

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION IN RESEARCH: Towards Achieving Gender Equity in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The project on Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education was initiated by the Institute of Education, University of London, conducted from April, 2003 to December, 2005 and funded by the Department of International Development and the Carnegie Foundation. The Project Coordinator was Professor Louise Morley and senior university academics from Nigeria, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uganda participated with assistance from other researchers. The project examined gender equity interventions in access, curriculum and staff development. It targeted two Millennium Goals: Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Partnerships between rich and poor countries.

The paper describes how regular communication, meetings in respective countries, adaptation of research instruments to suit country contexts, common scheduling of activities and guidance and monitoring by the Project Coordinating Team enabled research partners to;

- make a significant contribution to knowledge on gender equity in higher education,
- enhance research capacity of junior researchers,
- disseminate study findings,
- raise awareness and initiate follow-up action on gender issues in higher education among policy makers and authorities and
- to promote multicultural understanding and the impact of cultures on gender equity in higher education.

Keywords: Gender Equity, International Development and the Carnegie Foundation, gender equity in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The third Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) in the United Nation's Millennium Declaration is Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women. This Goal focuses on Target Four - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015. The value which underlies the third MDG is equality. The global community recognizes that no individual must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development. The equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured.

Sri Lanka with a Human Development Index of 0.751 and a Gender Development Index of 0.747 is often cited as a success story. Sri Lanka has reached a high degree of success in ensuring equal access to educational opportunity - the cumulative result of the long-term vision of policymakers and their commitment to liberal-democratic policies in the early years of independence (Jayawardena, 1985; Jayaweera, 1985).

The system of free education from kindergarten to university level, introduced in 1945 has been complemented by a number of incentives and services like subsidized transport, free text books, free mid-day meals and free school uniforms that contributed towards reducing social and economic disparities.

At university level, there has been a gradual increase of women in enrolment. Thus female representation in total enrolment which was 42.9% in 1990/91, increased to 45.4 % in 1995/96 and to 53.6% in 2002. Women are visible in most disciplines but the majority is mainly in Arts-oriented disciplines. In Engineering the women are still a low minority.

At national level, no accurate data is available on the unemployment of graduates. In 1992, the total number registered in the Graduate Placement Scheme was around 12,000. In 1994, 1995 and 1996 the number registered in the Ministry of Youth Affairs were 11,364, 10,460 and 4,660 respectively. The data on unemployed graduates show that the graduates who mainly suffer unemployment are women (Table: 1).

Table: 1
Registered Unemployed Graduates by Sex (1994-2001)

Year	Total	% Female
1994	11364	49.5
1995	10460	58.1
1996	4660	62.0
2001	25515	63.1
2004	40014	65.4

Source: Department of Census and Statistics (1997),
University Grants Commission (2002) & Prof. V.K. Samaranayake,
School of Computing, University of Colombo.

Throughout the period, except for Engineering, which enrolls a majority of men students, in all the other degrees the majority of the unemployed are women graduates. Similarly, the advancement of university women academics into senior academic positions has been quite slow in latter 1990s.

Table: 2
Distribution of University Academic Staff by Gender (1996 -2003)

Grade	1996		1999		2003	
	Male	Female	Male%	Female%	Male %	Female %
Professor	88.7	11.3	85.0	15.0	77.8	22.2
Asso. Professor	78.6	21.4	72.0	28.0	78.7	11.3
Snr. Lecturer I	61.7	28.3	74.0	26.0	56.9	33.1
Snr. Lecturer II	58.5	31.5	66.0	34.0		
Lecturer	54.3	35.7	62.0	38.0	60.5	39.5

Source: Chitra Karunaratne (1996, 1999, 2003) CENWOR,
Proceedings of the National Conventions on Women

The Sri Lankan context thus clearly showed that even while some targets of Gender Equality had been achieved yet there were other areas, especially at the levels of higher education, employment and empowerment, where little or no progress had been made.

