



## New Gender Inequalities in Tertiary Institutions of Learning in Selected Universities in Southern Africa

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**ABSTRACT:** During the 1990s and the preceding years, various campaigns were launched across several Southern African countries to encourage girls to enroll in school and remain in the education system through to the tertiary level. These efforts followed studies that revealed significant gender inequalities in education, particularly in countries where girls failed to complete school due to factors such as gender discrimination within households—where boys' education was prioritized—lack of financial resources, early pregnancies, and high dropout rates for various other reasons. In response, several governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implemented programs aimed at increasing girls' participation and retention in school through to the tertiary level. These initiatives have, in some countries, yielded positive outcomes, evidenced by increased enrollment of female learners at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

This article focuses on the status of female students in tertiary institutions within selected Southern African universities. It argues that there has been a notable increase in the number of female students in higher education, with some institutions achieving and even surpassing gender parity. In certain universities, this has resulted in a reversal of traditional gender imbalances, where male students now constitute the minority. However, despite these advances, many universities continue to experience gender disparities in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines, where female students remain underrepresented. Similarly, female lecturers continue to form a minority within academic staff. Although the general trend across Southern Africa shows an increase in female student enrollment, this has not translated into a proportional increase in the number of female academics. Moreover, there appear to be no deliberate programs aimed at addressing the underrepresentation of male students in institutions where they are now the minority—both in terms of enrollment and graduation rates. Likewise, there is a lack of targeted initiatives to increase the number and visibility of women in academic and management positions within universities, despite their possessing qualifications comparable to those of their male counterparts.

The article contends that the rise in female student enrollment in Southern African universities has introduced new forms of gender inequality, particularly with male students now forming a minority in some institutions, while female underrepresentation in STEM disciplines persists. It is anticipated that the continued increase in female enrollment may, over time, help address disparities in STEM fields. However, if left unaddressed, the declining representation of male students could reach problematic levels, potentially leading to a shortage of male professionals in key sectors. Finally, the gender disparities among students are more pronounced in public universities in Zambia than in private institutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Career aspirations in STEM, Gender, Gender inequalities, Gender stereotype.

### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality within tertiary institutions in Southern Africa is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors. One significant aspect is the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions among academic staff. This phenomenon is well-documented by research conducted in the region [1]. Women often face challenges in ascending the academic hierarchy, which can be attributed to deeply ingrained gender biases and stereotypes [2]. Such biases can result in women being passed over for promotions or leadership roles in favour of their male counterparts. Other researchers indicate that “the majority of literature and research on education and gender focuses on primary and secondary school education. The smaller amount of existing data about universities and colleges shows the huge gender gap. Currently, 7.19% of women are enrolled in universities and colleges in Sub Saharan Africa compared to 10.41% of men enrolled. This is low compared to global average for women which is 41.66% [3]. While this study focused on Sub Saharan Africa, the data for this paper focuses on selected countries in Southern Africa and compares the enrollments of male and female students in colleges and universities.



It's important to recognize that these disparities are complex and multifaceted. Within the academic realm, gender inequalities can manifest in numerous ways, affecting access to education, career opportunities, and the overall academic experience. By examining these practical examples, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers that persist in tertiary institutions across the globe, with the aim of promoting greater gender equity and inclusivity within the educational landscape.

Additionally, gender inequality can manifest among students through disparities in access to educational opportunities and disciplines. Female students may be discouraged or steered away from pursuing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields due to societal perceptions and stereotypes [4]. This contributes to a gender gap in enrolment in certain academic programs particularly in STEM courses as indicated above. However, it should be noted that the female students though in their minority are making headways into STEM courses and this has been manifested in the presence of women 's engineering associations in several countries in Southern Africa composed of female graduates who of course studied STEM courses at tertiary level. Management of universities still remain a reserve of male academics and the women academics remain more underrepresented or in the peripherals of management. Initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) of the United Nations, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, serve as a global commitment to combat these issues [5].

Positions such as university Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Deans of Schools and Directors of Institutes remain predominantly in the hands of men are the domain of male academics. Professorial positions and Senior lecturers in the majority, these ranks are dominated by male academics in southern Africa despite the increase in the number of female students in almost all universities.

