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## **Impact of Gender Aspects and Geographical Location on Transformation**

**By**

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**“From Recommendations to Action”**

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Programme Director

Vice Chancellors

Researchers and academics from various organisations and institutions

Government Officials

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

## **Background**

Firstly, I would like to thank Professor Matoane and the Management of Unisa for agreeing to partner with the Department of Higher Education and Training, by co-hosting a seminar on transformation.

Colleagues, allow me to express my sincere appreciation of the serious and enthusiastic manner in which delegates and speakers have responded to the call. This clearly indicates a desire to unpack issues of transformation within the higher education and training sector. My assignment is to examine the impact of gender and geographical location on access to quality education and skills development.

The title of my address is, ***Impact of Gender Aspects and Geographical Location on Transformation.***

The question of gender is about examining socially constructed relations that exist between men and women in society. For the sake of analyzing how well are we doing in transforming our education system, post apartheid, we will specifically focus on girls and women within our education system and the skills pipeline in general.

As we gather here today, I am mindful of the contested nature of the dynamics of transformation. For some segments of society; especially those who have positioned themselves to defend their benefits from the old order, calls for transformation are perceived in a negative light. My point of departure is the **Strategic Plan of the Department of Higher Education and Training (2010/11-2014/15)** which identifies race, class, citizenship, disability, gender, HIV and AIDS, age and geographical location as key areas that need to be taken into consideration in our resolve to transform our education system.

The National Skills Development Strategy 111, Human Resource Development Strategy and the National Systems of Innovations are also important policy framework.

It is a well established fact, world-wide, that girls, women and people from rural communities face numerous challenges from the time they seek **access** to education, to attainment of skills, jobs and even innovation. The girl children in particular, are disempowered from birth through the socialisation process. By the time they enter school, their self-esteem is undermined and they are made to believe that they cannot do subjects like technology, mathematics and science; all subjects which lead to careers with critical skills. Gender and the socio-economic status of students inevitably influence their choices of career paths.

Stereotypes and prevalent beliefs about capabilities of girls inevitably have a negative impact on the education of the girl child, and thus hamper the **transformation agenda** of any society. Women who leave rural communities in search for **skills development** opportunities including university education face numerous barriers.

They are sometimes labelled as being too independent and face risks of possible marginalization and cultural alienation.

## Access to Education and the Promotion of Social Cohesion

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

Gender issues in education have to be examined in the context of other factors, overt or subtle, which undermine social cohesion in our education and the skills pipeline for attainment of critical skills.

The Soudien Report (p.36: Nov. 2008) states that, “**transformation could be reduced to three critical elements, namely policy and regulatory compliance; epistemological change, at the centre of which is the curriculum; and institutional culture and the need for social inclusion in particular**”.

It is thus very clear that our universities should respond creatively to efforts aimed at bridging the existing **socio-economic** gaps in our societies. Institutions of higher education and training should establish relationships with surrounding communities, with a sole purpose.

The current democratic Government has taken concrete steps to address gender disparities in education and training. The **National Skills Development Strategy III** calls for the dissemination of career guidance information, skilling of the previously marginalised sections of society especially the citizens living in rural areas and women.

It is the considered view of Government that an inclusive economic growth path can be achieved through skills development of all citizens, particularly women from disadvantaged backgrounds. The mere fact that they have been marginalized for too long, indicates that much more resources are required to advance equity in society.

Traditionally, the rich attend well-funded schools while the poor attend schools with inadequate facilities **“reinforcing disparities in access retention and completion.**

**This is especially true for female learners who already start from a cultural and social disadvantage”** (UNESCO, Education and Training of women and the girl-child: 2005).

My Department has developed policy instruments to deal with possible **exclusion** of students on grounds of their socio-economic status. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and the National Skills Fund (NSF) have been established so as to ensure that poverty does not continue to be a barrier in access to education. Our challenge is to continuously engender even Financial Aid so as to ensure that all legacy related deficits are taken into consideration in our students support.

### **The Political Will**

The Government has consistently given political and moral support on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. As a result, our women were represented in Beijing where a Platform for Action was developed in 1995. We as of today, have a Ministry which is dedicated to the needs and empowerment of women, children and people living with disabilities.

