

Promoting the Retention of Women Faculty and Students in Higher Education: The Rwandan Case

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Rwanda provides a unique opportunity to investigate how public commitments to gender rights materialize in institutions of higher learning. This paper explores the Rwandan case to situate critical gender considerations central to tertiary institutions within a broader context of reconstruction, reconciliation and rapid social change. Our intention is to explain the current challenges to ensuring gender sensitivity at the level of higher education in Rwanda. In doing so, we propose strategic measures to promote the retention of women faculty and students that may be applicable to a variety of geographic locations.

Setting the Rwandan Context

Although geographically small and formerly quite isolated, Rwanda has earned the world's attention following the 1994 genocide. This claimed the lives of an estimated one million people in the course of three months, destroying the infrastructure and civil service and disrupting the social fabric. The humanitarian crisis that ensued posed the most severe structural barriers to development, taking a particularly harmful toll on the entire system of education. Yet the global attention Rwanda now attracts stems from its remarkable transformation in the aftermath of one of the most severe contexts of massive violence in the 20th century. In the course of 14 years, Rwanda claims enormous victories in its efforts to reconstruct society and reconcile its history of terrible conflict.

This process of rebuilding Rwandan society placed gender as a central priority at the national level. Of particular importance, in 2003 Rwanda elected the world's highest percentage of women leaders to its national parliament with a 48.8 percent representation. The dramatic gains for women in parliament can be traced in part to the significant changes in gender roles during and immediately after the genocide when women comprised 70 percent of the population. In 2008, women are 50 percent of the population, they head over 35 percent of households, and are the most productive segment of the population (Powley 2007). Yet a close examination of the education sector—where social norms and values are institutionalized—shows a pervasive gender imbalance. While women have achieved enormous victories at the level of public representations, analyses of higher education present sharp disparities in terms of access, retention and widespread institutional inequalities. This causes us to question the extent to which gender rights have materialized in the everyday social spaces where women and girls continue to face distinct and overlapping disadvantages. In the Rwanda case we believe that the celebrated promotion of gender rights at the public level will only be sustained through a parallel commitment to ensuring gender equality in education. We focus on tertiary institutions to illustrate the widespread barriers to gender equality which stand in contrast to the commitments Rwanda has guaranteed for girls and women as central components of the national development scheme. As the Coordinator of the Forum

for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Odette Mukazi (2008) asserted, institutions of higher education hold a central space for reconciliation and the full integration of gender priorities. By critically evaluating tertiary institutions, we intend to promote the longer-term integration of Rwanda's public commitment to gender rights, thereby advocating for the assurance of gender equality at all levels of society.

Gender Policies

Rwanda has instituted a series of key policies and programs that focus on the promotion of girls' and women's education. These include the Rwandan *Constitution*, with its commitment to affirmative action, *Vision 2020*, the *Economic Development Poverty Reduction Strategy 2008-2015*, the *2008 Education Sector Strategic Plan*, the *Joint Education Sector Support 2006-2010* (JESS) and the *2008 Girls' Education Policy* (GEP). *Vision 2020* states that "In order to achieve gender equality and equity, Rwanda will continuously update and adapt its laws on gender. It will support education for all, eradicate all forms of discrimination, fight against poverty and practice a positive discrimination policy in favour of women. Gender will be integrated as a cross-cutting issue in all development policies and strategies." (*Vision 2020*, Section 5.1). JESS places specific emphasis on encouraging girls in the area of science and technology as one of the four focus areas for the entire initiative over the four-year period, illustrating a clear and critical gender gap in education across all levels. GEP provides the most comprehensive emphasis on gender rights at all levels of education, defining its *overall objective* as "to guide and promote sustainable action aimed at the progressive elimination of gender disparities in education and training as well as in management structures." Three key areas of emphasis within the policy include access, quality/achievement and retention/completion at all levels of education. The Rwanda Ministry of Education is developing a Girls Education Implementation Strategy to execute the policy. This illustrates a concrete measure to actualize the public discourse on assuring gender rights and prioritizing the education of girls and women as a key component in assuring the continued economic growth and social well-being of the nation.

