



Factors Affecting the Academic Performance of Female Students at Higher Education in Ethiopia

By Aemiro Tenaw

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Abstract- Education is one of the social factors whereby gender disparity is reflected. The number and proportion of educated females is very low. As the grade level of education increases, the number of female students starts to decline. Consequently, higher education remains the level of learning where females are in a less academic performance when compared to males. Problems female students encountered constitute personal, university related factors, academic factors (previous academic background) and economic factors. The off-campus factors that affect female students' academic performance include family background, traditional Music Houses and economic problems and others. In short, the majority of problems female students encounter and those factors that affect female students' academic performance are personal and the other problems are caused by the university environment. Therefore, I argued that despite the number of female students who attend higher education has been increased but the challenges that faced after entrance is very little investigated. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the on-campus and off-campus factors that affect female students' academic performance negatively in higher education in Ethiopia, especially for undergraduate program. For the purpose of the paper I used different sources such as interview with female students of Addis Ababa University and other literatures. Finally, suggested solutions, my own reflection and conclusion are included.

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I. FACTORS AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the literature, various factors have been stated that affect the academic performance and higher attrition rates of female students in higher institutions. For instance, the general institutional environment, the overall interaction and practice the students make with school personnel, institutional rules and regulations, sanctions, and the organizational structure. It is long noted that the relationship between students and their universities is one significant predictor of social and academic development that the structure of the university unfairly treats students based on their background (Yeshimebrat Mersha & etal, 2013). So, the question is that what are the off-campus and on-campus factors that affect the academic performance of females' students in higher education?

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a) *Personal Related Factors*

A number of personal related factors were put forward to explain female academic weakness and the high attrition rate of female students. According to the study conducted by Bahir Dar University in 2013 those most often mentioned were:

- Lack of self confidence
- Lack of adequate effort
- Carelessness
- Lack of ability to be competent
- Homesickness
- Being addicted to drinking, smoking, disco houses, etc
- Tension
- Falling in love easily
- Inability to become well planned and organized
- Lack of interest for learning
- Fear of failure

From my experience in my university when I observe females in class they lack self-confidence to do whatever the activity is independently. Instead they become dependent of males effort that could not be true and reliable always. The other most important factor is tension and fear of failure. Most females fear that they are incapable of achieving good mark despite having an effort to score. As a result, they come with serious tension that is very danger to study well.

b) *University Related Factors*

Schools and universities because of their biased treatments and some other external factors become centers of gender disparity. For instance, some studies made in USA revealed that children of both sexes start school with roughly similar potential to learn. Their scores on IQ tests were approximately equivalent when gender difference was controlled. Yet, test scores of female students decrease over time until when children move up the ladder in the education arena (Feldman, 1990). Thus, there are also university related factors that contributes for the low academic performance of female students. Some of these are:

- Lack of proper reading place where they can use freely
- The influence of male students/peer pressure
- The influence from male teachers and other staff members and youth from surrounding environment
- Lack of proper guidance
- Academic advising problem

- Sexual harassment
- Existence of music and film houses
- Stereotyping etc

According to ministry of education Gender office report, 2009 stereotypes in higher institutions, based on students' characteristics serve as an important avenue in affecting females' academic performance. Eliminating stereotypical attitudes towards various groups that are represented in the classroom is a recognized avenue to increase females' academic performance and there by minimize their attrition rate in higher institutions. In addition, the study conducted by Haramya

University in 2014 prevailed that University students are more vulnerable to wider and risky sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and HIVAIDS problems due to new environment with poor protection, age and the need to explore life, peer pressure and absence of proactive programs. The study has portrayed that a number of female students were victims of sexual harassments or attempted sexual assault per year and in nearly most cases it was by an acquaintance, based on ethnicity, coming from same place, study group, and rarely outside of the campus by students. The types of sexual harassments include:

- Showing sexually appealing writings and magazines
- Telling sex related jokes to female students without their consent
- Disseminating female students' photographs.
- Sending sex related messages using electronic instruments
- Touching female students' body during practical works and laboratory training
- Assigning and using sex related nick names to female students
- Harassing females through continuously following their activities
- Hiding learning materials and forcing female students for sexual practice

