

Tackling Gender Inequality in Higher Education Institutions in Africa: From Affirmative Action to Holistic Approaches

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Associated with the massive expansion in the higher education sector in Africa over the past twenty years has been a perceptible growth in the participation of women. This growth is partially attributable to advocacy for girls' and women's education leading to policy changes which have facilitated growth in initial enrollments. Different manifestations of affirmative action – the most pervasive intervention have focused on increased access. However, after a number of years of implementation and evaluation, the effects of affirmative action reveal that this focus on access, while necessary, has led to the neglect of qualitative indicators of gender equality in higher education. Thus, facilitating access for women has not taken into consideration the fact that environments in higher education institutions (HEIs) are not necessarily conducive for their academic and career advancement.

The argument presented in this policy brief is that there is need to shift to more holistic gender responsive strategies. Such strategies move beyond simply enabling women's access to HEIs to issues affecting women's ability to fully participate, and perform within these institutions. Based on the Forum for African Women Educationalists' research, the key priorities for addressing the gender inequalities in African HEIs are highlighted. Therefore, in response to the challenges of women's under-representation in the science, technology and commerce faculties, the unconducive environment of HEIs which perpetuates gender inequality and the lack of women in leadership roles in HEIs, the following key recommendations are proposed:

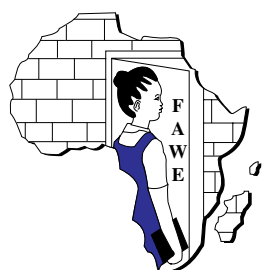
1. Put in place gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion process in HEIs.
2. Establish bodies/committees to implement and monitor the impact of gender policies within institutions.
3. Urgently initiate research on Higher Education, particularly from a gender perspective, to produce responsive and relevant policy.

4. Re-invigorate the implementation of scholarship programs and pre-science courses aimed at motivating and upgrading the skills of girls interested in pursuing science programs
5. Accelerate gender policy dissemination and translate the policy into tangible actions.
6. Initiate/enhance deliberate policy provision to ensure that the HEI environment takes cognizance of the needs of female students and lecturers in the areas of infrastructure, academic program, social environment etc.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) serve to equip people with the intellectual capacities needed to pursue national and regional development advancements, yet individual country data illustrates that women continue to be under-represented at all levels of HEIs. The need for women to participate in such processes is well articulated in tandem with the persistent campaign for the effective participation of girls and women in edu-

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FAWE

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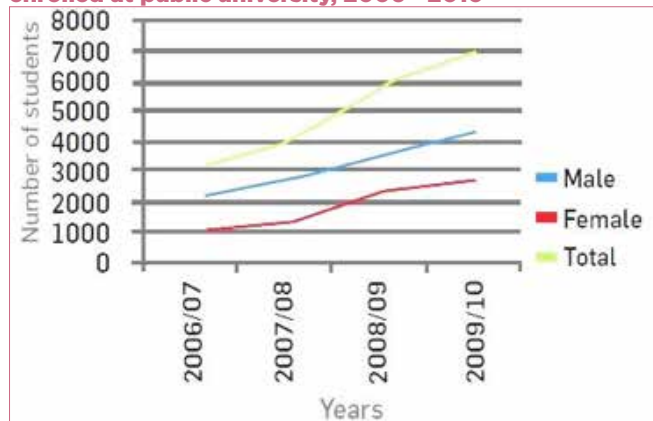
cation at all levels. However, as current trends illustrate, women’s access to and their performance in higher education remains deeply inequitable: African universities tend to be overwhelmingly male-dominated. Gender imbalance in HEIs is a common phenomenon across the continent. This imbalance is a result of cultural, sociological, economic, psychological, historical and political factors. Furthermore, it is also a result of institutional frameworks, which, having largely been male dominated spaces are not sensitive to the needs of women and therefore lock women out of decision-making spaces, influential roles and academic excellence. While several initiatives across the continent are underway to address gender inequality, much still remains to be done; in particular: a shift from the singular focus on women’s entry into HEIs to a holistic approach that transforms HEIs into gender-responsive spaces that produce gender equality. This argument will be supported through the discussion of four priority areas:

1. Conducive environment of HEIs for female students and academic
2. Gender based violence in HEIs
3. Women representation in Science, Technology and Commerce faculties
4. Women in leadership in HEIs

CURRENT STATUS/PRIORITY AREAS

In today’s knowledge-intensive global economy, access to higher education is a priority. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that educating a woman has multiple impacts on a society’s development as higher education empowers women to participate in the social, economic and political lives of their communities and countries. Thus, women’s access to and effective participation and/or engagement in higher education is a pre-requisite for gender equity and equality in society and an important strategy for poverty alleviation and development in African countries.