In addition, Rwanda has committed itself to international guidelines and standards, ratifying the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for All* as well as the gender guidelines of the African Union. These guiding documents and international commitments provide a clear indication of Rwanda's efforts to integrate gender within its strategic development initiatives, particularly within the education sector. Yet, as the international standards similarly emphasize, efforts to reduce gender imbalances are more often focused on the primary and secondary levels of education. While central to development, such measures fail to equally emphasize the protection of gender rights at the level of higher education. In Rwanda, with its distinct emphasis on building a "knowledge-based, technological" society, the development of higher education institutions becomes a critical component in the process of materializing these priorities that are central to *Vision 2020*. Furthermore, given this emphasis, coupled with the high percentage of youth in Rwandan society (over 50 percent of the population is under the age of 18), the demand placed on higher education in the post-genocide setting is extraordinary. For example, before 1994, the National University of Rwanda (NUR), the only tertiary education institution within the country, had produced only

2000 graduates. In 2007, however, Rwanda enrolled approximately 40,000 students, placing an incredible expectation on the 14 tertiary institutions throughout the country (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE]). Given the critical space that institutions of higher learning hold in the rebuilding of Rwandan society, we suggest that in order to ensure the nation's public commitment to gender priorities, institutions of higher learning must also transform by adopting strategic gender-sensitive measures for students as well as academic staff.

Gender in Rwandan Institutions of Higher Education

Findings from former analyses of gender and education at the primary and secondary levels in Rwanda point to a persistent gender imbalance in retention, transition and completion rates (see Randell and Huggins 2007; Ministry of Education 2008; FAWE 2008). We believe that such gender disparities shape the context of higher education by posing serious obstacles to girls' opportunities to enter Rwandan universities. Our framework is consistent with the findings of the June 2008 Joint Review of the Education Sector, which emphasized the need to "consider the sector as a whole, within one holistic analysis, to explain and remedy phenomena such as gender disaggregated drop-out, transition rates, learning achievement, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, and higher education" (p. 5). Using this integrated approach. Table 1 captures the prevailing trends in education in Rwanda according to specific gender imbalances.

Table 1: Student and Staff Indicators in Education, Rwanda, All Levels

Measure	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Considerations
Student Measures				
% of Girls Enrolled (2006)	51.3%	47.2%	41.6% total	Tertiary by institution, 30% public, 50.6% private
% of Boys Enrolled (2006)	48.7%	52.8%	58.4% total	Tertiary by institution, 70% public, 49.4% private
Girls Transition Rates (2005)	54.8%	8.18%	n/a	
Boys Transition Rates (2005)	61.8%	15.16%	n/a	
Girls Examination Pass Rate (2006)	37.91%	31.7%	n/a	
Boys Examination Pass Rate (2006)	62.09%	68.3%	n/a	
Staff Measures				
Representation of Women Faculty	45.9%	23.1%	12%	Concentration of women faculty members at the tutorial level and within particularly gendered fields.
% of Qualified Women Faculty	96.9%	18.9%	Data unavailable at national level	2.7% of all PhD holders at NUR are women

*Girls enrollment rate is represented as the percentage of the entire population. Girls transition rate is represented as the percentage of girls within one sector of education that meet completion requirements and transit to the next level (e.g. primary to secondary). In secondary examinations, only 8.18% of girls enrolled in tertiary institutions, whereas 15.16% of boys transitioned to higher education. Data acquired reflect the most recent statistics available through the Ministry of Education in Rwanda.

As these data illustrate, the gender imbalance we see in higher education has its roots in pervasive imbalances within the primary and secondary levels. The consistently lower pass rates and declining enrollment levels for girls that coincide with advancement within the system point to critical junctures where girls drop out of school or are sharply disadvantaged in their qualification for the next level of education. Furthermore, a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between the level of girls' enrollment and the declining level of female faculty members in the secondary and tertiary systems. Without role models that are proportional to the number of women in society, the education system continues to uphold male power and authority roles. This becomes strikingly evident at the university level, where only 12 percent of faculty members are women.

These data further reflect the need to disaggregate by gender particular patterns within institutions of higher learning in Rwanda. For example, when we consider the placement of the 12 percent of women in institutions of higher learning, the gender imbalance becomes even more striking. According to Professor Verdiana Masanja, Director of Research at the NUR, "Out of 109 PhD holders in the university, only three are women."¹ In April 2007, a survey of NUR Rwandan female academic staff revealed the following indicators of qualifications and educational achievement among women faculty members (Table 2).

