

Paper for Presentation at Pan-Commonwealth Forum for Open Learning

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Topic: Female Participation in Higher Education: Is it an Impossible Dream

Abstract :

Results of a gender baseline survey carried out by the Secondary School Teacher Education Project (SSTEP) in November 2000 revealed that males dominated the enrolment rate of institutions of higher learning in Malawi. For example, conventional program at Domasi College of Education (DCE) has 390 male and 150 female bed spaces, respectively. However, the bed space in the female halls of residence is sometimes not filled or utilised due to less number of females that qualify for various programs at the college.

Disparities in literacy enrolment are generally attributed to such factors as unavailability of bed space and lack of required entry qualifications. Nevertheless, the Secondary School Teacher Education Project (SSTEP), a distance education program at the college funded by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), has managed to enroll about 36% females. Additionally, for the first time in the history of the college, more female students joined the faculty of science than has been the case with the conventional program. Domasi College of Education's challenge is now to sustain all the females in the program.

This paper provides strides that Domasi College of Education has made in addressing gender gap at the college. It also examines other possible ways of further bridging the gap, providing counselling services, and giving extra support to female students as well as male students at risk.

1. Background

Malawi lies on the southern part of the African Continent. It shares borders, as well as linguistic and ethnic values with Mozambique to the east, south and south-west; Tanzania to the north; and Zambia to the west. The population of Malawi is estimated at eleven million people, of whom 52 percent are females and 48 percent are males. Most of the population lives in the southern and central regions, which are the most fertile parts of the country. Illiteracy rate is much higher among women than men. Stronguist and Murphy (1996) reported a 35 percent literacy rate for women compared with 60 percent for men in the 15 to 45 age group.

1.1 School System

The country's education system has three levels: Primary, Secondary and Tertiary. All levels fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Enrolment at primary level has increased since 1995 with the introduction of free primary education. The number of girls and boys at primary level is almost equal. However, girls' enrolment drops as we go up the ladder. Malawi Ministry of Gender, Youth and Community Services (1999) reported that in the final year of primary school only 25 percent of the students are girls. The situation is worse at secondary level and let alone at tertiary level, because three percent of the girls enter university. Banda, Mbalame and Polepole (2001) explain that girls drop out of school for such reasons as early marriages, pregnancy, poverty, unsupportive parents/guardians, lack of confidence, lack of role models and low performance.

1.2 Domasi College of Education Programmes

Domasi College of Education is a tertiary institution under the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. It is entrusted with the mandate to train secondary school teachers at a diploma level. The college was established in 1987 to train primary school teachers and in 1993 it was transformed to the current status. As of now, the college has two major programs, which are the on campus and distance programs. Both programs are run by three facilities: Science, Humanities and Education. The only difference is that the distance program is run as a project and is slowly being incorporated into the college's calendar of activities. This process is in line with the Ministry of Education's view of institutionalising distance education at Domasi College of Education.

1.2.1 On Campus Programme

Domasi College of Education was established in 1993 to address shortage of secondary school teachers in languages (English and Linguistics and African Languages) and sciences (Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Human Ecology and Mathematics). In 1997 and 1999, the college diversified its programmes to offer Social Studies (Geography, History, Theology and Religious Studies) and Physical Education, respectively. Since its inception, the number of female students at the college has been lower than that of male counterparts. Among other things, the low numbers have been attributed to availability of bed space, which is at the ratio of 13:5 in favour of males. There are 390 and 150 bed spaces for males and females, respectively.

1.2.2 Distance Education Programme

The College has from 2000 taken a stride to introduce distance education through the Secondary School Teacher Education Project (SSTEP) funded by Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Before SSTEP, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) assisted Domasi College to train its academic members of staff on module development. Members were trained to modularise the course outlines for the on campus programmes. As of now, all the three-year course outlines have been modularised. The programme was designed to upgrade teachers in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) to diploma level using distance mode of delivery.

