

Gender and Regional Disparities in Opportunities to Higher Education in Ethiopia: Challenges for the Promotion of Social Justice

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Abstract: Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic, traditional and one of the least developed countries in the world. The participation rate in early childhood education was 2.0%; in primary and secondary education was 64.4% and 19.3%, respectively in 2002/03 (MOE, 2003). The participation rate in higher education is about 1%. Except in the KG's, the participation rate of girls is lower than boys at all education levels. It was 25.2% in higher education enrollment and 16.3% among 2002/03 graduates. Primary and secondary enrollment ratios for girls are 13.8% and 5.1% respectively in Afar Region; the ratios are 15.1% and 3.3% respectively in Somali Region. While the primary participation rate for Addis Ababa, Harari and Gambella are about 100%, the Secondary enrollment ratios are above 50% for Addis Ababa, Harar and Dire Dawa. According to MOE statistics, the number of ratio of students who sat for and scored above 2.6% in the EGSECE min 2003 are significantly higher in Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and Tigray regions than many others (e.g, Afar, Somali). When figures of the regional population, total enrollments students who sat for the 10th and 12th national examinations, and students who were admitted to higher education institutions are compared, large disparities exist between regions and genders. The development of an inclusive and democratic society requires that equality of opportunity needs to exist and the disadvantaged social groups need some support to catch up with the others. Exclusion, particularly those of regions or ethnic groups, tends to be a threat to democracy and national integration in the long run. Furthermore, higher education is highly related to better standard of living and easier participation in societal matters. Hence, the regions in the peripheries and the females need much better access to higher education. The Ethiopian constitution and various policies address issues of affirmative action, support to disadvantaged and diverse groups, and notions of equality. The provisions are not put into practice and perhaps more detailed policies, guidelines and interventions might be in order to improve the situation in higher education admission and retention.

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Introduction

Inequality of opportunities between various social groups for higher education is and has been a serious problem in Ethiopia. The numbers of admissions and graduates have not been proportional to the size of population when we compare males with females, various regions, various ethnic groups, urban-rural residents, and the center with the peripheries. Usually, the males, urban residents and the center are the advantaged ones. Their participation, enrollment and graduates' rates are much higher.

In this study, attempts are made to show that the disparities (inequalities between the sexes and regions) continue unabated and serious attention needs to be given to redress the inequalities (the social injustice).

The paper has the following chapters: objectives and method, overview of educational opportunities, higher education opportunities, discussion and conclusion.

Objectives and Method

The following are the main objectives of the study:

- Pointing out the advantages of the provision of equality of opportunity;
- Presenting statistical data showing the disparities in higher education admission;
- Bringing the magnitude of the problem to the attention of decision makers, educators, researchers and the public at large;
- Making some suggestions to redress the inequalities.

The sources of the data are mainly the Ministry of Education (EMIS and NOE) and the Central Statistical Authority (CSA). It is mainly a descriptive study using quantitative and qualitative data and

approaches of analyses. The focus is on the Ethiopian situation and data as the relevant literature have been reviewed by earlier studies (e.g., Tekle Haimanot, 1982; Ayalew, 1989; Seyoum, 1991; Teshome, 1989; Habtamu, 1992 and 2002). Hence, only an overview of the literature on the issue will be made.

Overview Of Educational Opportunities

Ethiopia has a projected population of 71 million in 2004, of which 84% is rural (CSA, 2004). Ethiopia's GNP per capita is \$110 while sub-Saharan Africa is \$480. The welfare monitoring survey indicates that 44% of the population lives in poverty and are unable to meet their basic needs and their income is less than one dollar per day (MOFED, 2002).

Ethiopia has about 80 ethnic groups, of which Oromo, Amhara, Tigraway and Somale account for 32.15%, 30.13%, 6.18% and 5.95% respectively (i.e, totaling 74.41%). Out of the 11 regions (including Addis Ababa and Diredawa), Oromia, Amhara, SNNP, Tigray, Somale and Addis Ababa account for 35.32%, 25.53%, 19.82%, 5.79%, 5.78% and 3.95% of the total population respectively (CSA, 2004). This would mean 96.19% of the total population. Each region's population size and the ratio are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Students Who Sat for Higher Education Entrance Examination in 1995 E. C. (2003) by Region

No	Region	Population in thousands	Examinees	Population %	Examinees %	Parity Index
1	Oromia	24,395	8,255	35.29	29.05	0.82
2	Amhara	17,669	5,938	25.56	20.89	0.82
3	SNNP	13,686	2,150	19.80	7.57	0.38
4	Tigray	4,006	4,731	5.80	16.65	2.87
5	Somale	4,002	66	5.79	0.23	0.40
6	Addis Ababa	2,725	6,399	3.94	22.52	5.72
7	Afar	1,301	55	1.88	0.19	0.10
8	Ben. Gumuz	580	342	0.84	1.20	1.43
9	Dire Dawa	357	150	0.52	0.53	1.02
10	Gambella	228	155	0.33	0.53	1.61
11	Harari	178	178	0.26	0.63	2.42
Total		69,127	28,419	100	100	-

Source: MOE (2003A). p. 103 and CSA (2004), p. 77.