This country is also part of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and South Africa is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training, Prof H Mkhize, International Women's Day Debate , NCOP, 09 March 2011

I am making reference to these humanitarian and human rights instruments so as to illustrate that we are in democracy and we have the opportunity to make significant gains for women today.

Our institutions should constantly examine their policies and ensure that they are responsive to gender needs. The University of Zululand, for instance, records **66%** of female enrolment.

In 2010, of the **138 610** students enrolled for post-graduate studies **56%** were female. However, only **48%** were enrolled for Masters degrees and **42%** for Doctoral degrees (Source: DHET: 2011).

We should find ways of dealing with barriers that limit women from entering post-graduate courses. We should also ask ourselves whether our admissions and student residence policies of our universities responding to the skills development plans of the country? Secondly, we should establish whether our universities are able to **retain** women students who come from rural areas and ensure that the **completion rates** are high.

### **Patriarchy and Career Choices**

Most education scholars are in agreement that the socio-cultural context and dominant power relations between men and women tend to determine career choices with more women being deprived of their freedom to enter the so called male professions.

Women's career choices in patriarchal settings are shaped by family attitudes and entrenched cultural values. Patriarchal practices are more prevalent in rural communities where cultural practices are still intact.

In such societies, women are regarded as belonging to the household and are not expected to leave and pursue academic studies that can take many years to complete (M. Kambarami (University of Fort Hare), **Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe**: 2006).

So one can argue that there is an intersection between culture, rural poverty and the advancement of the girl child and women (UNESCO: 2005).

There is a need to study this trend in Post-Apartheid South Africa in the light of the rollout of adult education and training programmes. The higher education and training sector needs to seek solutions to address these disparities. Those living in rural areas are worse off as they are directly affected by challenges of underdevelopment such as **poverty** and lack of **basic health and education services**.

Marginalisation has contributed to a skewed skills base in the country with male dominance in key professions such as **engineering, science and technology** and women under-represented in these areas as well as in post-graduate PhD studies.

The situation becomes more desperate in rural areas where most young girls get married and assume a reproductive role at an early stage, thus excluding them from higher education and training opportunities (including the skills development programmes). This situation denies the country of much needed human capital.

Saniye G Corat, in her paper, **Multiplication not Division: Overcoming the Gender Divide**, delivered at the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women, *Theme 1: Girls' education-a prerequisite to access to science and technology* (2011), observed that there was a need to empower women in **science and technology** and we should **make these courses relevant to women**. She pointed out that public health, maternal health, HIV and AIDS and climate change are all fields of Science that could respond to women's interests as they deal with the nurturing of life. Corat argued that women need to be introduced to courses that are more hands on and relate to the social

environment. Her paper further noted that women hold over half of university degrees in the world but only **30%** are graduates in science and technology.

The paper also revealed that only **29%** of world researchers are women. Women are generally still paid lesser than men. This is a global phenomenon. The most economically advanced states produce more women scientists than developing countries. Social and cultural factors have also contributed to these inequalities. These are matters that need further interrogation as we are all involved in encouraging women to enter scarce skills careers in the science and engineering fields.

### **Geographical Location and Higher Education Choices**

As a country, South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. This is because of the past policies of colonialism and Apartheid that neglected rural areas, specifically, African rural areas communities.

The basic education system experiences of rural students in South Africa is disempowering as it is characterised by lack of proper classrooms, absence of well –coordinated extra-curricular activities, library and laboratory facilities.

Geographical location becomes a constraint, in economic and psychological ways, as students from rural areas and working class backgrounds find it difficult to break geographical barriers because of lack of finance, challenges posed by transport infrastructure and emotional reasons.

### **Cultural Barriers**

Cultural barriers are the most serious obstacles to access to higher education and training for women and the girl -child. There are societal expectations that women should be responsible for the upbringing of children and devote less time to careers and self-development. The stereotypes become more entrenched in

rural communities where culture and customs are still dominant. Recent discussions at the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Status of Women Conference in New York confirmed the fact that rural women are the most over-worked and they are often excluded in skills development programmes.