## METHODOLOGY

This was purely desk review of journal articles and research reports conducted in different universities under study. Documents containing relevant or important information were used as sources of data. Records from universities in forms of statistical reports were collected and analyzed for the purposes of comparing what changes in numbers had taken place in different universities between the male and female students. Non primary data was collected but only secondary materials used in writing the article.

## GENDER INEQUALITIES IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

Over many decades of heavy campaigns for the gender parity and gender equality in schools, colleges and universities carried out by local organizations and at times through government policies and programmes, the number of female students has been increasing and at times in some universities figures going beyond the gender parity levels. These efforts have been reinforced by international commitments to gender equality such as the United Nations MDGS and SDGS which have been fully implemented by governments whose objective was to increase the number of female learners in institutions of learning. The concept of gender equality has been supported by UNESCO's Global Education 2030 Agenda, which calls for inclusive and equitable education for all, without any form of discrimination [6].

Data from universities in Southern Africa specifically from countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa and Namibia does indicate that there are new gender inequalities in some institutions of learning where male students have been outnumbered by female students in terms of the population or total populations of learners. The tables below show the situation of male and female students at some universities in Southern Africa showing years of enrolments and the numbers of students broke down into male and female categories. These are gross populations without disaggregation into programmes which the students are pursuing.

### (I) UNIVERSITIES IN ZAMBIA

Zambia has both private and Public Universities offering different courses from undergraduate to post graduate courses. There are more Private than Public Universities in Zambia and that the total [population of students in private University is higher than that of Public Universities. Table 1 below shows that the female student population in Private Universities is higher than that of male students by 1% while in Public Universities, the male students outnumber female students by about 4% in Zambia. Table2 shows the situation in Universities in Botswana where there are wide gender gaps in all programmes and in all universities whether Public or private universities and other tertiary institutions. The table below shows that the female students are the majority in all programmes. The table shows that in both Private and public Universities, more than 60% of the student population are female



students and in technical colleges, 50.4% of the students are female students and this is almost the gender parity ration where the male students are almost 50% in terms of representation.

**Table 1: Students Both Undergraduate and Post Graduate In Both Public and Private Universities in Zambia in 2020.**

TYPE OF UNIVERSITY	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	% MALE	% FEMALE	% TOTAL
PUBLIC	30, 703	25, 760	56, 463	24.2	20.3	44.5
PRIVATE	34, 598	35, 678	70, 276	27.3	28.2	55.5
TOTAL	65, 301	61, 438	126, 739	51.5	48.5	100.0

*Source: HEA status of higher education in Zambia in 2020.*

Table 1 shows the situation of enrollments at both public and private universities in Zambia. The female students in public universities were (45.6%) while the male population of students was higher than that of females at (54.4%). The situation in Private Universities shows that female students were the majority (51%) while male students were (49%) of the total student population. The Zambian situation as at 2020 enrollment showed that the public universities had a gender gap of 8% while the Private universities had more female students (51%) than male students (49%) according to table 1 above. However, the total population of female students (48.5%) in both public and Private Universities was lower than that of male students (51.5%). This means that as at the year 2020, there were more male students in both public and private Universities in Zambia, despite the fact that private universities as a category had more female students than male students. One of the causes of female underrepresentation in Public Universities in Zambia could be open discrimination right at enrollment level [7]. One observation from research is that of gender-based discrimination in admissions. Some studies which explored the admissions process in Southern African universities found that discriminatory admission practices disproportionately affect female applicants. Admission committees often favor male candidates, despite the fact that female applicants may have similar or even superior qualifications [8]. This could be one of the many factors which has negatively affected the number of female students in public universities at the level of enrollments.

Further, some scholars argue that sexual harassment is prevalent in universities and does create a very unsafe learning environment in tertiary institutions and becomes one of the drivers of gender inequality. These scholars have pointed out that female students often face sexual harassment and assault, which can create an unsafe learning environment and hinder their academic progress. Addressing gender inequality in Southern African tertiary institutions requires comprehensive policy changes and cultural shifts to challenge biases and stereotypes. Initiatives promoting diversity, inclusion, and gender-sensitive education are essential. Despite the existence of policies that are corrective measures taken by some universities in combating sexual harassment, the scourge still continues and the most affected are the female students who are either harassed by members of staff or fellow students. At times lack of knowledge on the existence of these policies and reporting mechanisms by female students compounds the situation of sexual harassment and creates unsafe learning environments in institutions which in itself affects progression particularly in programmes which are male dominated.

