senior executives (Singh, 2002).

WOMEN AS STUDENTS

Women are entering the academy as students, or consumers, to use the new language of the market. In South Africa, women make up 53 per cent of students in higher education, but access still remains a complex issue that is impacted upon by a number of factors, including social class, poverty, race and preparedness for higher education. Women students also still tend to cluster in certain fields *e.g.* Health Sciences, Humanities.

In Sri Lanka, the proportion of women in university enrolment increased steadily from 1942 (the year of establishment of the University of Ceylon) until 1973 when the percentage rose to 40.6. In 2001, the percentage of women in total student enrolment was 53.8. However, there is still horizontal segregation with women under-represented in Medicine, Engineering and IT.

In Makerere University, Uganda, women were only allowed to enter in 1945. Current student enrolment is over 30,000 with women comprising 42 per cent. This increase is attributed in part to a strategic intervention to increase women's participation. In 1990, the University Senate instituted an affirmative action programme to increase female student numbers. This is popularly known as the 1.5 Points Scheme. This provides for an additional 1.5 points bonus to female student applicants. This has progressively raised the percentage of female students from an average of 20 per cent to about 35 per cent in 1998 to 42 per cent currently.

In Nigeria, the percentage of females in higher education is 39.9 per cent. While access of females to university education has increased from a ratio of 1 to 40 in the 1950s to 1 to 4 in 2001, there is still wide disparity in traditionally male dominated disciplines such as Technology. There are more female than male students in Education, the Humanities and Science and considerably less in the Social Sciences.

The proportion of women enrolled in higher education in Tanzania is growing. Based on data from the University of Dar es Salaam, in the academic year 2000/01, 27 per cent of all students enrolled on undergraduate courses were women. This was nearly double the number enrolled seven years earlier during the 1993/94 academic year. Still, as was found in the other countries discussed here, women studying at the University of Dar es Salaam were also more likely to enrol on traditional courses such as Education (51%) and General Studies (41%) as opposed to more technical courses, such as Computing (10%).

The increase in numbers of women students is seen as a mixed blessing, as there is a view held by certain policy-makers that qualitative change automatically follows

quantitative change. For example, in Sri Lanka, gender equity is not seen as a policy priority as numbers of women students are high.

SETTING THE SCENE DEMOGRAPHICALLY

The national contexts vary considerably across the countries participating in this study. The five countries vary in population and overall GDI per capita (Figure 1). The Nigerian population is large and diverse. At 124 million, Nigeria has the largest population in the study and includes over 250 different ethnic groups (UNDP, 2003a). Over the years between 1987 and 2000, an average of 34.1 per cent of the population were living below poverty level (UNDP, 2003b). 30 out of 44 years independence were under military rule and the country is undergoing a major democratisation programme.