1.3 Operations of SSTEP

SSTEP comprises residential training and distance learning. The length of the program is 36 months as of now. The programme is run in such a way that there is:

- Two months of residential training at Domasi College of Education, where lecturers introduce course modules by way of facilitation.
- Ten months of study by distance education where the teacher learners are supported by supervisory staff. The supervisory staff includes field supervisors highered by SSTEP, Education methods advisors from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, teacher helpers from qualified secondary school teachers and college lecturers.

The distance education programme and the on campus programme otherwise known as conventional programme are parallel in that the courses offered are similar. The only difference is the mode of delivery. The distance education programme is basically print base. College lecturers and some lecturers from the University of Malawi, Mzuzu University as well as Malawi Institute of Education develop the modules.

2. Student Enrolment in Institutions of Higher Learning

Results of a gender baseline survey conducted in November 2001 revealed that males dominated the enrolment rate of institutions of higher learning in Malawi. It was mentioned earlier in this paper that although equal numbers of boys and girls enter primary schools, only three percent of the girls enter university and a small percentage participates in other tertiary institutions. Disparities in literacy enrolment are generally attributed to such factors as societal and cultural practices, economic structures, unavailability of bed space, and lack of required entry qualifications due to poor performance at Malawi Schools Certificate Examinations (MSCE), which is equivalent to Ordinary Level Examinations. The females are the only group that is victimized by the said structures.

This state of affairs is worrisome when one considers that 52% of the Malawian population are females. Educating a small percentage of females means ignoring the core of the nation. The end result will be high illiteracy rate among females, hence, retarding the development of the Malawian nation. The saying “you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate the nation” connotes that females are pillars of development in any society. And indeed with the current trend in education regarding enrolment, one would be challenged to answer the direction of national development in Malawi.

3. Addressing Gender Gap at Domasi College of Education through Distance Education

Domasi College of Education has between 1993 and 2000 run a conventional program whose enrolment was dictated by availability of bed space for females and males. However, the bed space in the female halls of residence is sometimes not filled or utilized due to less number of females that qualify for various programs at the college. Table 1 presents student enrolment in the conventional program.

Table 1: Student Enrolment in the Conventional Programme

YEAR	PROGRAMME	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
1997	Humanities	42	118	160
	Sciences	6*	57*	63
1998	Humanities	30	102	132
	Sciences	1*	17*	18
1999	Humanities	38	29	67
	Sciences	0*	24*	24
	Physical Education	7	13	20
2000	Humanities	21	87	108
	Sciences	0*	30*	30*
	Physical Education	7	17	24
2001	Humanities	23	103	126
	Sciences	3*	28*	31
	Physical Education	5	22	27
2002	Humanities	39	21	60
	Sciences	1	46	47
	Physical Education	1	26	27

*Sciences refer to Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology (Excluding Human Ecology)

The introduction of distance education programme at the college has seen the increase in female intake. This has been the case because CIDA policy in SSTEP is to have equal numbers of females and male teacher learners. However, it has not been possible to have 50 percent females into the programme, as there were not enough qualified female teachers in CDSSs. As a result, project managers settled at 30 percent female intake as its minimum. The project was designed to enroll 300 teacher learners for each intake. However, the first intake had 311 students (to cater for dropouts) of which 113 were females representing 36 percent of the total intake. Additionally, for the first time in the history of the college, more females enrolled into the Faculty of Science than has been the case with the conventional program. Table 2 presents distance education enrolment statistics.

Table 2: Distance Education Enrolment

YEAR	PROGRAMME	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
2000	Humanities	101	170	271
	Sciences	11*	31*	42
2001	Humanities	65	105	170
	Sciences	20*	80*	100
	Physical Ed.	12	24	36

* Sciences refer to Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology (Excluding Human Ecology)

The Distance Education programme has been able to attract majority of females because of a number of reasons. Firstly, teacher learners are allowed to bring babies and expectant mothers are also allowed to the eight-week residential sessions and examination periods. Thus, there is no discrimination due to health status of mothers as is the case in conventional programme. Women with children less than six months old are not admitted into the conventional programme. Female students in the described conditions are advised to reply after delivery or when the child is over six months.

