

Enrollment and Academic Performance of Female Students in Higher Learning Institutions: A Case Study

Hedija Mohammed*

Introduction

Education is considered to be an important means of economic, social and cultural development of Ethiopia. It helps to develop the labour force and the managerial skill, which enhances economic and social transformation. Thus, provision of education services to the society should be the primary concern of the government. In this regard, though the participation of female students in primary and secondary level is comparable with that of boys (Fantaw, 2001) the inequalities of female students at higher education level is not narrowing from time to time. It is also observed that the chance of success of female students in the academic life is limited by some artificial and natural factors. Thus this paper tries to assess the level of participation and performance of female students at tertiary level of education.

Enrolment by Gender

Despite the efforts made to expand primary and secondary schooling in Ethiopia, the enrolment at tertiary level is low. The human development report of the World Bank (2000) confirms that the enrolment rate of students at tertiary level in Ethiopia is very low (less than 1%) as compared to other countries such as India (7%), South Africa (15%) and England (52%).

Furthermore, it is a well-established fact that there is a very wide gender inequality when one goes from primary to secondary and then tertiary levels of education. In order to address these inequalities the government of Ethiopia has to enhance incorporated gender responsive policies as part of its strategy female participation in

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higher education and other socio-economic activities of the country. In doing so a number of measures have been taken to increase the number of female students in higher education institutes. One of the actions taken is the affirmative action that enables female students to join higher institutions with a GPA of 0.2 less than that of male students. Some studies indicate a positive impact of affirmative action on enrolment of female students at under graduate level (Abebayehu, 1988). Yet the representation of female students at tertiary level is still minimal (Fentaw, 2001).

Moreover, report of MOE of Ethiopia (2000) indicated that, the level of participation of female students at tertiary level of education is not consistently growing. For instance the proportion of female students at diploma level ranges from 23% in 1995 to 28% in 1999 and again becomes smaller in 2000 than in 1999 (Table 1 and Fig. 1). And at degree level, the proportion of female students in 1998 was very low as compared to the proportions in the other academic years. While the participation of female students was higher in 1995, it drastically fell in 1996 with the difference of 1.26% and again rose to a certain extent from 1998 to 2000.

Table 1: Proportion of Female Students at the Three Levels of Higher Education (%)

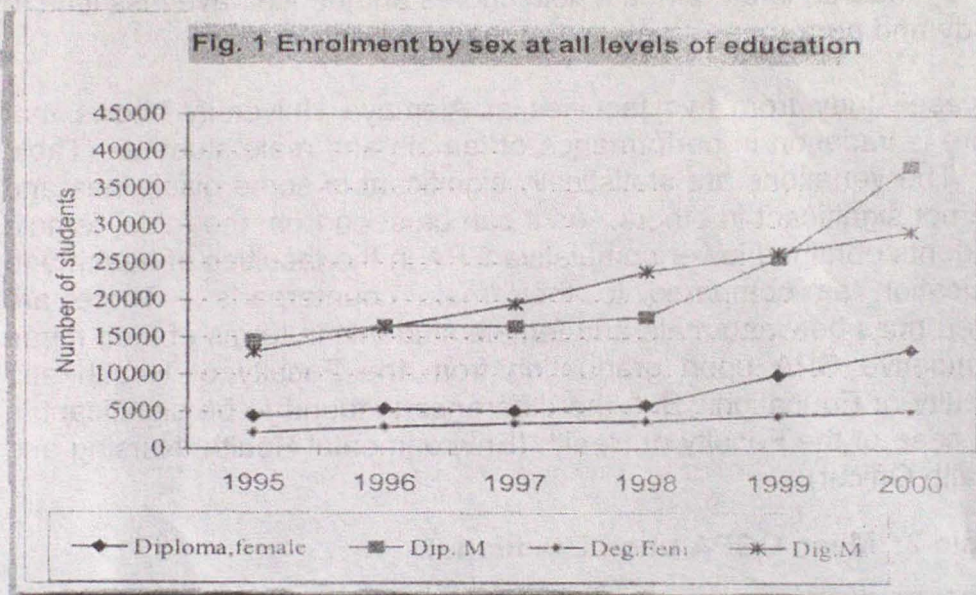
Year	Diploma	Degree	Post Graduate
1995	23.23	14.46	8.12
1996	24.62	15.73	6.96
1997	23.65	15.28	6.92
1998	24.92	13.68	7.18
1999	28.01	14.71	7.12
2000	25.98	15.08	7.54

Source: Computed Based on MOE Unpublished Data (2000)

Similarly, Emebet (2002) indicated that in the academic year of 1999/2000 among the students who could manage to enter colleges at diploma and degree levels, only 24.4% and 13.2% were females respectively. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of female graduate

students is persistently low. Thus, it is legitimate to say that the overall enrolment of the female students in higher education has not increased significantly since most of them discontinue their education.