The impetus to initiate a research study to interrogate and document the action that universities in five Commonwealth countries have been taken with regard to gender equity was a result of the realization that in spite of the interventions that were introduced at higher education level, the extent to which these interventions were effective or the outcomes of research studies carried out in developing countries were not well-documented. Three interventions on access, curriculum transformation and staff development were selected for the study and one University from each member country in the Project was selected as the research site. Partnerships and collaboration was an essential need to initiate the study and was continued as the study proceeded from the stage of seeking funding, planning and conduct to dissemination and follow-up action. Partnership and collaboration was ensured among;

- funders and research groups,
- universities and policy making bodies,
- academics, policy makers and national level women's organizations,
- university research teams from different universities in the same country and from Commonwealth countries,
- research teams and implementing bodies such as Staff Development Units.

Partnership and collaboration took place at different stages of the Project such as;

- project proposal preparation,
- (ii) development of data collection instruments,
- (iii) training on data collection and analysis in gender research
- (iv) clarification and feedback on research reports,
- (v) seeking avenues for and participation in dissemination and
- (vi) implementing interventions to work towards Gender Equity in Higher Education.

The paper describes how regular communication, meetings in respective countries, adaptation of research instruments to suit country contexts, common scheduling of activities and guidance and monitoring by the Project Coordinating Team enabled research partners, Sri Lanka in this instance, to:

- make a significant contribution to knowledge on gender equity in higher education,
- have access to essential equipment and software,
- enhance research capacity of junior researchers,
- disseminate study findings,
- raise awareness and initiate follow-up action on gender issues in higher education among policy makers and authorities and
- to promote multicultural understanding and awareness on the impact of cultures on gender equity in higher education.

The paper thus focuses on two Millennium Goals: Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Partnerships between rich and poor countries.

THE STUDY

Three interventions were selected for the study in Sri Lanka: under access, the District Quota Scheme and the Mahapola Scholarships, which were equity interventions were studied while the Master of Women's Studies Programme and the gender courses in the Arts Faculty and the activities of the Staff Development Centre were studied under

curriculum transformation and staff development respectively. University of Colombo was the Sri Lankan University selected as the research site.

Partnership and Collaboration in Research

Initiation of the Research Project

The collaborative cross-cultural research on Gender Equity was initiated at a meeting of potential researchers from the University of London, Commonwealth Secretariat, and Universities from Kenya, Malaysia, Nigeria, South Africa and Sri Lanka. Each researcher presented a country paper briefing the colleagues about the situation and issues with regard to Gender Equity in Higher Education in their own country. The meeting in Johannesburg was sponsored by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The Johannesburg meeting was followed by the drafting of the research proposal by the research group in London, and scrutiny and observations by the fellow researchers. The finalized research proposal submitted to funding organizations was successful on obtaining support for Sri Lanka and Nigeria from the Department of International Development (DIFD), UK and for South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Sponsorship from the donor agencies provided essential support to purchase equipment, new software for qualitative data analysis, research capacity building, participation in international meetings and conduct of the study. Between the initial meeting and the acceptance of the proposal for funding, two of the countries, Kenya and Malaysia could not continue and were replaced by Tanzania and Uganda.

Collaboration among Commonwealth Countries

The Universities participating in the project were University of London (with Professor Louise Morley as the Coordinator of the Project and two other colleagues and a Research officer to support her), the University of Ibadan, the University of Cape Town, the University of Colombo, University of Dar es Salaam and the Makerere University.

The Lead Researchers were given guidelines regarding the selection of research assistants, obtaining approval from university management for data collection, appointment of Steering Committees and the activities to be completed at different phases of the research study. The Project Coordinator visited these universities for in-person assessment of the research planning and progress at different intervals and could meet with the Steering Committees and research teams.

Development of Instruments

The data collection instruments using the case study approach had to be standardized for the five participating countries. Through the use of electronic mail and discussions at meetings in member countries it was possible to examine the different scenarios in higher education and gender that exist in each country and understand the cultural contexts in which these scenarios evolved and persisted. A major benefit that accrued was the opportunity to obtain inputs from the research teams in the participating countries to standardize these instruments.

Procurement of Equipment and Resources

The Project enabled the research team obtain essential equipment such as a computer, tape recorders, Nvivo software and books on gender and higher education which facilitated the study, even though the financial commitment was moderate.

Research Capacity Building

In Sri Lanka the research team comprised three senior researchers who had experience mostly using large-scale surveys and two juniors. Two workshops were conducted on gender research and using interviews and observations for data collection. The

participation in these staff development workshops on research methodology was not limited to the research team but was extended to other staff from the two universities that were involved in the study.