Tertiary level gross enrollment ratio is below 1%, while Sub-Saharan Africa is 4% (WB, 2004). Obviously, Ethiopia's higher education enrollment ratio is one of the lowest in the world.

Often the concept of equality of opportunity is defined in terms of access, participation and achievement in education of individuals who differ in gender, socio-economic background, geographic location or ethnic membership. Members of certain social groups tend to have better access than other social groups. The development of a democratic and inclusive society requires that individuals and various social groups get equal opportunity in education, employment and other services.

Addressing educational disadvantage usually requires some intervention from the kindergarten through higher education. Having a large pool in higher levels implies the existence of a larger pool at lower levels. For instance, to have hundreds of female applicants for admission to higher education institutions or to have a large number from a specific region would mean that there were abundant students and females who completed the preparatory program. Despite immense efforts to expand the education sector, the participation rates of some social groups are very small. Redressing the under representation, particularly as the level of education increases, needs serious attention. Looking at some figures would suffice.

Early childhood education participation rate has been only 2% for several years. In 1995 E.C., primary (grades 1 – 8) gross enrollment ratio (GER) for Ethiopia was 64.4% (MOE, 2003A). But the GER for girls was 53.8%; for Afar and Somale regions were 13.8% and 15.1%, respectively. The advantaged regions of Addis Ababa, Gambella and Harari had primary GER of 135.4%, 124.6% and 105.7%, respectively. [Percentages over 100 imply that over aged children, for the cohort, were in attendance]. Secondary (grades 9 – 10) GER for the country was 19.3% in 1995 E.C. while it was only 14.3% for girls and 24.0% for boys. Secondary GER for Afar and Somale regions were only 5.1% and 3.3%, respectively. The advantaged regions of Addis Ababa, Harari, and Dire Dawa had 78.1%, 56.1% and 50.3%, respectively (MOE, 2003A).

Despite the rise in government expenditures (about 16% of the budget for the past 5 years) and the participation of the private sector, participation rates in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education are very low. Furthermore, the disparities between the regions (partly implying ethnic groups) and the sexes are large.

Higher Education Opportunities

Nowadays, it is generally agreed that higher education is one of the key elements for the socio-economic development of a country, for

poverty reduction and even for good governance (WB, 2004; Damtew and Altbach, 2003; MOE, 2003B; Habtamu, 2003). The current trends are that the Ethiopian government is cognizant of this fact and seems to be investing more in higher education in general. It is hoped that issues of disparity, particularly between the regions and the sexes, would get due attention in practice. Though not detailed enough, there are adequate policy statements to support the disadvantaged regions and social groups. I will cite a few policy statements below.

A. The Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE, 1995) states the following (Article 35: 3 and Article 41: 3 and 4):

“The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative action. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.”

“Every Ethiopian national has the right to equal access to publicly funded social services. The state has the obligation to allocate ever increasing resources to provide to the public health, education and other social services.”

B. Education and Training policy (TGE, 1994) article 3.7.7 states the following:

“Special attention will be given to women and to those students who did not get educational opportunities in the preparation, distribution and use of educational support input.”

C. Higher education proclamation (FDRE, 2003) also states the following (Article 33: 1):

“Entry assessment or admission procedures designed for any female, disabled student, a student who has completed high school education in a developing region and who is native of the nationality of such region or a student from the nationality whose participation in higher education is low shall be different from others. They shall, during their stay in the institution, get special support; particulars of such support shall be determined by the Ministry”. Article 6: 3 also states that “higher education shall have the objectives to ...provide equitable distribution of higher education institutions.”

Looking at these and other policy statements, it can be argued that adequate awareness and legal framework exist regarding the inequities that are prevalent in the country in general and in the education sector in particular. But the practice and the figures of the past several years are highly contradictory to the policy statements. Though the government budget for higher education has increased in the past several years, much larger investment is required to reach Sub-Saharan Africa level of GER in higher education.