Table 2: Education Status of Female Faculty Members, Rwanda, 2007

Qualifications—National University of Rwanda	
Total number of female academics	84
Tutorial level qualification (without completion of Bachelor's degree)	25%
Bachelor's degree qualifications	19%
Master's level qualifications	34.5%
Pursuing Master's degree studies	22%
PhD qualification	3.5%

These institutional inequalities pose serious challenges to the integration of gender equality commitments within institutions of higher learning. They reflect the prevailing climate of higher education, male leadership posing particular barriers to women faculty members, and subsequently women students who find few female role models in the tertiary system in Rwanda. Pamela Abbott, Executive Director NCHE, identified only three female Vice Rectors and one female Department Chair in the entire tertiary system. She assessed that these institutional inequalities, caused by a variety of systematic and socio-cultural factors, prevent women in higher education generally from moving beyond positions as lecturers.² According to women faculty members who had attained institutional leadership positions, rather than being integrated into a system that reflects systematic commitments to redressing the gender imbalance, "they look at you as a special or unusual woman." Furthermore, as we see in many other country contexts, women who have attained levels of influence in institutions are often called upon for a variety of committee and representational governance responsibilities, placing a distinct and added burden upon women, and limiting their ability to pursue research.

¹ Personal interview, June 27, 2008.

² Personal Interview, June 19, 2008

A second striking example of the need to delve beyond the overview statistics on higher education in Rwanda emerges as we investigate the particular placement of women faculty members and students in specific disciplines. Here again, we see how patterns in the secondary system entrench sharp divisions at the tertiary levels. Even though the Government of Rwanda has emphasized the importance of science and technology, and included measures to increase girls' participation in these disciplines at each level of education, the proportion of girls in these streams remains very low. According to the National Board of Examinations, at the secondary level, girls comprise only 26.7 percent of maths-physics students, 40 percent of biology-chemistry students and 11 percent of electricity-electronics students. At the tertiary level, the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) enrolled just 20 percent young women in 2006. FAWE depicted this distinct gender pattern through the proportion of state scholarships allotted to particular fields within public institutions. Table 3 illustrates these findings.

Table 3: Female Students Access to Government University Scholarships, Rwanda, 2006

State Institution	Female Recipients
National University of Rwanda	23.3%
Kigali Institute of Science & Technology	21.9%
Kigali Health Institute	50.3%
Kigali Institute of Education	26.6%
Institut Supérieur d'Agriculture et d'Élevage	35%
Total female access	25.9%

As we see in other tertiary institutions in Rwanda, these patterns reflect traditional gendered constructions surrounding particular fields of study. In the Rwandan case, however, with the distinct overarching national commitment to science and technology as key to national development, such gender disparities will take a particular toll on girls' future opportunities if they are not addressed at the tertiary level.

These institutional factors depict one of four key areas identified by FAWE in a comprehensive analysis of gender-based barriers central to girls' succession in the Rwandan education system. We outline these interrelated considerations in Table 4 to highlight the complexity of mutually reinforcing factors that remain centrally connected to the prevailing circumstances, causing girls to fall out of the system at critical points.

In the Rwandan context, the interrelated nature of these factors cannot be overlooked. Particularly in the context of post-genocide reconstruction, women carry a substantially disproportionate level of the responsibility for rebuilding society. As Powley (2007:3) describes, "Rwandan women play a vital role, not only in physical reconstruction, but also in the crucial tasks of social healing, reconciliation, and increasingly, governance". These factors play out at a number of levels in higher education institutions. For example, women faculty members often choose not to continue the studies needed to gain advancement within higher education institutions, because of the caretaking roles they assume, and the need to undertake doctoral training outside of Rwanda. This double burden of social responsibility reproduces the gendered nature of higher education institutions, which remain

predominantly male, in both the formal classrooms and the broader institutional climate.