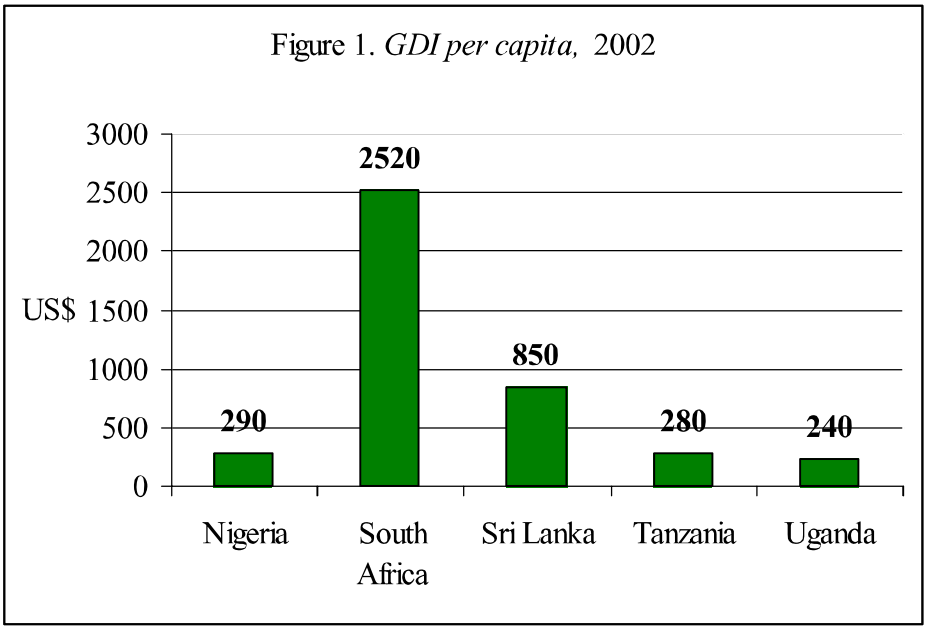
Approximately 45 million people live in South Africa (UNDP, 2003a). Amongst the population, in 2000, 77.6 per cent identified themselves as African; 10.3 per cent as white; 8.7 per cent as coloured; and 2.5 per cent as Indian/Asian (Editors Inc., 2003). South Africa is by far the wealthiest country included in the study, with a per capita GDI upwards of US$2500 measured in 2002 (Figure 1). Owing to racial inequalities instituted during the apartheid years, there is a severely uneven distribution of wealth among racial groups. Since the 1994 democratic elections, redressing these inequalities through education is at the forefront of current transformation initiatives.

Sri Lanka's population was measured at 19.06 million in 2003 (UNDP, 2003a). The population is composed of a number of diverse ethnic and religious groups. Of the many groups, the majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese (81.9 %) and the most practised religion in Buddhism (76.7%). (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2001) Among the five countries included in the study, Sri Lanka has the lowest percentage of the population living below the poverty level, only about 25 per cent of the population (UNDP, 2003b).

At 36.9 million, Tanzania has the third largest population of the five countries studied here (UNDP, 2003a). The Tanzanian population is also diverse. Between the mainland and Zanzibar, Tanzania is mad is made up of varying proportions of Bantu and Nilotic ethnic groups, a mixture of Arab and Asiatic groups; and a mix of Christian, Muslim and indigenous religious groups. The per capita GDI of Tanzania is US$280 (World Bank, 2004). And over 40 per cent of the country's population live below the poverty line (UNDP, 2003b).

Similar to Nigeria, Uganda's population of 22.5 million is very ethnically diverse. The largest ethnic group in Uganda are the Baganda. And although several languages are spoken throughout the country, English is the official language. The per capita GDI of Uganda is also similar to that of Nigeria and Tanzania, US$240. (Table 2) (World Bank, 2004)

Figure 1. *GDI per capita,* 2002



Source: World Bank (2004) *Edstats* [online] Available from: http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/cg.asp. [Accessed January 2004]

HIV/AIDS

Accurate statistics for HIV/Aids are notoriously difficult to source. However, it appears that the HIV/Aids pandemic has hit all the African countries in the study to varying degrees (Table 1). The devastating effects of the epidemic have impacted on many aspects of African society, including higher education. Apart from the human suffering caused by the pandemic, the public services and human resources in low-income countries are under severe strain. Staffing and succession planning are already major challenges in countries dealing with brain drain.

Table 1. HIV prevalence rate among adults age 15+ in five Commonwealth countries, 2002

	HIV prevalence rate among adults (%)
Nigeria	5.8
South Africa	20.1
Sri Lanka	0.04
Tanzania	7.8
Uganda	5.0

Source: WHO (2002) Report on Global HIV/AIDS Epidemic [online] Available from: http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/epidemiology/en/hiv_aids_2001.xls [Accessed February 2004]

