



POLICY BRIEF

Challenging Gender Inequalities

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About this brief

This policy brief summarises the findings of an eight month participatory action research project (PAR) conducted in 2015 at the QwaQwa campus of the University of the Free State (UFS). The brief is intended to encourage UFS Student Affairs and broader management to develop a gender equality policy for students. This will need to include a re-conceptualisation of gender equality which extends beyond numerical representation, and to create a university environment which is aware of gender-based inequalities in teaching and learning and social spaces in the university. From the PAR data, the brief presents examples of gender inequalities students experience, as well as recommendations for policy goals.

Context

The need for a gender equality policy for the UFS stems from the fact that even though national laws and policy state the importance of eradicating gender inequalities, monitoring reports is based only on numerical representation. For example, Figure 1 shows that women have been outnumbering men in South African higher education enrolments since the year 2000 and that the gap is widening.

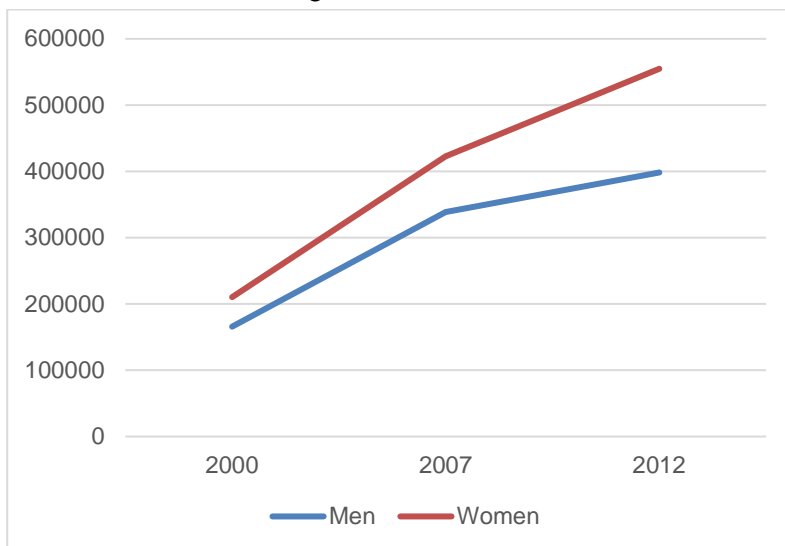


Figure 1: Enrolment of all students by gender

However, on closer inspection, women's enrolment declines with level of study. Figure 2 shows that even though women by far outnumber men in undergraduate and lower level postgraduate

enrolments, men still outnumber women in higher degree levels, such as masters and doctoral degrees. While these figures are useful to track gender representation, they do not consider deep-seated and persistent gendered inequalities and sexism still prevalent in universities.

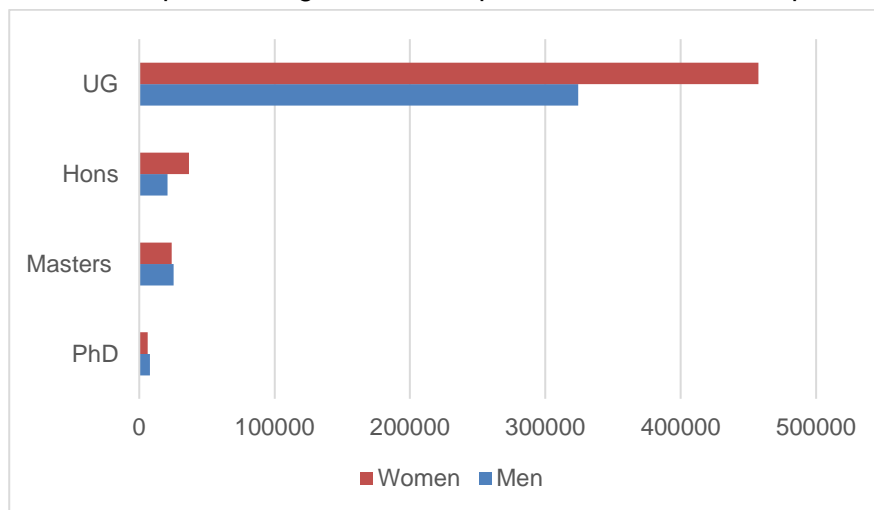


Figure 2: Enrolments by gender and study level for 2012

A further reason for the necessity of such a policy is that there is no national policy for gender equality in [higher] education, nor is there a UFS policy explicitly focusing on creating an environment free from gender inequalities beyond the University's value statements. However, to implement the University's values and mission statements requires genuine gender equality in practice.