Table 4: Gender Considerations in Tertiary Institutions in Rwanda

Factor	Gender Implications
Tertiary Education Institutional Climate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Low representation of women faculty members, particular at upper administrative levels 2) Barriers to women's ability 3) Distinction between public and private universities in terms of resources, costs and longer-term opportunities 4) Gendered concentration in particular fields of study 5) Shortage of resources for teaching and institutional advancement 6) Failure to integrate gender awareness or perspective in academic courses of study.³ 7) No affirmative action policies applied to academic staff members. 8) No gender awareness initiatives practiced in higher education institutions beyond the level of one student organization per institution.
Legal and Policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Government bursaries awarded disproportionately to male students 2) Institutional gender bias through the promotion of science and IT scholarships
Socio-Cultural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Early marriage norms, particularly in rural areas 2) Domestic and agricultural labour responsibilities which often determine family priorities regarding girls' education.
Macro-Structural	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) There are inadequate educational resources to deal with demand at the tertiary level 2) Persistent poverty shapes family decisions about girls' continuation in the school system. 3) The HIV/AIDS burden is placed disproportionately on women. 4) The ongoing project of post-genocide reconciliation and national reconstruction falls on women's shoulders through the care of orphans and excessive family responsibilities.

Prevailing socio-cultural norms that limit girls' opportunities to continue their education are seen at higher education decision-making junctures as well. The residential climate within Rwandan institutions remains heavily male centered. As a result, female secondary graduates, who are most often socialized in environments that tend to be resistant to girls' independent endeavors, make decisions about their long-term higher education path based upon their perceptions of living within particular institutional settings. Therefore, in many cases, the male-dominated residential communities within Rwandan universities are determining factors in girls' institutional selections. More often, female students choose to remain in Kigali, where they can be assured of secure living environments, thereby shaping their long-term career and life opportunities on institutional decisions made outside of academic streams alone. As these examples suggest, any effective initiative to redress the gender imbalance at the level of higher education in Rwanda must take into full consideration the interconnected factors that continue to reinforce widespread gender inequalities within the system.

³ According to a curriculum review carried out by the authors in 2007 and 2008 at NUR, only two courses in the entire curriculum mention gender. One of these courses groups women with children, orphans and vulnerable populations. The other is housed in development studies, although the female faculty member who taught the course is currently on leave from 2008-2010.

Retention Strategies

From our ongoing contact with and research on gender in institutions of higher education in Rwanda, we pose five strategic areas of intervention to increase the number of women faculty and students and promote the longer-term project of institutional climate change. In order to ensure that Rwanda's commitments to gender equality at the national policy level materialize within higher education institutions, increased measures to build the capacity of women faculty members throughout all institutions will promote necessary changes in leadership structures which will have an impact on student populations. Our interviews with women academic leaders in Rwanda indicate a need for support in five critical areas:

- 1) enhanced opportunity structures to acquire advanced degrees, taking into full consideration the ongoing social and parenting responsibilities placed on women in the post-genocide setting;
- 2) integration of support structures that provide critical networks for women in higher education and expand the development experience beyond the academic level;
- 3) strategic interventions for women at the university level;
- 4) development and full implementation of an affirmative action policy to ensure the representation of women faculty members; and
- 5) commitment to comprehensive longitudinal research on the status of young women in Rwanda's higher education system.

These five strategic areas of intervention for higher education fit directly within the Government's newly adopted *Girls' Education Policy*, which outlines the following strategic principles:

1. Training teachers and education managers on gender issues
2. Building capacity of female teachers and managers
3. Increasing the share of girls and women in public secondary schools, higher education institutions, science and technology courses, education management positions, etc
4. Ensuring parity in access to quality education
5. Increasing the number of women in management positions (only one woman at management level at the Rwanda National Examinations Council and only one inspector at the Inspectorate)
6. More concerted efforts in sensitising the population on the need for providing education to children, irrespective of gender
7. Gender analysis by the Ministry and its institutions to determine the actual extent of girls' and boys' participation in education at all levels
8. Capacity building for women in order to create self esteem and confidence as well as a sense of justice and equality among staff
9. Encouraging boys to take courses traditionally regarded as feminine (nursing, secretarial studies, home economics, etc) (Ministry of Education, 2008)

Based upon this overview of the context of gender in higher education in Rwanda, we propose the following initiatives within each of the five outlined commitments:

Enhanced Opportunity Structures at the Post-Graduate Level

The pervasive inequalities in representation and qualifications of women faculty members point to severe structural barriers and an overarching male-dominant culture within Rwandan higher education institutions. To address this imbalance, the development and integration of post-graduate programs is critical to supporting

women faculty members and changing institutional cultures. Because of the particular demands placed upon women in the post-conflict reconstruction period, these graduate programs need to be flexible and accommodating to women's needs. Innovative technologies such as distance learning, along with global partnerships with existing graduate programs provide a feasible possibility that relieves Rwandan universities from the expectations of creating new graduate programs.