According to Asresash Demise, Ruth Shinebaum and Kassahun Melesse (2002) that conducted a study in Jima University, females are vulnerable to sexual violence and insecurity at Jimma University. In addition, from my experience in my university there are also male teachers who seriously and sexually harass female students so that they could not survive in their learning confidently. The existence of many music and film houses in higher institutions also makes females vulnerable to sexual harassment. Even in universities male students sexually harass females in different places like space, when return from library, 'beg tera', etc. Furthermore, lack of the existence of proper guidance and counseling also can be the other university related factor that cause low academic performance of female students.

c) *Academic Related Factors*

First of all, the mean difference between male and female students on their perception of the school climate is statistically significant in favor of males. That is, male students perceived that the school climate is more conducive than their female counterparts. Furthermore, the comparison of the means of female and male students in the support they receive from peers and teachers has revealed that females are in the disadvantageous position (Yeshimebrat Mersha & etal, 2013).

Thus, on the basis of my experience and different studies, the following are some of academic related factors for the low academic performance of female students in higher education:

- Difficulty of education
- Poor high school performance/previous background
- Language difficulty
- Unable to fit with new way of delivery of learning etc.

When female students enjoy higher education they face new way of delivery of learning/environment which largely gives emphasis for independent activities and tasks. Here the first challenge female students face is that how to fit their previous educational background with this new environment. When I observe in the previous grades the quality or/and competence of female students is relatively low. Thus, females face serious challenges while they enjoy higher education. In addition, females also lack competence on the medium of instruction that is English. In fact, this problem is true for all students but females lack confidence to speak, write and understand English.

d) *Economic Related Factors*

In addition to the above factors there are also economic related factors that affect academic performance of female students in higher education. For instance, a number of female students face shortage of money to support themselves for different activities. I remember a number of students who lack money to copy the materials given by teachers when I was a student, and it could have psychological impact too. Therefore, since many of the students are from the poor family economical related factor also played its own role for the low academic performance of female students in higher institutions.

To conclude, based on literatures and my own experience, despite the existence of various factors which affect the academic performance of female students in higher education but personal related factors such as lack of self-confidence, lack of adequate effort and carelessness constitute the major ones. In addition to the personal problems, poor educational background, lack of support from teachers' sexual harassment, absence of concerned people in higher education about female students' problems and

absence of adequate counseling services are also the other crucial factors.

II. THE POLICY FRAMEWORK TOWARDS FEMALES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Ministry of Education Gender Office, 2009 report since the implementation of the New Education and Training Policy (1994) various strategies are employed to increase females' enrollment in all levels of education. Besides, the affirmative action is duly being implemented to increase females' academic performance and to minimize females' attrition rates. Despite the increments of the number of female students in all levels of education, their academic performance is observed to be less than their male counterparts and their attrition is higher. Through the efforts of government to maintain equity through expansion of higher education, many of today's college and university campuses are not dominated by males and major ethnic groups like that were in the past three decades. This expansion of higher education has increased student population both in size and diversity.

On the other hand, Ministry of Education Gender Office stated that in an effort to manage the attrition problem and improve students' academic performance, many universities and colleges take various intervention programs, from 2001 to 2003, with the Success Challenge grant funded by the state. The Success Challenge grant has two components: 1) challenging university campuses to enable at-risk students successfully to earn baccalaureate degrees; and 2) challenging university campuses to enable baccalaureate seeking students to complete their degrees in a timely fashion, typically three/four years. Most of the interventions programs were designed to promote student-to-student interaction, faculty to-student interaction, student involvement, academic engagement, and academic assistance. They can be roughly categorized into six different program types based on the types of services they provide. The categories consist of advising, academic help, and first year experience (FYE), social integration, general orientation, and financial aid. Slaughter (2004) stated that freshman orientation may be effective to reduce the risk of dropping out.

However, the question is that whether those intervention programs are effective or not, and how long the effect lasts? How many of female students graduate from higher institutions compared to their male counterparts?