Hence, major expansion that seems under way and dealing with disparities has to get priorities among the issues in the sub sector. In the past few years, various colleges were reorganized, expanded and became universities. The establishment of new universities is underway. Enrollments have also increased significantly (ESDP II, MOE, 2002; Habtamu, 2003; Aschcroft, 2004). Out of the 28,419 students who took higher education entrance examination in 1995 E.C., 26.66% (7,576) were girls. Only 55 (0.10%) and 66 (0.40%) students sat for the exam from Afar and Somale regions (MOE, 2003A), respectively. As could be observed from Table 1, Addis Ababa, Tigray, and Harari were the advantaged regions with party index of over 2.40. The situation was not much different in 1993 E. C. either. Out of the 94,508 examinees who sat for the E.S.L.C.E., 37.9% were females. Addis Ababa, Harari and Dire Dawa were the

advantaged regions while Somale (0.39%) and Afar (0.67%) were the disadvantaged ones. The following table shows the details.

Table 2: Population and Regular Students Who Sat for the ESLCE in 1993 E.C. (2001) by Region

No	Region	Population in thousands	Examinees	Population %	Examinees %	Parity Index
1	Oromia	23,023	27,817	35.23	29.43	0.84
2	Amhara	16,748	17,131	25.63	18.13	0.71
3	SNNP	12,903	14,349	19.75	15.18	0.77
4	Tigray	3,797	5,713	5.81	6.04	1.04
5	Somale	3,797	373	5.81	0.39	0.07
6	Addis Ababa	2,570	24,717	3.93	26.15	6.65
7	Afar	1,243	636	1.90	0.67	0.35
8	Gambella	216	599	0.33	0.63	1.91
9	Ben. Gumuz	551	764	0.84	0.81	0.96
10	Harari	166	1,129	0.25	1.19	4.76
11	Dire Dawa	330	1,280	0.51	1.35	2.65
Total		65,344	94,508	100	100	-

Source: NOE (2002), p. 22 – 23 and CSA (2004), p. 75.

The parity index values provided in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that some regions are using larger resources and also producing larger share of human resources than others.

A major issue to consider is not only the number of examinees or 12th grade completers, but also the number (ratio) who pass the national and/or higher education admission examinations. Out of the 57,133 examinees in 1993 .E.C. who scored a GPA of 2 and above, 29.14% were female (NOE, 2002). In addition, 34.25%, 21.25%, 16.81% and 14.59% were from Oromia, Amhara, Addis Ababa and SNNP regions, respectively. The most advantaged regions in relation to their

population size were Harari, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The disadvantaged regions were Somale, Afar and SNNP with parity index of 0.07, 0.53 and 0.74 respectively. This is shown in the table below.

Table 3: Population, Regular Students with a GPA of ≥ 2 in the ESLCE in 1993 E.C. (2001) by Region

N.o	Region	Population in thousands	Examinees	Population %	Examinees %	Parity Index
1	Oromia	23,023	19,567	35.23	34.25	0.97
2	Amhara	16,748	12,138	25.63	21.25	0.83
3	SNNP	12,903	8,338	19.75	14.59	0.74
4	Tigray	3,797	4,629	5.81	8.10	1.39
5	Somale	3,797	238	5.81	0.42	0.07
6	Addis Ababa	2,570	9,604	3.93	16.81	4.28
7	Afar	1,243	574	1.90	1.00	0.53
8	Gambella	216	199	0.33	0.35	1.06
9	Ben. Gumuz	551	562	0.84	0.98	1.17
10	Harari	166	626	0.25	1.10	4.40
11	Dire Dawa	330	654	0.51	1.14	2.24
Total		65,344	57,133*	100	100	-

Source: NOE (2002), p. 23 – 24 and CSA (2004), p. 75

*60.45% of the examinees scored a GPA of 2.00 and above

Discussion and Conclusion

The provision of equal opportunity to individuals (irrespective of sex, race, residence, etc) and various social groups has several advantages. It is a human right, contributes towards the development of fair and inclusive society, promotes unity within diversity, fosters civic and community responsibility, and develops sense of belongingness to minorities and historically disadvantaged groups.

Since education has a direct correlation with the societies' future social and economic prospects and to basic standards of living, equality of educational opportunity is a serious issue. Often, exclusion, marginalization and unfair treatments are threats to democracy, national unity, peace and development.

The World Bank report (2004, 14) on Ethiopia's higher education states that, "These regional imbalances in access hold serious long-term implications for the development of high level leadership in under-served areas and consequently for their ability to participate fully in the political life and social policy making of the country. If these inequalities are left unattended, political instability might begin to germinate over the longer term." This researcher believes that all responsible citizens are to pay attention to the last statement and would like to add that such seeds might already exist with the flourishing of so many ethnic-based political parties in the country.