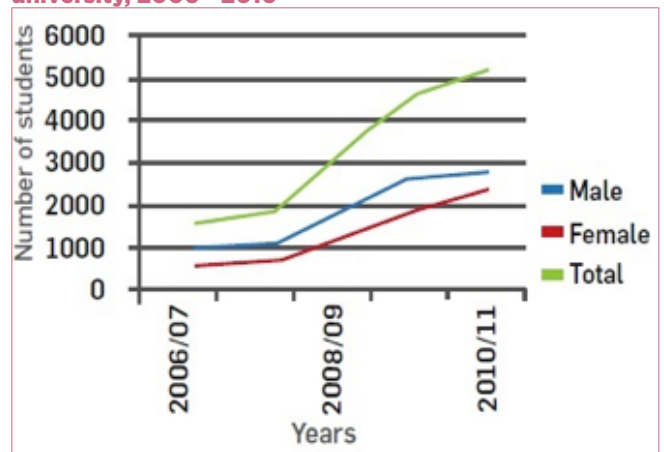
Figure 1: Total Number of students enrolled at public university, 2006 - 2010



Source: FAWE. 2013, FAWE Research Series Vol. 3, p. 123.

Women’s access to higher education has therefore, more and more, become a priority in several African countries as part of the agenda of building more equal and just societies. Given the large disparities in enrollment to higher education, the focus of achieving gender equality in education has been on the enrollment of women. The key intervention adopted by most African governments has been Affirmative Action (AA) policies, which often entail lowering entry requirements for female students in recognition of the deficits that accrue at primary and secondary levels of education and enabling women to engage in key areas of a country’s economic, political and social spheres. The positive correlation between AA initiatives and the improvement in female enrollment rates highly suggests that AA is improving women’s access to higher education. While the number of females enrolling in HEIs continues to increase, there is still a significant disparity in favor of males in both public and private universities as evidenced below. This data represents enrollment in one private and one public higher education

Figure 2: Total Number of students enrolled at private university, 2006 - 2010



Source: FAWE. 2013, FAWE Research Series Vol. 3, p. 123.

Figure 3: Total Number of Post-Graduate Students enrolled at the University of Ghana (2006 -2010)



Source: FAWE.2010. Women in African Higher Education: University of Ghana Project, p. 6.

institution in Dar es Salam, Tanzania, and post-graduate student enrolment in the University of Ghana.

However, enrolling women is merely the first hurdle in addressing gender equality in HEIs. The focus on access is premised on the assumption that institutions are egalitarian in their functioning and that the gender gap that exists is solely a result of past and external inequalities. This line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that bringing in more women will automatically produce gender equality. It does not. Access has been viewed as an end in itself, while it contributes to closing the gender gap, it cannot be seen as the key indicator for equality. The focus on access and in some instances performance (quantitative data) overlooks the fact that these are not the sole indicators of gender equality in education. Qualitative data, such as a women's ability to regularly attend class and participate within classes, their interest in participating in traditionally male-dominated fields and how they balance the competing priorities of family and academic responsibilities, also provides vital information. Thus, what is equally important, other than access, is what happens once women are in HEIs.

- Are they able to fully participate and engage as students in institutions which are male dominated at student, academic staff and management levels?
- Are HEI environments responsive to the needs of women?

FAWE's research in countries across the continent indicates that the answer to both questions is a resounding "No". In order to promote gender equality in HEIs, these qualitative aspects have to be taken into consideration by the institutions. The following discussion on FAWE's proposed priority areas illustrates and supports this negative response.

Conducive Environment: Gender Inequality in HEIs

HEIs are not necessarily (as often assumed) gender neutral spaces. In fact there is evidence to suggest that they may operate in ways that reproduce gender inequality and injustice instead of challenging it. Universities have institutional cultures that continue to privilege masculine norms of behavior, academic prowess and status. Women have gained access into HEIs only to face a series of challenges within the institutions. Their experience in HEIs is of key importance in facilitating optimal educational and career outcomes.