The Project Team in the University of London provided training on the use of Nvivo for qualitative data analysis, and together with the teams from participating countries provided useful comments on the Working Papers produced by the Sri Lankan team and helped to improve the quality of the reports. The teams, similarly, contributed to the improvement of the quality of the Final Project Report, through their feedback on the Draft Report.

All the members of the research teams contributed to the dissemination activities and publications which enabled the junior researchers to develop their skills in presentation, gain confidence in participation in international seminars and conferences. Thus the Sri Lankan team produced a book based on the research study, "Not Adding Up: Looking Beyond Numbers", contributed an article (forthcoming in the Women's Studies International Forum) and presented at two national and four international conferences (New Zealand; Korea; Sri Lanka; Adelaide).

Follow-up Action on Gender Equity

Recognizing the importance of linking research with policy and action, two dissemination seminars and two workshops were held. The first dissemination seminar was held as an interim seminar in October 2003 six months after the commencement of the Project after the first Working Paper was written. The second in which the Lead Researchers or their nominees from the partner countries participated was also held in Sri Lanka enabling the academics, policy makers and researchers to meet and discuss the findings of the Project related to individual countries. The academics included those from both the Open University (where the Lead Researcher and another team member worked) and the University of Colombo (the research site).

The Research Team realized that in order to carry forward the research into action, it was necessary to conscientize key persons in the university system regarding the need for curriculum reform. The Directors of Staff Development Units in the Sri Lankan universities or their nominees were invited to participate in two sequential workshops on incorporation of gender into the curriculum. The participants identified areas in their respective curricula for which gender could be introduced and drew up plans for the same.

Partnership and Collaboration within Sri Lanka

Cooperation of stakeholders from the University chosen as the research site was essential for a study of this nature that entailed access to documents, lengthy interviews and observation of classes and meetings. The readiness to extend cooperation shown by all stakeholders such as the Chairman of the University Grants Commission, the Vice Chancellor, members of the Council, the Senate, Deans, staff, administrative staff and students who volunteered to be interviewed in response to a notice was truly encouraging.

Collaboration from academics and other stakeholders within the country was extremely helpful in improving the quality of the research study at various stages. Thus representatives of persons of eminence in the university system, women's organizations, Ministry of Women's Affairs served as members of the Steering Committee and provided direction and guidance to the study with their insightful observations. In the two workshops for training on research methodologies a senior academic from another universities in the country, University of Peradeniya also contributed as resource persons. The Lead Researcher's presentation on the findings of the study in respect of the

curriculum interventions was followed by presentation by academics from the University of Colombo on the issues they had confronted when they attempted to introduce gender courses into the mainstream curriculum and these served as the basis for the workshop activities.

Understanding among Communities and Nations

The Research Study provided an opportunity for the Lead Researcher to visit other countries such as United Kingdom, South Africa and Tanzania for research meetings and participate in academic discussions and seminars on Gender Equity, enabling her to gain an understanding of the cultural contexts and issues impinging on gender equity in these countries and present an analysis of the Sri Lankan situation. Similarly Lead Researchers or members of the research teams from partner countries could visit Sri Lanka for the dissemination seminar held towards the end of the Project. Research teams' participation in Panel Sessions at international conferences in Korea, and Australia helped to continue, renew and enhance the friendships they had forged through the Project. The beneficial effect of these opportunities extended beyond academic dialogues to long-term friendships.

Networking and Forging Links in Research:

An Effective and Stimulating Medium of Global Cooperation

In this paper an attempt was made to describe how partnership and collaboration among five developing countries and a developed country in the Commonwealth was utilized to conduct and complete a research study on Gender Equity in Higher Education. Access to resources made possible through forming a consortium of researchers across countries that succeeded in obtaining sponsorship facilitated the study that could not have materialized had each of the partner countries striven to carry out the study in isolation. Over and above the professional satisfaction of completing a high quality research study as academics, was the sense of gratification that the researchers experienced as a result of the research network that the Project had developed among the six Commonwealth countries.

CONCLUSION

In this paper an attempt was made to describe how partnership and collaboration among five developing countries and a developed country in the Commonwealth was utilized to conduct and complete a research study on Gender Equity in Higher Education.

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