**(II) UNIVERSITIES IN BOTSWANA**

Table 2 below shows the situation of students in different tertiary institutions in Botswana during the 2019/2020 intake. Tertiary education in Botswana is dominated by female students in both government and Private institutions of learning. It is also peculiar to note that almost all academic programmes are dominated by female students. These inequalities suggest that there are more male students in secondary schools as well as primary schools because this is the reservoir where tertiary institutions draw their students' populations from. Below is table 2 which shows gender inequalities in all institutions of leaning at tertiary level in Botswana.



**Table 2: The Universities in Botswana 2019/2020 Enrolment at Tertiary Level**

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL	% FEMALE
Private Institutions	6, 205	3, 957	10, 162	61.1
Private Universities	5,284	4,159	9, 443	56.0
Colleges of education	961	448	1, 409	68.2
Institute pf Health Sciences	805	424	1, 229	65.5
Technical Colleges	1,002	986	1, 988	50.4
Public Institutions	6,087	3,518	9, 605	63.4
Public Universities	14,1`61	8, 669	22, 830	62.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>34,505</b>	<b>23,161</b>	<b>56,666</b>	<b>60.9</b>

*Source: Tertiary Education Statistics 2020*

Table 2 above shows that there were more female students in all tertiary institutions represented above in Botswana. The female students are overrepresented in both Private and Public Universities and that in all colleges despite specialization of the college or institute. The gender inequalities in Botswana tertiary institutions show that the male students are underrepresented in all colleges and universities. This is different from the Zambia Situation where the female students are a slight majority (51%) in Private Universities but are underrepresented in Public or Government Universities. Thus, in Botswana, the male students are underrepresented in colleges and Universities which could be reflecting the fact that these inequalities do stem from the primary to secondary schools and continue to tertiary levels. From the total student enrolment of 56,666 in 2020, the gender parity index was at 1.6 (The Gender Parity Index (GPI) measures progress towards gender parity in education participation and learning opportunities available for women in relation to those available to men). The number indicates ahiger number of females (0.6) than for males enrolled in the tertiary institutions. Trends in Gender Parity Index for the period 2013 to 2020 shows that the index has been in favour of females. The highest index (1.6) was recorded in 2020, i.e. a total of hundred and sixty (160) females were enrolled against every one hundred (100) males. It also shows a slight increment of 0.1 compared to the previous year. The increase was mainly attributed to (among others) the increase of female students enrolled to study in technical colleges which went from 657(42.5 percent) in 2019 to 1,002 (50.4 percent) in 2020 [9]. There is a consistent increase in the number of female students in the Universities and other tertiary institutions in Botswana and this is regardless of the programme that is being pursued. The challenge in for gender equality in Botswana is to increase and the number of male students in universities who are the underrepresented gender. Female students are the majority in all programmes including STEM programmes as indicated in table 2 above. This could be attributed to gender related discrimination against male pupils and students in the education sector as well as domestic sphere when it comes to issues surrounding formal education. It is highly likely that some economic activities have negatively affected the participation of male children in education. This is could be one of the main reasons why there are fewer male students than female students in tertiary institutions of learning in Botswana. This further translates into the fact that there would be more female professionals running the industries and other institutions that require university education in terms of training for effective operations.