To reduce and perhaps eliminate educational disadvantage (particularly in higher education), several countries such as the USA, Canada, South Africa, Tanzania, India, Malaysia and others have used affirmative action, quota, preferential treatment, reserving positions, admission of top percent, compensatory procedures, separate institutions and preparatory (compensatory) programs. All the programs have been challenged and questioned on the grounds of unequal treatment and discrimination between individuals with equal academic merit (Faundez, 1997). Many argue that redressing of past inequalities (access, quality of the school, etc) is needed if social justice is to prevail. The author also believes that promotion of equity of access and outcome is needed to redress the past and present inequalities and the student profiles should move towards reflecting the demographic composition of the Ethiopian society. Some serious measures such as affirmative action have to be taken to "level and equalize the playing field" for all Ethiopian children irrespective of various differences.

No doubt that subtle resistance, implicit and explicit oversight, a lack of serious recognition and ignorance do exist also in Ethiopia, as in other African countries, in trying to remedy the gender and regional (ethnic) imbalances (Damtew and Altbach, 2003: 9). It is to be noted that in Tunisia, Lesotho and Mauritius close to 50% of the students in higher education are females. In Morocco, Tunisia and South Africa, 24%, 33% and 36% of the faculty are females, respectively. Only 7% of the faculty are females in the Ethiopian higher education institutions.

The inequalities and imbalances in Ethiopia are not due to the oppression of one social group over the other; they are mainly due to historical, cultural, economic and political factors. Particularly, undemocratic governance, internal conflicts and backward economy have fostered the vast inequalities between regions.

Some affirmative action has been taken by the Ministry of Education to increase the number of girls and students from “developing regions” (Afar, Somale, etc.). The achievements, failures, and overall contribution in higher level human resources’ development have not been assessed. The few study reports are critical of the situation (e.g., Ababayehu, 1998; Anteneh, 2000; Emezat, 2001; MoE 2003B; Habtamu, 2004). The following are some of the problems, misunderstandings and myths concerning the affirmative action efforts in higher education in Ethiopia.

- The number of students (girls and those from developing regions) admitted by the affirmative action is very small (less than 10% of the admissions).
- Affirmative action students, particularly girls, are admitted to higher education institutions with only 0.2 GPA, but are considered and labeled as much inferior and of lower merit.
- Due to weak background and inadequate preparation, a large number of affirmative action students tend to be dismissed from higher education institutions (over 30% of them).

- Higher education institutions themselves (the administration, deans, teachers) are not well convinced of the need for affirmative action and do not provide the necessary academic and material support to the students.
- The quality of higher education will be negatively affected due to the few (up to 20% for females) affirmative action students per program.
- Affirmative action is reverse discrimination, and giving special rights to a specific social group is unfair and illegal (unconstitutional).
- Some social groups, including females, are not intelligent, competent and/or hard working and hence unqualified for some higher education programs.
- In most campuses, the tutorial services and various support mechanisms being provided, particularly to girls, is inadequate and the overall academic environment is not supportive.

These and other arguments are provided by those who are not well aware of the situation and those who do not support the affirmative action policy. Construction and running of quality high schools are suggested, instead. But the question is what to do till then? Should those ahead wait till others catch up? Can't both be done?

The main goal of affirmative action should be the development of an Ethiopian society where fair representation of all social groups is reflected in most fields, levels and positions in proportion to their number in Ethiopia. It should be a mechanism that could be dropped once the playing fields and starting points are similar for all the social groups and individuals in the country.

In conclusion, the following strategies and activities are recommended to reduce gender and regional inequalities in higher education opportunities and to bring about equities and social justice in the long run.

- The Ethiopian Governments' education budget should increase more and be about 20 to 25% of GDP (average of developing countries, WB, 2004).
- In addition to the regular (day and evening) education programs, various alternative routes have to be used to increase the participation rate of students in under-served regions such as Afar and Somale.
- The aims, objectives and procedures of affirmative actions should be clearly understood by the public at large and the academic community in particular. The magnitude and the criteria used for affirmative action would have to be reconsidered in the direction of more admissions, better support and retention. Also, other mechanisms (regional institutions, preparatory institutes and programs, etc.) have to be studied, discussed and implemented.
- The overall educational/academic environment needs to be supportive to female students and developing regions' (minority) students. This would be in terms of provision of needed materials, academic, social and counseling services.
- Various kinds of sexual harassments and/or discriminations that prevail in many campuses have to be seriously dealt with. In addition to awareness raising about rights and duties, various monitoring mechanism have to be built in. Violators have to be punished and exposed to the public.
- The achievements and failures of affirmative actions so far have to be studied, discussed and be public knowledge.

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