While there is a common notion that once enrolled, women are prone to 'drop-out', there is little evidence to support this. The term 'drop-out' infers that the reasons for leaving are wholly in the personal lives of women rather than the institutions. If HEIs do not transform to take into consideration gender-inequalities, they work to give women access to an environment which may in fact "push-out" women.

To avoid this situation of institutions themselves serving as impediments to the effective participation of women (both staff and students), institutions need to focus on ensuring that they create a gender-responsive environment, attending equally to the needs of men and women and hence contributing to effective, efficient and human-centred development. Below are some of the challenges girls face in HEIs, based on a study done in Kenyatta University (KU) and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) in Kenya, which can be inferred as common experiences on several campuses across the continent:

Teaching Methods

Students identified teaching approaches as a major impediment to their attendance, especially in the science and technology courses. Teaching methods can limit students' ability to understand the content and limit their participation.

When asked which of their students – male or female – participate more in class, two male lecturers gave the following responses:

"... girls have to be forced to talk. They are shy and have no confidence. They are sometimes overwhelmed by how fast the boys think." (KU, male lecturer, History, 2011).

'Boys ask the most questions in class; only one lady tries.' (JKUAT, male lecturer, Engineering, 2011).

(FAWE. 2011, FAWE Research Series Vol. 2, p. 104)

As female students are more likely to lack the confidence to speak in public (as a result of cultural and social constructs), the question and answer methods of teaching, which is dominant in most universities (and secondary and primary levels as well), is not suitable for them and therefore limits their participation and opportunities to enhance their understanding of the content. Consequently, it is more effective to combine this method with other gender-sensitive approaches. For instance, an increase in the use of group work exercises presents increased opportunity for women to participate. While gender responsive pedagogy advocacy has been directed towards primary and secondary teachers/instructors, the need for it is also evident at university level.

Sanitation

The lack of access to clean, easily accessible, well-functioning and private sanitation facilities and sanitary towels remains a problem at higher education levels as girls are negatively affected, especially during their menstrual periods. For instance, in Kenyatta University, female students spend a lot of time looking for clean toilets in times of water shortage. Furthermore, students from poor households cannot buy monthly supplies of san-

itary towels, affecting their attendance and academic performance.

Security

Limited on-campus accommodation, coupled with evening classes, often affects female students' ability to attend classes out of fear of being attacked on their way to and from evening classes.

Sexual harassment

Gender polices which aim to curtail sexual offences are in place in the universities. The policies outline students' rights and responsibilities, and the steps to follow in cases of harassment. However, students confirmed that sexual harassment was still a reality, especially for first-year students. Furthermore, a majority of students indicated they were unaware of the existence of such polices.

Sexual and reproductive health

The lack of easy access to sexual and reproductive health services and utilities has led to absenteeism. Students from both universities reported that although contraceptives such as condoms were available in the hostels, female condoms and morning after pills had to be sourced from a facility situated a long way from the hostels. It was also reported that students seen going to this facility was labelled 'loose', meaning they were of poor moral standards.

Family responsibilities

While pregnant students have to take time off from school for medical check-ups, those with young children miss classes to attend to their children. This is particularly an issue for students who chose to further their studies to Masters and PhD level; who are often married and/or have children. Thus, the lack of mechanisms to enable women to fulfil both their family and academic responsibilities acts as a deterrent for further study and, for those already enrolled, it negatively affects their participation.

Translating polices into action/ monitoring

Where gender policies do exist, implementation and monitoring is problematic. Without bodies or persons designated to ensuring that the strategies in these policies are acted upon, and their effect monitored, they often remain reference documents that are used to illustrate a commitment that efforts have been made to address gender inequality rather than an actual commitment to doing so. Positive interventions in recognition of this issue have been developed in certain institutions. For instance, Kenyatta University has set up the Gender and Affirmative Action Implementation Centre with the mandate of implementing gender policies in the institution.

Taking into consideration the above, institutions that attempt to address such challenges improve the learning experience of their female students, creating an envi-

ronment which addresses their needs and ability to fully participate as students within the university. Thus, the failure to do so evidently affects their experience, illustrating that while they may have access to HEIs, they face challenges within the institution which negatively affects their ability to fully engage, participate and perform well. The above also illustrates the need for each institution to conduct a situation analysis that informs the development of context-specific policies and interventions to address issues affecting students' performance.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major human rights problem on the continent and, increasingly, within HEIs. A study conducted by FAWE at Kenyatta University indicated that 5% of males in comparison to 8% of females reported gender based violence as affecting their academic participation. Girls/young women are disproportionately victims of physical and sexual abuse in HEIs; they are raped, sexually assaulted and sexually harassed by male students and even by their lecturers. The threat of GBV results in irregular attendance, bad performance and low self-esteem, it is an environment which pushes out girls from HEIs.

