Transforming a segregated and patriarchal tertiary education system in South Africa

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ABSTRACT
Since the African National Congress (ANC) assumed power in South Africa in 1994, there has been a concerted effort to correct the gender and race imbalance in tertiary education institutions. These alterations have been facilitated by government policies and economic incentives. Have these methods been successful in encouraging previously disadvantaged groups to register at universities and continue into postgraduate studies? The statistics are favourable in this regard. When observing registration numbers at the University of the Witwatersrand, it is clear that there is an increase in the number of historically marginalised people entering this institution, particularly black females. It is also reassuring to note that more women students are studying in traditionally male disciplines.

The democratic election of the African National Congress (ANC) to government in South Africa in 1994 signalled the end of the apartheid era. Under apartheid, forced racial segregation had resulted in a disparity between the economic and social growth of the predominantly white urban areas and the independent black homelands. Unfortunately, the new democratic government could not instantly correct these inequalities due to years of control and oppression, but the end of apartheid did bring the promise of access to educational facilities previously denied to large sectors of the population. In 1994, the Ministry of Education was tasked with the challenge to create a new single national system of education in South Africa. The policy of Affirmative Action and the Reconstruction and Development Programme implemented soon after to empower people through education, reinforced the ability of those previously disadvantaged due to race, gender and disabilities to be allowed greater chances of attending tertiary institutions.

The ANC also established a National Commission on Higher Education and an Interim Assistance Group with the purpose of transforming and improving the tertiary education system. The National Commission on Higher Education was also handed the task of drafting a report on student financial aid in order to assist over 70 000 needy students (Bizsa 1997:1).

This article will examine whether the changes in government policy and the subsequent impact on higher education has positively affected the number of females registering, particularly those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. It will also be determined whether the new environment has encouraged women in higher education to branch out into fields which are not traditionally female dominated. The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, shall form the focus of this study.

GENDER AND EDUCATION IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Feminist theorists tend to agree that gender is a social construct. It is not specifically biological in nature, rather it is based on social relationships. Biklen (1993:2) identifies gender as belonging to “behaviour, attitudes and presentation of self”. Since this definition is largely determined by society, the under standing of this concept will vary from one state to another and may even alter slightly over time. One factor, however, remains fairly constant, that of female subordination (Momsen 1991:4). Women tend to gain less access to educational institutions due to a combination of factors: male prejudice; confinement to the domestic sphere; and limited financial resources.

Male prejudice is a large obstacle to women furthering their education. From an early age, females are coerced into believing that the male is the “bread winner” and provider for the household, whilst the female is the caregiver and supporter. Due to this
belief system, many females at school are not actively encouraged to continue in science or mathematics, two subjects which are usually required for university acceptance. Although this omission affects most scholars in 1999 only 28% of all matriculants received a higher grade pass in mathematics (Department of Education 2000) it is to the distinct disadvantage of female scholars. This is further aggravated in South Africa, where there has been a tendency for women to finish school in Grade 10, two years short of matriculation and this denies them the opportunity to attend tertiary education institutions.

In order to redress the problem of people having left school at an early age due to the discriminatory political climate of apartheid and an inferior education system in the homelands, non governmental organisations supported by the Department of Education initiated Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). These classes are designed to encourage adults to complete their schooling, and are usually held in the evenings and on weekends. The courses emphasise literacy and numeracy skills. Should they matriculate successfully and gain access to higher education institutions, studies show that gender streaming still occurs with women continuing to study in the humanities and vocational schools such as secretarial colleges (Coenen 1994:3).

There is no doubt that the sector of society most disrupted by the socio economic conditions of apartheid were black females. Due to the nature of apartheid in South Africa and the unequal distribution of wealth between urban areas and homelands, many black men were forced to seek employment outside their area of residence. Thousands flocked to the mines on the Witwatersrand, particularly the gold mines in Johannesburg, leaving their mothers or wives behind to care for the family. Furthermore, according to tradition, the black woman has been responsible for looking after the family, as well as tending the crops to address the subsistence needs of the family. Thus the black women in South Africa found themselves in a double quandary, having to deal with both traditional stereotyping and govern mental prejudice. Both of which limited their oppor tunity for further education and a career.

Due to a need to sustain the family and limited financial resources, most families could only afford to send one child to school. In most cases, male children received preference. As primary education in South Africa has become compulsory both sexes attend, but once that level has been completed and as fees increase, females will often receive little to no further education. The need to decide which children will receive better education is endemic all over Africa due to economic deterioration and the subsequent decrease in government subsidies. In 1993, Mosse (1993:80) estimated that in Sub Saharan Africa, 93% of male children attended primary school, as opposed to 77% of female children. At a secondary level, 36% of the males and 22% of the females continued. In South Africa the drop in boys continuing into high school may be attributed to the need for them to follow their fathers or elder brothers to the urban areas looking for employment, in order to assist with family finances. The girls would return home to help with the household. By the tertiary level, female percentages had decreased to 12% (Hartnett & Heneweld 1993:1). Once more limited finances and high fees force families to make a decision as to which child they will support through university or college, and so the preference of men over women continues. In some poorer areas, whole communities will actually pool their resources to pay for one of their group to attend university. Naturally only the stron gest scholar is considered and more often than not, male.