THE GENDERING OF ILLITERACY

In Nigeria, the illiteracy rate varies according to region and environmental setting. Overall, the female illiteracy percentage is 44 per cent in the general population and the adult illiteracy is at about 36 per cent. Though about 13 per cent of South Africa's population is illiterate, the country has the narrowest gap between the overall rate of illiteracy and that of women in particular. Sri Lanka has the smallest illiterate population among the countries in this study. A mere 8 per cent of its population cannot read and write, and among females, only 11 per cent. In Tanzania, at independence, the majority of the population could not read and write and the few literates in the country were overwhelmingly men. Now, 40 years later, the overall illiteracy rate has dropped to 25 per cent and among females to 33 per cent. Uganda has the widest gap between the overall illiterate population and illiterate females. 33 per cent of Ugandans cannot read or write, but among females there is a 10 per cent higher rate of illiteracy. (UNESCO, 2000)

GENDER AND BASIC EDUCATION

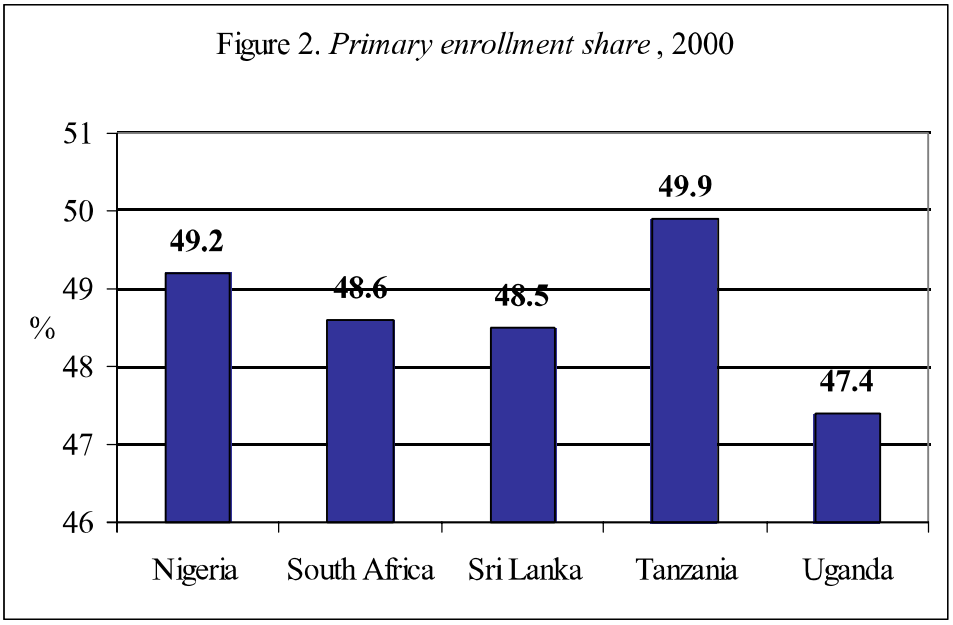
The participation of the girl child in education has been a major policy priority reinforced by international targets of education for all. As a result, in all the countries studied here, girls' participation in primary schooling is approaching the desired 50 per cent. Although the situation is clearly improving, many countries still report gender inequalities.

Nigeria notes how fewer girls than boys are enrolled in primary and secondary schools and also reports related problems of girls' non-completion and absenteeism. Further, rates of girls' participation in education in Nigeria vary regionally and are lower in the

northern zones of the country. It is suggested that common cultural and religious beliefs along with economic factors bar girls' access to education in those regions. The introduction of universal primary education allows Tanzania to report almost a 50 per cent participation rate for girls in primary schools, but the numbers are lower in secondary schools.