Gender Equality

Through its Human Project, the UFS commits to confronting prejudice, cultivating a culture of inclusion, promoting equity, openness and access, and engaging with the community. This policy brief draws from the values, vision and mission statements that the UFS declares in its Strategic Plan 2012-2016. Beyond the UFS, the importance of gender equality is clearly stated in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training 2013, the Higher Education Act of 1997, and the National Development Plan (2011). This policy brief also acknowledges and draws on the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality bill 2013, as well as the Protection from Harassment Act 2011. According to these national legislative and policy documents, gender equality implies:

- The full and equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms and equal access to resources, opportunities and outcomes, by women, men, girls and boys (Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill 2013).
- The concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. Gender equality means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men have to be the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (Commission for Gender Equality 2007).

These definitions of gender equality extend far beyond numerical representation, yet tracking progress is still limited to the numbers. Moreover, as a consequence of relatively equal numerical representation, further pursuit of gender equality through policy interventions is not considered priority even though persistent inequalities are a matter of injustice.

Methodology

As one element of a three-year longitudinal mixed methods study exploring UFS student's gendered experiences, a participatory action research project was implemented by the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Development (CRHED) on the QwaQwa campus. Over eight months, 13 undergraduate students discussed and explored gender inequalities happening on their campus. The examples of inequalities as well as the recommendations for a policy result from this project.

Key findings

Discrimination

- Some people are denied opportunities simply because they are women. For example, when it comes to leadership, women are not supported by other students to vie for top positions. People, especially men, do not perceive women as competent enough to hold these positions. Perceptions that women are emotional, weaker and that they need protection might cloud judgments if they were put in senior and leadership positions of the academy. Men are not ready for women's leadership. Further examples include that all the faculty deans on campus are male, and women are either assistants or occupy lower ranks.
- Gender segregation in residences. Strict rules apply to women's residences compared to men's residences. Female residences have a 24/7 security surveillance, while in the male residences, there is nothing of the sort. People come and go at any time. Girls are 'protected' more than boys.
- There is no male clinician on campus and this prevents the majority of male students from visiting the clinic.
- Pregnant students are not allowed to stay on campus accommodation.

Socio-Cultural Norms and stereotypes

- Gender stereotypes that girls are weak and cannot take care of themselves persist, while men are considered strong and able to take care of themselves.
- Separate male and female residences create a gendered division based on the stereotypes and attributes ascribed to men and women.
- Gendered norms, socialisation, religious values and beliefs, as well as traditions are keeping gendered identities and roles in place and these are very difficult to change, although things are slowly changing (although for some this is not a good thing).
- Inequalities are rooted in culture which defines different roles of men and women, and these roles are passed on from generation to generation. These roles are practiced on campus whereby women tend to do the care and cooking.
- Religion requires women to be subordinate to men. When they come to campus and they learn otherwise, then there is a clash.
- Students, especially men do not perceive gender inequalities. They are socialised to believe that women should be in lower ranks. So to them the status quo is acceptable as they benefit from it.
- Inequalities are institutionalized and thus addressing them becomes difficult because it means dismantling deep rooted beliefs and practices.

Extra-curricular Activities

- Women's sports are underdeveloped on campus while men's sports have more funds and are better developed.

- The gymnasium is not equipped in a manner that promotes equality of genders; it favours males.

Recommendations

From the research findings, it is clear that gender inequalities impact on the university experiences and full 'capabilities' development of male and female students. We therefore recommend the following issues to be addressed by a gender equality policy:

- Draft a policy based on gender equality and monitor its implementation to ensure equality in practices at the University. The policy must indicate the need to make amendments to the policies which already govern the university. Example: the amendment of the SRC constitution so that it has clauses which give clear guidelines on how the portfolios should be constituted according to gender.
- The policy on gender equality should see to it that there are programmes in place which would work to eradicate gender stereotypes that exist amongst the student populace on campus.
- This gender policy should ensure consistency especially in residences, for instance the campus protection service should cater for all students living in residences. Male students should be protected as much as female students.
- Places in residences should not be based on gender but rather on academic level i.e. senior residences, first year's residences and post graduate residences.
- Programmes that address the inequality of genders need to be put in place, such as the sexuality programme that is offered mainly to first years. To address the inequalities between the genders, the programme needs to be broadened and include other gender-wise points.
- The gender equality policy must outline qualities and practices that define being a Kowsie, rather than the culture or the background of students because gender inequalities arise due to society's norms.
- The policy should specifically look into or promote gender equality related subjects such as bisexual, gay, lesbians etc. to create an environment of comfort and freedom of expressing oneself.
- The gender forum that exists on the QwaQwa campus needs to be vibrant on matters that touch discrimination and stereotypes. Therefore the policy needs to serve as a binding mechanism on the gender forum.
- The policy should ensure that all sporting codes and the gym promote equality, i.e. when it comes to sports, there should be sports that cater for both males and females there should be tournaments that are inclusive.
- While not part of a policy directly for students, students are influenced by the absence of women in leadership and senior academic positions on the QwaQwa campus. We would like to see this discussed and addressed.