In my understanding despite there have been various intervention programs in higher education at the state, regional as well as institutional level but most of them are not effective. For instance, when we take affirmative action teachers are not volunteer to participate in tutorial programs for females. When we

see the number of female students join high education it is relatively in a good ratio with males but when we observe the number of female students who graduate, it is relatively low. Thus, the government both at national, regional and institutional levels should set workable policy that takes into account the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political context of the country and aggressively work towards its implementation.

III. WHAT MEASURES SHOULD BE TAKEN TO ENHANCE THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

In order to enhance the academic performance and decrease the attrition rate of female students at higher education serious measures should be taken at the national as well as institutional level.

If not, inequity in higher education representation has a serious life-long impact on their opportunities to participate in the country's political power sharing, economic privileges as well as social representations.

Here are some of the measures should be taken by the national government that I suggest:

First, the policies and strategies are good but what is the problem is that lack of implementation of those policies. Thus, the government should give emphasis for effective implementation of various policies and intervention programs. For instance, affirmative action is very important remedy for past discriminations on women but it is not effectively implemented in various higher education institutions in Ethiopia.

Second, the government should organize different capacity building programs and trainings for various bodies so that they could be able to effectively implement different policies and strategies.

Third, the government should work towards the quality of education provided for lower grades of education to enhance their competence.

At institutional level higher education institutions should also take serious measures as:

First, institutions should formulate inclusive rules and regulations that give more emphasis for female students.

Second, institutions should arrange various capacity building trainings and meetings for females to enhance their capacity to learn, especially with respect to English language and to build good psychological makeup.

Third, institutions should organize guidance and counseling to add their self-confidence of learning and avoid tensions.

Fourth, institutions should arrange appropriate places for study in addition to library. Here, availability of computers should also be emphasized.

Fifth, institutions should establish serious laws and follow up its implementation regarding sexual abuse of females so as to enhance their human security so that it could contribute a lot for their academic performance.

Sixth, institutions should arrange different workshops and meetings to change the attitude of teachers towards affirmative action to give different supports and tutorials for female students.

Seventh, institutions should participate in various fund raising activities in cooperation with NGOs and the community to help students that cannot help themselves.

Finally, female students themselves should also organize themselves in clubs to discuss their own problems and struggle for rights and freedom in higher education.

In general both the government and institutions should work towards creating good learning atmosphere for female students in cooperation with other stake holders because females are vulnerable for various challenges by nature and culture of the society.

a) *However, the question is that do only females face challenges in higher education on their academic performance?*

In my understanding I don't think so because both females and males have been facing various challenges at higher education in Ethiopia like language problem, tension, financial problem and others. But, the situation is very worse for females since females are vulnerable for various challenges by nature as well as due to the influence of the culture of the society.

b) *Do we measure equality in education by the number of enrollment and by the institution inputs?*

In my opinion I don't think so because equality of education in higher education should also be evaluated from the competence of students of both females and males. So, based on data we observe and I saw in my university the academic performance of females and males is very different. However, it does not mean that there are no competent and matured female students.

There are but their number is few. As a result, as I interviewed some students in Addis Ababa University the attrition rate of female students is more than males.

IV. CONCLUSION

A number of on-campus and off-campus factors caused for the low academic performance of female students at higher education when we compare with males in Ethiopia. These could be included under personal, university, academic and economic related factors. Based on studies and my experience, personal problems such as fear of failure and lack of self-confidence are the first top most factors that impede

female students' academic achievement in higher learning institutions of Ethiopia. But, it does not mean that there are no female students who perform well even over male in their academic achievement totally.

Policies and strategies seem good but the main problem is lack of implementation in higher education in Ethiopia. However, those policies and intervention programs are not that much effective. Thus various measures should be taken by both the national government as well as institutions to effectively implement those policies and strategies so that female students' academic performance could be enhanced.

Finally, I argued that despite the number of female students who attend higher education has been increased but the challenges that faced after entrance is very little investigated. Therefore, the academic performance of female students is lower when we compare with male students in higher education institutions in Ethiopia.

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