We should ask ourselves, to what extent are our university admission policies, including those policies dealing with bursaries and residences, take into account the urban-rural complexities of South Africa. How do we use our institutional policies to bridge or even close the gap between students from rural and urban areas?

### **The Urgent Need to Confront Gender Based Violence (GBV) At Our Universities**

Our universities have in the recent past experienced negative media exposure involving allegations of sexual harassment and GBV in the broader sense. It should be noted that gender-based violence is a problem throughout the skills pipeline as women are victims of **early pregnancy** and **school dropout** rate at a young age. It has been noted that most of our institutions do not have the capacity to monitor and evaluate practices that threaten gender relations on campuses.

The current status quo is unacceptable as it perpetuates gender oppression, inequality and threatens transformation.

Sexual harassment has an invisible face which needs institutional commitment and resources in order to tackle it. It can contribute to failure and dropout rates.

Is it not the time for us, as institutions of higher education, to seriously consider **gender mainstreaming** and **gender budgeting** in all our policies, programmes

and budgets? Is it not the time for us to strengthen gender awareness programmes and the mechanisms to deal decisively with perpetrators?

The other major barrier is institutional culture and apparent lack of capacity to deal with Gender Based Violence across the higher education and training sector. In our recent engagement with the Commission for Gender Equality, it is clear that Gender Based Violence (GBV) is rife in our institutions of higher education. The root of this problem is the persistence of patriarchy, homophobia and the social and economic challenges which pre-dispose women students to exploitation by older men, sometimes, by men who are HIV Positive and sometimes by men who are involved in human and drug trafficking.

Women students are exposed to extreme physical and psychological abuse perpetuated in many instances by their own partners or known perpetrators.

The perpetrators are not reported to management because they could be providers of accommodation and food to victims. Perpetrators could also be having strong links with powerful university syndicates. It is therefore very difficult for anyone to provide reliable statistics because of under-reporting of Gender Based Violence cases in universities and colleges. Under-reporting is equally caused by unequal power relations and lack of transformation in institutions where governance structures are still dominated by people who have not been trained in gender education and awareness programmes.

## **Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Budgeting**

Gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting have been identified as solutions to some of the problems faced by our society. The European Union's definition of gender mainstreaming involves the placing of gender issues at the centre of policy and programme development.

Also, the current national gender policies adopted by the newly –created **Department of Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities** call for gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting.

In clearer terms, policy development should from the beginning take into account possible impact on men and women, recognising that they may have different needs. This leads me to gender budgeting which takes into account the formulation of the budget to meet the needs of both men and women. For example, women may need security personnel in their residences and could advance stronger demands for campus patrol. These concerns cannot be ignored simply because they are raised by women.

The question therefore is, how does our budgeting at institutional level impact on gender equality? Does our budgeting reduce gender inequality, or are our policies gender neutral?

It has been noted that most financial policies do not put take into consideration issues of social cohesion and social inclusion. Our neutrality inevitably perpetuates and maintain the status quo.

## **Conclusion**

Women students from poor rural and working class backgrounds become the most vulnerable groups as choice for higher education and education is shaped by power relations and social stratification.

**Discussions in our breakaway groups will hopefully consolidate** the road map that will enable us to continue to improve the representation of women in technology, science and engineering sectors, in line with them.

A developing country like ours needs to find ways of attracting women students, especially rural women to our institutions of higher education and training, "from the backwaters and side streams into the mainstream"<sup>2</sup>. We need to find ways of keeping the girl child longer in the education system by developing relevant academic programmes that relate more to the nurturing of life and their social contexts.

My address has only flagged critical areas. I hope that in your breakaway sessions you will intensively interrogate the issues raised and come forward with recommendations that can be implemented by the higher education and training sector. You are best positioned to articulate a concrete plan of action which will fast track our determination to promote gender equality in society.

**I THANK YOU**

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<sup>2</sup> Paper by Professor Diane Elson, **Gender Mainstreaming and gender budgeting**, European Union Conference, Brussels, 4 March 2003