"Male sexual aggression is institutionalized and considered as normal, and girls respond on the whole with resignation and passivity."

- Itegi & Njuguna, 2013. Gender Based Violence in Educational Institutions and its Impact on Girls' Education, p. 278

Among the causes of GBV are poverty, traditional beliefs and some aspects of modernity and particularly the socialization of girls and boys. Students in HEIs are predominantly young adults, many of whom have been raised in patriarchal cultures. Furthermore, HEIs tend to be male dominated, creating male tolerant cultures and environments. For instance, a FAWE study in Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) revealed that there is a perception amongst male students that girls cannot refuse to go out with them and that those who refuse are verbally and physically abused.

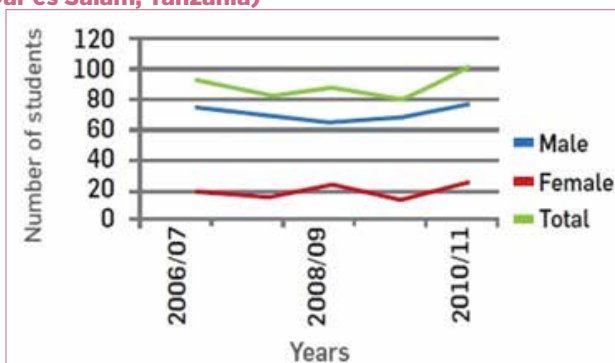
Several cases of GBV go unreported due to fears of victimisation, punishment or ridicule. This is also a result of unclear reporting mechanisms which means that students are unaware of how to address GBV. In Kenyatta University, a confidential mobile phone line which victims of sexual violence can use to report was created. While this led to an increase in reported cases, interviews with students at the university indicated that most cases still go unreported due to fear of victimisation. This highlights the need to focus on the prevention of GBV, which, from FAWE's experience is best addressed through policy advocacy and implementation, alongside community sensitisation.

Representation in non-traditional fields

Science, Technology and Commerce courses lead to strategic and marketable careers. Therefore, women's enrollment in these sectors is crucial to maximize their career opportunities. Traditionally, however, these fields have been dominated by male students mainly as a result of the gender-stereotypes surrounding their study. Parents' lack of expectation and therefore lack of encouragement for their daughters to perform well in these courses, in addition to the teachers' minimal effort in ensuring girls' engagement in the subject areas negatively affects girls' interest to participate in the three subject areas.

While the proportion of disparity across countries differs, the female student population in these traditionally male dominated fields across African higher education institutions is consistently lower than that of male students. This translates to the academic staff as well, as illustrated in Kenyatta University where, in 2009 in the School of Engineering, of the 37 academic staff members, only 3 were female. This implies that female students in these departments lack role models with which to identify. Furthermore, female lecturers are more likely to understand the learning styles of female students and encourage them through different methods to participate and engage with the content.

Figure 4: Total Number of students enrolled in Computer Science at public university, 2006 -2010 (1 Public Uni. In Dar es Salam, Tanzania)



Source: FAWE. 2013, FAWE Research Series Vol. 3, p. 1

Despite this, those who gain access to these fields perform well. This can be attributed to, for instance as seen at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the introduction of remedial classes for female students. Additionally, the university introduced programs that assist Form 5 leavers improve their A-level science grades to enable them to not only gain entry into university but also to prepare them for the level of difficulty; serving as a foundational year for female students to excel once accepted. In recognition of the challenges students face at secondary level in relation to traditionally non-female subjects; universities are obligated to address this issue to encourage enrollment (given the support system) as well as good performance.

“When laboratory assignments are done in groups, female students are forced to participate” – KU, Female Lecturer, Engineering Faculty, 2011

(FAWE. 2011, FAWE Research Series Vol. 2, p. 104)

Women in Leadership

There is a paucity of women involved in the leadership levels of HEIs, compounded by the lack of gender-responsive policies. Where there are policies in place, their translation into practice is not adequately or effectively done or monitored, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo. In some institutions where there are no formal gender-responsive strategies for recruitment (such as in University of Swaziland, 2009), the tendency to hire males is greater in most of the departments with historically strong male bias, such as the Agricultural and Earth Sciences.