Secondly, realising that there is not enough bed space for females at the college, the project organises accommodation at a sister institution, Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) during residential sessions and examination periods. Although MIE is a walking distance from the college, teacher learners are ferried every morning for breakfast and classes at the college. In the evening, they are ferried to MIE at 10:00 pm after library hours to allow them to use the facility.

Thirdly, female teachers look at distance learning as an ideal way of accessing higher education because of family pressures. Some men feel uncomfortable to allow their spouses to attend on campus courses for various reasons. If a woman enrolls into a distance programme she will have an opportunity to study at home and at the same time being able to take care of other family duties. However, this does not rule out cases of unsupportive spouses.

4. Ways of further bringing the Gender Gap at the College through distance education

It was mentioned that one of the reasons for disparities in literacy enrolment is lack of required qualifications. This factor has affected intake at Domasi College of Education in both programmes. For one to be enrolled for programmes at the college one has to have a credit in English. This requirement is posing a bottleneck in the distance education programme considering that most teachers in the CDSSs have passes in English. Consequently, they cannot qualify for DCE programmes and in this case, SSTEP which is requiring 300 teacher learners for each cohort. Every year, more than a thousand teachers apply for the program but most of them do not qualify because of a pass in English.

Gender and HIV/AIDS committee responsible for overseeing gender and HIV/AIDS issues at the college has been monitoring this trend. As such a subcommittee in the college was set up to examine competencies candidates with passes and credits in English lack and possess. It was discovered that candidates with passes in English might lack communication and language skills. It can therefore be concluded that if one is exposed to such skills, one could perform equally well as those who had scored credits during the Malawi Schools Certificate of Examinations (MSCE) and Ordinary Level Examinations. Teachers whom the distance education programme is targeting are already teaching the children of Malawi in secondary schools. As educators we cannot sit back and leave these teachers doing harm to our children. Domasi College of Education through the Gender and HIV/AIDS committee is working hand in hand with appropriate department at the University of Malawi to correct the situation. The result has been positive because the Language and Communications Departments at Chancellor College, University of Malawi has accepted and approved the course. There is need to facilitate the development and implementation of a bridging course in English as one way of increasing access into teacher education programme, hence, realising female participation in higher education. Once the English bridging course starts, it might kick start other departments both at Domasi College of Education and the University to start thinking in a like manner to offer bridging courses in sciences.

5. Sustainability Issues

Realising that enrolling females into college programs is one thing and sustaining them is another, the Gender and HIV/AIDS Committee has put in place a Gender Monitoring Strategy (GMS). This is a support mechanism for at risk teacher learners especially females. The committee monitors teacher learners' performance, identifies weak ones, holds interviews with such teacher learners to establish reasons or concerns for their poor performance and finally recommends to the project office as to what kind of support the teacher learners would need. The college hopes of sustaining the committee and efforts have been made to have all college lecturers sensitized to gender and HIV/AIDS issues. Specifically, college lecturers have been exposed to a number of professional gender workshops in which they were trained to develop gender friendly modules. In this case, the modules are written in a manner that accommodates both female and male teacher learners in their expressions and examples.

The Gender monitoring strategy was initially put on the ground to support female teacher learners in the realization that they would meet more challenges in their course of study than is the case with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, it was discovered that most of the females outperformed the males in most subjects. The male teacher learners therefore are also considered in the monitoring strategy.

Additionally, female teacher learners are provided with counseling services especially in situations where their social life would interfere with their studies. The most common cases being unsupportive spouses. Just as an example, one female teacher learner had her modules and other information related to her studies burnt.

6. Conclusion

The distance education programme at Domasi College of Education has given more women an opportunity to participate in higher education. This was not possible when the college offered on campus courses only. However, there is need for the college of Education and other stakeholders to make deliberate policies in offering higher education to more women than is the case now. This move would open doors for female participation in higher education because when these females graduate, they would inspire more girls in secondary schools to further their education. Such a move would compliment the saying "if you educate a woman you educate a nation". Indeed if national development has to be realized we need to aggressively educate more females in Malawi.