The slope of enrolment curves shown in Fig. 1 shows that the enrolment rate of male students is increasing at a higher rate than that of female students despite the affirmative action taken by the Ministry of Education. It is more so for the degree level education.



Performance Variation

The academic performance of students at higher education is highly dependent on the academic performance of students at high school level by assuming that those students with poor academic background will most likely perform poorly at higher education level as well; and the reverse is also true. Moreover, Sintayehu (1998) indicated that the academic achievement of students is not only a function of the students' ability but also the environmental factors that students are living in. These factors could be biological (sex), social

and economic. For instance, the report of Jimma University (2002), indicated that from the sample of 147 female students, about 69% of those who obtained a semester GPA of less than 2.00 were students with poor academic background. On the other hand, about 78% of the students who obtained the semester GPA of 2.00 and above were those with good academic background. The poor academic background is, however, the result of family, social and economic barriers with which the students are confronted. Female pupils are more hindered in other household chores and hence have less time to study and perform as much as the male students do.

A case study from two faculties at Alemaya University shows that there is variation in performance of female and male students (Table 2). The variations are statistically significant in some disciplines and are not significant in others. As it can be seen from the table, female students obtained lower cumulative GPA in the faculties of health and education as compared to their male counterparts. There are differences between male and female students in terms of their mean cumulative GPA upon graduation from the Faculty of Health and Faculty of Education. But, the difference is found to be significant in the case of the Faculty of Health (Environmental Health, Nursing and Health Officer).

Table 2: Mean CGPA upon Graduation

Department	Diploma		Degree	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Environmental health	3.22	2.41**		
Nursing	3.12	2.62*		
Medical Laboratory	2.95	2.62		
Health Officer			3.12	2.62**
Geography			2.67	2.5
Biology			2.53	2.34
Mathematics			2.6	
Physics			2.6	
Chemistry			2.6	

*and **means the performances are significantly different between female and male at 5% and 1% level respectively.

It should be noted that female students even do not choose to join a given department or do not stay there. This clearly shows that affirmative actions should consider not only college entrance privileges but also preferential enrolments to different disciplines.

Reasons for Failure

In this regard, Ababayehu (1988) showed that among female students admitted to higher education between 1979-1985, half of them could not succeed in finishing their education. The reasons for discontinuation of education of female students could be more of academic dismissal due to personal inability to cope with academic situation at higher education and other non-academic reasons such as economic, social and cultural constraints.

Even those female students who were considered to be successful in completing their education were found to be less achievers in their academic performance as compared to male students. The reasons could be:

- *Family support* – a family plays a great role for the successful achievement of students at all levels of education. However, the role of family is very crucial in the case of female students at tertiary level of education in terms of moral and material supports. It is well known that female students need money to buy some clothes and other make ups in addition to purchases of stationery materials. If these things are not fulfilled, female students may feel inferior to their colleagues and may divert their attention from the education and try to get some way to fulfill their requirements. As a result these students become poor in their academic performance.
- *Cultural barriers* – The cultural barrier imposed on female students influences the performance of female students at higher education level in different ways. For instance the social training and expectation of female students at home has some impact on the

level of confidence they develop and their choices of what they want to be. This condition leads to lack of assertiveness that encourages females to be silent, shy, passive, humble and emotive - culturally considered as good qualities of a woman. As a result of lack of assertiveness after joining tertiary level of education they may face difficulties in adjusting themselves to a new academic environment that again leads to psychological instability and thereby poor academic performance.

- *Harassment* – It is one of the severe problems that female students face in the campus life. This condition also can be observed not only at higher level of education but also in the secondary schools. For instance, the result of the research undertaken in five high schools in Addis Ababa, indicates that about a quarter of the respondents faced unbearable harassment while walking to and from schools by male students and some times by their teachers (Emebet, 2002). The same is also true in the case of tertiary level female students. This situation is also reported as the main problem in the case of female students in Jimma University and it is also recognized by male students (Jimma University, 2001).

Conclusion

The result of the analysis indicates that the enrolment and academic performance of female students in higher institutions is low as compared to the male students. The reasons for these problems could be family, social and cultural as well as natural factors. Thus, to solve these problems, in addition to the affirmative actions taken by Ethiopian government, the participation of all groups of people is very important especially in the attempts to change the attitudes of people towards female students.

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