“In order for a gender-responsive approach to permeate institutional thinking and action, it needs to become an explicit consideration at all levels of the institutions operations.”

FAWE.2009. Kenyatta University: Baseline Study, p. 4.

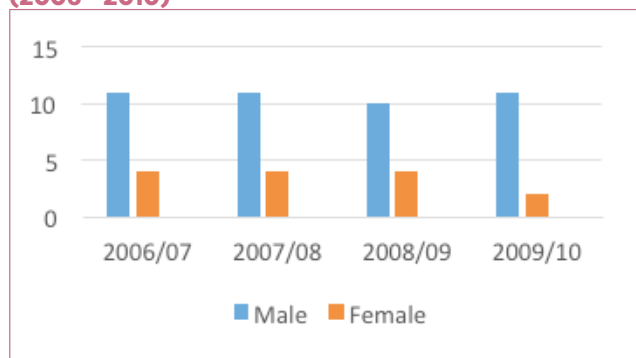
Management

Women are generally concentrated at lower level decision-making positions in HEIs. While there are a few exceptions, such as in Kenya, where the first female Vice-Chancellor was appointed to lead Kenyatta University, women remain in positions in which they are unable to make or influence decisions, limiting their ability to contribute to the transformation of universities into gender-responsive institutions. In fact, in 2009, despite having a female Vice-Chancellor, Kenyatta University's management was dominated by males with only 2 females out of 11 members. Another example is the admissions committee at Buistema University in Uganda, which has 1 female, and 7 males and is chaired by a male, while the Academic Affairs Committee has only 1 female and 6 males and is also chaired by a male. In total, the composition of the University Senate is: 5 females and 18 males which means that only 22% of the decision-making body is female. This similar occurrence is reflected at the University of Ghana in which females are under-represented in the university's apex decision-making body, the University Council, as illustrated in Figure 5.

While a common argument is that there is no guarantee that the inclusion of women will lead to more gender-responsive decisions/policy-making, it makes it more likely as the inclusion of women's perspectives on certain issues will often lead to decisions that take into consid-

eration both male and female needs, leading to more gender-responsive decisions and policies.

Figure 5: University of Ghana Council Membership (2006 - 2010)



Source: FAWE.2010. Women in African Higher Education: University of Ghana Project, p. 15.

Academia

Women in academia tend to occupy junior untenured positions, publish less and are only marginally present in managerial positions. Figure 6 and 7 representing the gender distribution of staff, and Tables 1 and 2 representing academic appointments with respect to gender in Zambia’s Copperbelt University and the Kenyatta

Figure 6: Gender Distribution of Academic Staff (2009 - Copperbelt University, Zambia)

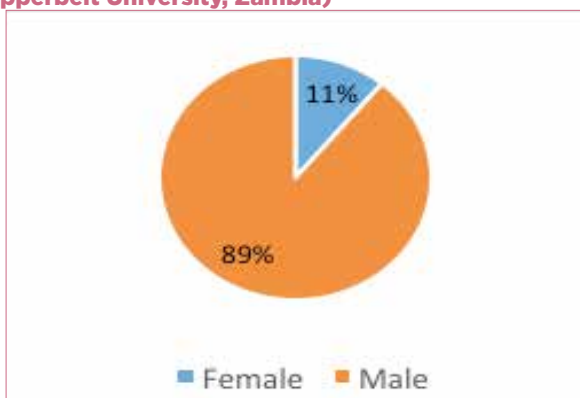
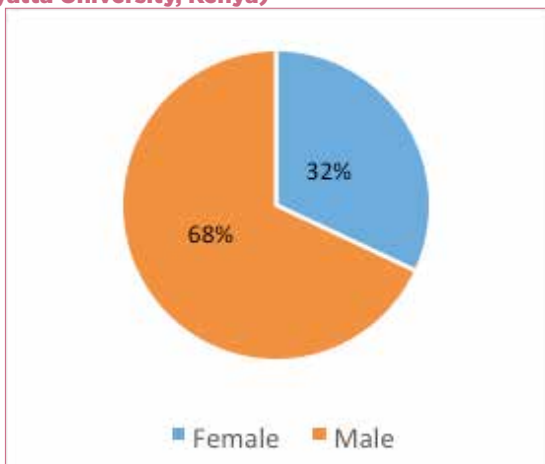


Figure 7: Gender Distribution of Academic Staff (2009 - Kenyatta University, Kenya)



University, illustrate not only the lack of female academic staff in HEIs, but also that they tend to occupy lower level positions. This is mainly a result of, as mentioned earlier, the uncondusive working environment for women’s upward mobility.