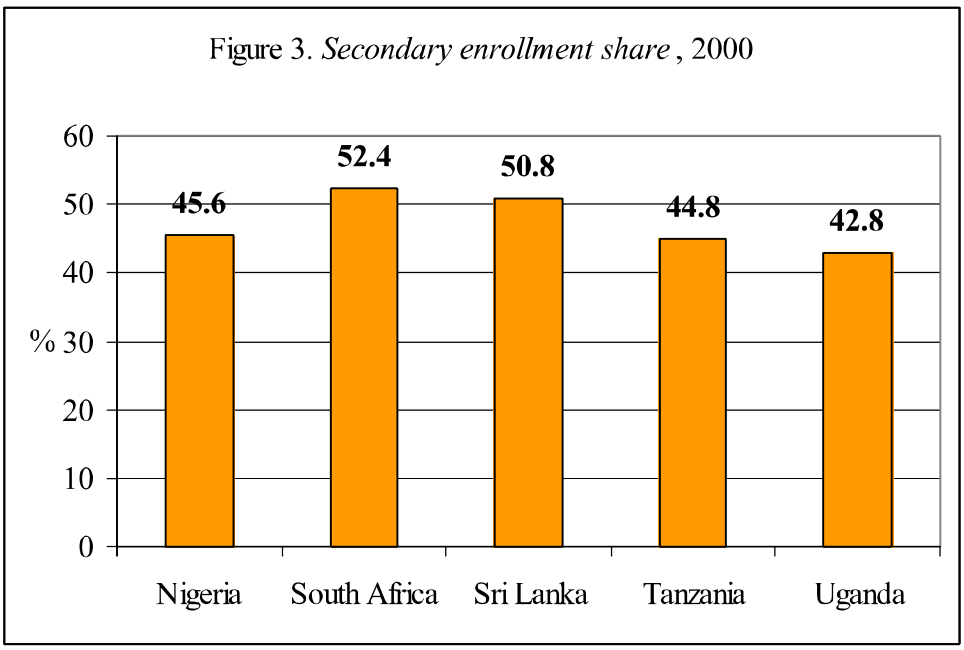
South African girls constitute over 48 per cent of the students enrolled in primary schools. A similar proportion is found in Sri Lanka. Of our five countries, Uganda reports the lowest proportion of girls enrolled in primary school (47.4%) and suffers a further steep drop to 42.8 per cent in secondary schools. (World Bank, 2004) (Figure 2)

Figure 2. *Primary enrollment share* , 2000



Source: World Bank (2004) *Gender stats*. [online] Available from: http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/ & http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/ [Accessed February 2004].*Data for Nigeria from UNICEF.

Figure 3. *Secondary enrollment share* , 2000



Source: World Bank (2004) *Gender stats*. [online] Available from: http://devdata.worldbank.org/edstats/ & http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/ [Accessed February 2004]. *Data from Nigeria from 1995.

Emerging Themes: Qualitative and Quantitative Change

Key themes are emerging across the five countries. The expansion of student numbers – but ongoing horizontal segregation in the disciplines is frequently reported.
In this study, both the Ugandan and the Tanzanian research teams are interrogating the impact of affirmative action schemes on gender equity. As gender equity initiatives can sometimes mean a change in benefit schemes, there is always the potential for backlash. Enhancing access and widening participation are also global themes that are refelct6ed in this study (see Kwesiga, 2002). However, there are questions to be asked about whether qualitative change follows quantitative change. Increasing the numbers of women students is not in itself a redistributive measure if attention is not also paid to retention, completion and women's entry and achievement in the labour market (Gunawardena, 2003; Morley, 2004).

Globally, more women students are entering higher education than a decade ago. However, they tend to cluster in certain disciplinary locations. The under-representation of women staff and students in science and technology is an international policy concern (see Bebbington, 2002). A paradox regarding women's entry into science is that while women are so under-represented, the area remains male-dominated and can therefore be perceived as a difficult area for women to enter. However, simply increasing the

numbers of women will not necessarily change the culture of the scientific disciplines (Dunne and Sayed, 2002;Rose, 1994). This requires a more radical transformation.

There is now a considerable body of knowledge generated by research about the causes and consequences of women's under-representation in science and technology in higher education (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, and Uzzi, 2000; European Commission Research Directorate-General, 2000; Fielding, Glover, and Smeaton. 1997; Greenwood, 2000; Rose, 1998). However, much of this has tended to concentrate upon higher income countries. There is a lack of data about women in middle and lower income countries, and the consequences that this has for social and national development (King and Hill, 1993). Rosser, (1999) and UNESCO (1999) are among the few studies that places gender and science within a wider global framework. In this project, the Nigerian research team is exploring women's experiences of courses offered by Agriculture and Technology departments and the South African research team is investigating access to the Engineering faculty, the faculty with the lowest percentage of women students at the University of Cape Town.