**FEMALE STUDENT STATISTICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND**

Sufficient research exists to show that the education of females is directly linked to national development. Education increases productivity in the state and thus the income of both men and women. This in turn boosts the standard of living in that state (Hartnett & Heneweld 1993:1). It is as true to state the corollary: increased productivity and income results in greater public participation in education. It has been proven that one reason for women accessing education facilities may be attributed to the impact of economic reforms on African society thereby making that society more affluent. That is to say, that in a financially weak African state one would find that women rarely complete secondary education, let alone attend tertiary institutions. Conversely, as an African state experiences economic growth, women expand their studies. In South Africa, given the change in government policy, coupled with adult education initiatives, one would expect an increase in women attending universities after 1994 as funds became more readily available and Affirmative Action placed an emphasis on women being one of the primary recipients of those funds. Due to limited bursaries and scholarships available to students, coupled with a greater demand for those awards and higher selection processes because of Affirmative Action, competition for funding increases. Therefore, one could also expect the number of students applying for funds belonging to groups previously unchallenged to decrease.
Empirical data indicates that this is indeed the case. If one were to evaluate statistics from 1992 to 1999, it becomes clear that the number of women registering for undergraduate degrees and diplomas at the University of the Witwatersrand remained constantly low in 1994 and 1995, and then experienced an increase up to 1999. Interestingly, as female numbers increased, male numbers decreased. Between 1992 and 1999, the gap between men and women registering almost halved.

The increase of female registrants has also occurred on a national scale. In 1993, there were 202 000 female students and 271 000 male students attending tertiary institutions. By 1999, the number of female students had risen to 291 000 whereas male students had only increased by 2000. According to the Department of Education (2000), this trend is most obvious in universities.

The greatest contributors to the narrowing of the gender gap at the University of the Witwatersrand have been black women. Those pursuing under graduate degrees had doubled by 1999, whilst those continuing into postgraduate research almost quadrupled. In contrast, even though the total number of women attending the university increased, white female undergraduate student numbers have decreased slightly over the past five years. Once again, this appears to be a national occurrence. Between 1993 and 1999, white tertiary student numbers in South Africa dropped from just over 222 000 to 163 780 (Department of Education 2000). Oddly though, at the University of the Witwatersrand white female postgraduate numbers increased, causing one to believe that although less are registering at an undergraduate level, those who do register tend to continue into honours and masters.

The disparity between white and black registrants may be attributed to a range of reasons. Firstly as aforementioned, competition for limited funds in increases, fewer white students are receiving grants or scholarships. Hence fewer are able to attend unless they are able to pay their own way. The increased competition for funds becomes more and more of a determinant of numbers especially since many universities have had their government subsidies cut, and have been forced to increase their fees. As a result, a general university degree in 1999, costs almost 40% more than one in 1993 (figures based on an average of fees across seven faculties at the University of the Witwatersrand). Access to financial aid certainly impacts on the likelihood of continuing one’s education.

A second reason for the divergence would be that as South Africa becomes more integrated into the international system after years of isolation during the apartheid era, more white students are choosing to study or work overseas. There is a belief that by attending universities abroad students will receive a better quality of education and will thus be more marketable in the corporate environment. Those wishing to be actively employed upon completing high school also tend to opt for going abroad. South Africa’s unemployment rate was estimated to be 30% in 1998 (CIA 1999:1). This high rate coupled with high inflation and the low exchange rate of the Rand to the British Pound and US Dollar makes the chance to work and live outside South Africa very attractive to many prospective students.

Even though there is an overall increase in the number of women registering for postgraduate degrees at the University of the Witwatersrand, there is still a tendency to affiliate themselves with traditionally female dominated disciplines. This may be seen in Table 1, where it is possible to determine that the two faculties with the greatest participation are the Arts Faculty and Health Sciences (nursing, therapies and dentistry).

The Education Faculty is not as well represented as one would expect. The increase in 2000 is misleading as it was predominantly due to the amalgamation of the Johannesburg College of Education with the Faculty of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, at the end of 1999 due to continually decreasing numbers. In the past, many women have been attracted to Education due to the belief that it guaranteed employment. This is no longer true. According to the Department of Education in South Africa (2000), teachers’ salaries absorb 91% of national Education expenses, leaving 9% to be allocated to resources, such as text books and the maintenance of schools, technikons and universities. In order to redress this problem, many teaching posts have been dissolved and will continue to be removed until a more acceptable equation has been reached. Aside from teachers specialising in mathematics and science, very few aspiring educators will find employment in this sector.

Although the remaining faculties cater for relatively few female candidates, it is reassuring to acknowledge that there is a slight upward trend in most. The faculty which has experienced a dramatic increase in intake has been Management. It is largely accepted that should one wish to perform well and be promoted often in the business world then the management degree is well worth obtaining. Non discrimination employment equity policies in local and provincial government bodies and non govern
mental organisations also ensures that more black women will venture into management positions. With the government providing assistance and bursaries to black entrepreneurs and encouraging the placement of women in managerial positions, this faculty is likely to continue enjoying higher registration numbers each year. Generally though, it would seem that more women are entering previously male dominated disciplines. It will be interesting to observe future trends in these faculties as a means of determining the empowerment of South African women.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The statistics appear to suggest that the new government policy regarding women in higher education has been successful and effective in encouraging previously marginalised groups to attend university. The increased number of women at the postgraduate level indicates a combination of the gradual change in perception regarding women in employment, and general economic growth in South Africa. Unfortunately, these achievements in largely urban areas may well be counteracted by the traditional patriarchal mindset which continues to persist in rural areas. However, as long as the commercial world continues to emphasise the need for further education in the work place and the government continues to recognise education as a building block to empowering people and the state, one can expect to observe a steady increase in women attending university and succeeding in all disciplines.

BIBLIOGRAPHY