Increased Support Structures for Women Faculty and Students

The experiences of women faculty members and students call for the establishment of solid organization structures, linked to institutions of higher learning, which can provide academic, career, and personal support for university women. The Rwandan Association of University Women (RAUW) currently serves in that capacity through its work as a resource distribution center, career mentoring organization and public education forum. Ongoing efforts in Rwanda need to focus on ensuring the long-term viability of this organization, along with local gender-focused initiatives within each institution of higher learning. Currently, RAUW is partnering with the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and Profemmes Twese Hamwe to implement a gender awareness campaign among student populations throughout Rwandan higher education institutions. This project encapsulates critical opportunities to merge gender efforts from non-government organizations with universities in ways that bring important components of gender sensitivity to higher education institutions.

Strategic Interventions for Women at the University Level

KIST launched a preliminary one-year transitional support program for women students in 2006. The project involved supplementary support, monitoring and peer networking to address the gap between entrance preparation and girls' opportunities in science and technology. Such measures provide a viable avenue to redress the gender gap, while meeting the policy priorities in higher education more broadly. Other strategic initiatives at this level include an assessment and revision of university residences to assure more gender-sensitive climates, the promotion of learning communities that integrate gender awareness within broader university cultures, and the integration of academic course content focused on gender as a valuable component of study across disciplines.

Implementation of an Affirmative Action Policy for Women Students and Faculty

Rwanda is well-positioned to draw upon the successes of the affirmative action policies implemented at the parliamentary level to assure the representation of women students and faculty members within institutions of higher education. As Professor Verdiana Masanja (2008) suggested, the 30 percent minimum requirement for women students can be applied to staff as well, to ensure a more holistic institutional commitment to change. In the existing context, affirmative action projects should be implemented within institutions of higher education.

Commitment to Comprehensive Longitudinal Research on the Status of Women in Higher Education

Although Rwanda has made remarkable strides in ensuring women's representation at a number of levels of governance, research remains extremely limited in terms of comprehensive analyses of gender within institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, those data that do exist are in some cases either not reliable, or are

inconsistent. In other cases, institutions do not keep gender-disaggregated data, which extremely disadvantages girls and women. Efforts to assess the most accurate picture of gender imbalances within Rwanda must focus on institutions of higher learning as critical barometers of social change. Longitudinal, integrated research on the status of girls and women in higher education can effectively influence policy and promote the longer-term process of institutional climate change. As mentioned by JRES, such research needs to be integrated with students of primary and secondary institutions to acquire the fullest contextual understanding possible.

Conclusions

The remarkable transition that continues to unfold in Rwanda illustrates that societies in rapid periods of transition also afford critical spaces to transcend asymmetrical gender power relations and reconstruct societies in ways that assure social development across lines of former inequalities. The commendable public representation of women in government in Rwanda demonstrates a clear national commitment to centralizing gender in the rebuilding and continued growth of this emerging nation. As the public discourse on gender rights materializes in institutions, higher education demonstrates a critical space to explore both progress and prevailing barriers to actualizing girls' and women's rights in everyday life. In this paper, we provide a preliminary overview of critical issues that continue to pose sharp obstacles in Rwanda's path to development. Although distinct in its national history, the Rwandan case allows us to develop and apply strategic measures that assure the implementation of gender rights in institutions of higher learning—where the long-term progress of society hinges upon the environments where social values, norms, skills and capacities are transferred across generations. The implementation of these strategic measures, coupled with a long-term commitment to research on gender in institutions of higher learning, will provide the clearest indicators of Rwanda's ability to reshape society at the public, institutional and private levels of social relations.

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