New formations in higher education mean that state monopolies have been broken and there is now a range of new competitions and providers. Higher education is expanding both in responses to state investment in the knowledge economy and also as a consequence of new private and offshore providers (King, 2003). A concern in this study is that the proliferation of private universities could be reinforcing social divisions. In Tanzania, the University of Dar es Salaam is the oldest of the country's four state-run universities. The research team also note the rapid expansion of privately funded universities. Furthermore, in countries such as Nigeria, religious groups run some of the private universities. This can mean that gender is not subjected to critical scrutiny and that traditional gender roles are reinforced. The discussions on new formations in higher education tend to focus on concerns about quality, standards and the need for accountability and regulation. These debates tend to be rooted in Economics, rather than in Sociology and almost no attention paid to gender.

There have been specific interventions to introduce women's disqualified knowledges into the curriculum throughout the Commonwealth. Detraditionalisation of the curriculum is taking place in some locations such as Uganda, via initiatives including gender mainstreaming and the development of women's studies and gender studies courses. One of the earliest initiatives for gender mainstreaming was undertaken in Makerere University, Uganda (Bishop-Sambrook, 2000). The development and maintenance of Women's Studies courses and centres is a cause for celebration. Within the 53 institutions of higher education in Nigeria, there are 5 existing centres of Gender/Women's studies. Women's Studies are also thriving in Uganda, Tanzania and

Sri Lanka. In this project, the Sri Lankan research team is interviewing students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Women's Studies programme to capture their perceptions of the experience on the course. The Ugandan team is also exploring the development of gender-oriented courses in Makerere University.

A strong argument, originally from feminist academics and women's studies scholars, but more recently from international organisations, is that access needs to be accompanied by organisational and curriculum change. Gender mainstreaming is now an initiative supported by international organisations including the European Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNESCO (Leo-Rhynie et. A.al, 1999; UNDP, 2002; UNESCO, 2002). It is a strategy that claims to make women's and men's experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. It is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes in any area and at all levels. However, it is controversial and problematic, requiring a highly capacitated labour force to implement such widespread changes.

The theme of staff development is being variously engaged with across the five countries. In Uganda and Tanzania, it is sometimes interpreted as the need to train and develop staff to deliver gender equity programmes. This can take the form of gender sensitisation programmes. Elsewhere, staff development can be interpreted as opportunities for women top gain professional competencies. For example, the South African team is investigating the HERS-SA programme that is aimed at developing women in middle management in higher education. In Sri Lanka, the courses conducted by the Staff Development Unit of the University are being researched to identify the status of gender in its programmes. The team is also interviewing University of Colombo academics and administrators who participated in the Women in Higher Education Management Workshops conducted by the Commonwealth Secretariat to explore how participants viewed and applied their experiences.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

A disturbing theme that is emerging from this study is the widespread existence of violence against women in universities. It is frequently reported as a major impediment to gender equity and indeed to women's participation and completion of higher education. Globally, violence against women causes more deaths and injury than cancer (Panos Institute, 2003). In Nigeria, serious social upheavals on campuses and danger to occupants especially from gender-based violence are reported. In Sri Lanka, ragging (a violent form of bullying of new students ostensibly to orient them to the university

culture) by senior students has been declared as a criminal act by law. However, the practice is still widely reported and has different connotations for men and women. Policies and programmes to challenge and combat sexual harassment are reported from South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

IN CONCLUSION

The research project is attempting to map successes, disappointments and areas in need of future policy action to establish gender equity in higher education. It is questionable what form the gender equitable university of the future will take. With such a rapidly changing political economy of higher education, the university of the future could occupy a very different global and local space. However, it is hoped that women will be well represented as students and as staff and that there will be opportunities for capacity-building and cultural and intellectual recognition that are not embedded in gender discrimination.

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