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Balancing Gender in Higher Education. What will it take?

More often than not I find myself in a room full on men seated at the high table with a scatter of women in the audience. I often wonder what it will take to balance the divide beyond the rhetoric of gender mainstreaming. Some strides have been made and increasingly we have seen enrollments in universities with more girls taking up education. But the boardrooms are still male dominated and it will be a long time before gender balance can be attained at that level. In the academe for example, when the Forum for Female Vice Chancellors (FAWoVC) was formed in 2015, there were only forty one (41) females representing 3% of Vice Chancellors on the African Continent. And while we mourn about equality in the classroom, it is important to realise that we have to put in place structures that will promote females to access the ladder in all spheres of learning and decision making.

The solutions do not lie with the academic institutions only.

The family unit has an equally important role to play. I have had of instances where families through sub-conscious or conscious gender bias create an environment that will hold females back even when they have adequate education. The Republic of Sudan is a classic example. Unlike other African countries, Sudan has commendable female participation at all levels of education. There is evidence of significant gender parity at different levels, including in areas of health and agriculture at the university level. Yet when it gets to females in employment and especially at the decision making level, Sudan has no significant difference from other African countries.



There is need for more research, but it has been argued that the females are held back by what had been termed as the ‘ticking biological clock’. Females themselves, their families, potential spouses and

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the community at large believe that the next logical step after university education is marriage and motherhood. More often than not, young female graduates will feel under pressure by peers and close relatives to take that next step.

Campaigns against teenage pregnancy and early marriages have hitherto been the focus for gender activists and educationists alike. These have successfully created awareness, to increase the participation of girls at all levels of education. It is now necessary to extend beyond the basic qualifications stage to create awareness for the next step. This will target the female graduates themselves, their universities, families and the general community. Career guidance, should move beyond the vocation to focus on perceptual and social inhibition aspects. It is further likely to increase participation in the lower levels of education. This is because while the benefits of education are clear to the nucleus family with better nutrition and general welfare. It is not evident for the larger family since whether the girl has gone to school or not, the terminal point is the marriage and motherhood.

The gender mainstreaming narrative has been around for close to 20 years, several universities if not all, have gender mainstreaming units. One would thus wonder why this movement is yet to translate into more female researchers and more females at the higher academic level. One of the reasons is because the focus of the gender mainstreaming units has predominantly been how to increase participation and maintain the girl child in a state of equilibrium as they pursue university education, be it at undergraduate or graduate level. On the other hand, exit and transition surveys for graduating students highlight three key options: i) formal employment, ii) self-employment/ entrepreneurship, and iii) further study. Conveniently ignoring the social and maternal aspect which are foremost at the biological stage of development for the female graduates at this stage. Programs therefore lose the opportunity to address this key aspect and guide graduates about the available options and how they can balance the family and career prospects. The target for increasing females in education, research and other decision making spheres should be nurtured at this level as well. The gender mainstreaming units have to interest themselves in the tracer studies undertaken by universities to establish not only where the graduates are but why they make employment and or social choices.

If we are to increase the pool of women in graduate education, and promote women in research and the academic career, gender mainstreaming should be a continuous undertaking that should extend beyond graduation. It should be segmented and structured for different audiences at all levels. Messages targeting males will diffuse some of the conscious or unconscious biases that prevent them for taking on well-educated females and or creating barriers for women advancement. This is largely because the male perceptions of women in decisions making positions reinforces the 'either/or' narrative. Programs targeting male and female graduates at this level will be a key ingredient to increasing the number of females in areas beyond the first degree graduation. Parents and other family member messages will provide a female support environment that will transcend the marriage expectations.

The mentorship and role modeling should assure girls that it is possible to climb the corporate ladder and have children as well. It is this change in mindset, a paradigm shift that will take away some of the inhibitions that have prevented females from pursuing male dominated careers. Society should

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empower women to make career choices without fear that they will lose out on the biological or maternal prospects. It is then and only then that we can say that we have a gender mainstreamed environment that may translate into balance at the board room level.

This is our fourteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM AGM 2019 Digests. You can get more details about the meeting at <http://www.ruforum.org/AGM2019/> and more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also join us online using Social Media for real time updates. Our Official hashtag is #AGMGhana2019.

About the Author

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