Issues affecting women’s upward mobility in HEIs, according to staff interviewed at the University of Swaziland are pregnancy and maternal obligations which interfere with their research and committee involvement, both of which are used as the key criteria for promotions. Research, especially fieldwork, necessitates leaving campus/home and going to the research sites which is often not possible due to maternal obligations. While committee meetings are often ad hoc and can go on until late, once again interfering with maternal obligations. Furthermore, some respondents stated that as they were in the “softer disciplines” it was difficult for them to publish in some journals as they tend to require quantitative research; skills which many women do not have. Deliberate efforts need to be made and targeted initiatives developed so that African women can assume positions of responsibility in greater numbers within academia, as an end in itself, but also to increase the number of positive role models for female students.

Table 1: Academic Appointments with Respect to Gender (2009 - Copperbelt University, Zambia)

Academic Appointment	Total Number of Staff	
	Male	Female
Associate Professor	6	0
Senior Lecturer	20	2
Lecturer I	35	0
Lecturer II	54	6
Lecturer III	52	13
Total	167	21

Table 2: Academic Appointments with Respect to Gender (2009 - Kenyatta University, Kenya)

Academic Appointment	Total Number of Staff	
	Male	Female
Professors	29	2
Assoc. Professors	39	15
Senior Lecturers	91	38
Lecturers	211	104
Asst. Lecturers	47	21
Tutorial Fellows	90	56
Research Assistants	2	1
Total	509	237

Recommendations

- ▶ Achieving a gender-balanced human resource requires a gender-sensitive recruitment and promotion process. HEIs should therefore amend their recruitment and promotion policies using a gender lens.
- ▶ National policies dealing with GBV need to be translated into specific guidelines in order to facilitate implementation in HEIs. In particular, the development of mechanisms to enable students to freely report GBV cases and the development of anti-GBV initiatives (e.g. sensitization campaigns) to act as a preventative measure.
- ▶ As in Kenyatta University, HEIs should establish Gender and Affirmative Action Implementation Centres to implement and monitor the impact of Gender policies within the institution.
- ▶ The dearth of reliable and comparable data on Higher Education and gender requires urgent attention. To produce responsive and relevant policy, research must be conducted on Higher Education, particularly from a gender perspective to provide up-to date evidence on which to develop targeted policies and programs to address female student's needs.
- ▶ Scholarships and pre-Science courses aimed at motivating and upgrading the skills of girls interested in pursuing science programs should be implemented.
- ▶ Ministries of Education and individual universities should enhance dissemination and implementation (translating policy into tangible actions) of gender policies and programmes to improve their impact in addressing inequalities.
- ▶ Put in place deliberate policy provision to ensure that HEI environment (infrastructure, academic programme, social environment etc.) takes cognizant of the needs of female students and lecturers.

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Hendrina Doroba has over 30 years of work experience and has an excellent understanding of gender and education issues, and the challenges that exist particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Forum of African Women Educationists (FAWE)

FAWE is a pan-African Non-Governmental Organization working in 33 African countries to empower girls and women through gender-responsive education.

FAWE believes that through education of women and girls, livelihoods are improved for entire communities and civic education and liberties are enhanced. Educated girls become educated women who have the knowledge, skills and opportunity to play a role in governance and democratic processes and to influence the direction of their societies.

FAWE works hand-in-hand with communities, schools, civil society, Non-Governmental Organizations and ministries to achieve gender equity and equality in education through targeted programs.

It encourages its partners to enact policies and provide positive learning environments that treat girls and boys equally.

Its work influences government policy, builds public awareness, demonstrates best educational practice through effective models, and encourages the adoption of these models by governments and institutions of education. This has led to increased rates of girls' enrollment, retention and completion of school in countries in which our National Chapters operate.

Through FAWE's work, girls and women across sub-Saharan Africa have the chance to attend school and overcome material deprivation and social and political exclusion.

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