**(III) UNIVERSITIES IN ZIMBABWE**

The Zimbabwean situation in terms of gender inequalities among students in tertiary institutions is not different from that of Botswana because there are more female students than male students in Zimbabwean Universities. Table 3 below shows that from 2018 to 2020 university enrollments; there were more female students in different universities both Public and private universities in Zimbabwe. Observations by some scholars concerning the Zimbabwean situation in terms of gender inequalities among students indicate that “In most of the universities, enrolments are in favor of females. It is important to note that there are more males than females in universities that have special mandates of offering training in science and technology. In 2020, females constituted 355



of the enrolment at the Manicaland State University of Technology; 39 % at the Harare Institute of Technology; 44% at the Marondera University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology and 44% at the National University of Science and Technology. Women students also dominate at teacher training colleges. In 2019, these colleges recruited 5, 546 men compared to 18, 491 females/women, while in 2020, 18, 639 women and 5, 442 men were enrolled [10]. The observation is that while there are more female students in total populations in universities, there is a bias in science courses where the male students are the majority. Table 3 below shows the above observations in different enrollment years in universities:

**Table 3: Enrollments in Zimbabwean Universities from 2018 to 2020**

Year	Male	Female	Total
2018	43, 432	50,699	94,101
2019	51, 535	60,149	111, 684
2020	53, 699	62, 629	116,328
Total	148,666	173,477	322,143

*Zimbabwean national Statistics Agency 2021.*

Further observations by some researchers are that “The trend was the opposite at technical and vocational colleges where male students dominated the enrollment figures. In 2018, 15, 026 men enrolled compared to 9, 337 women. In 2019, 19, 499 men were recruited compared to 15, 437 women. The same trend persisted in 2020 (18, 647 men and 14, 062 women). In some programmes however, more women enrolled than men” [10]. The observation is a continual rise in the number of female students in universities in Zimbabwe right from the enrollment stage. This persistence of gender inequality at enrollment level disadvantages the male students in all universities and is a future problem laying in waiting. Gender parity However, there has been persistent gender inequalities in STEM programmes in different universities in the Country. The World Economic Forum reported that “despite government initiatives to reduce gender disparities in higher education in Zimbabwe, persistent gaps remain particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) related fields. Only 19% of female students are enrolled in STEM compared with 39% male student” [11]. These gender gaps suggest that there were fewer female pupils in secondary schools who were studying and passing STEM subjects very well compared to the male pupils. In other words, as long as the secondary schools are male dominated in STEM subjects, the gender inequalities in STEM programme in tertiary institutions will remain unchanged and unchallenged.

### Number of Students in South African Universities in 2022

SEX	TOTAL
Females	6,637, 036
Males	6, 732, 935
TOTAL	13,419,971

*Source: Natalie Cowling 2023*

**UNISA:** The number of female students has shown a year-on-year growth and currently females account for 63% of the student population [12].

### (IV) NAMIBIAN UNIVERSITIES

Altogether the University of Namibia will this year graduate 4 401 students, of whom 2 985 are female, while male graduates are 1 416. The northern campuses’ graduation was held at Ongwediva’s Trade Fair Centre yesterday. Unam Vice-Chancellor Professor Kenneth Matengu, during his address, questioned where the boy child is and asked society to retrospectively interrogate why many boys do not make it to university.

The observations from the table below show that there were more female students in universities in Namibia and few male students. The source of students which are the secondary schools and other lower none degree offering colleges and institutes seem to have more female students than male students. This is further reflected in the statement by the Vice Chancellor who encouraged society to introspect and find out what was going on with the male child who does not reach university education.



## Graduating Students in Namibia from Universities In 2022

UNIVERSITY	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
University of Namibia	2,985	1,416	4,401
Northern Campuses(Oshakati, Ogongo, Jose Eduardo dos Santos, HifikepunyePohamba Campuses0	504	230	734
Total	3, 489	1, 646	5,135

Source: ONGWEDIVA 2022

The comments from the vice chancellor during the graduation ceremony at the University of Namibia echoed sentiments of disapproval of gender inequalities which were taking the centre stage in almost all universities in the country and he pointed out that “Altogether the University of Namibia will this year graduate 4 401 students, of whom 2, 985 are female, while male graduates are 1 416. UNAM (University of Namibia) Vice-Chancellor Professor Kenneth Matengu, during his address, questioned where the boy child is and asked society to retrospectively interrogate why many boys do not make it to university [13]. This was a concern raised at the graduation ceremony which questioned the whereabouts of the male students in universities in Namibia and wondered what could be the causes of the absence or less numbers of male students in universities in the country. This observation applies to some countries in Southern Africa where numbers of female students in universities and colleges are rising higher than the numbers of male students.

## CONCLUSION

There have been a growing number of female students in universities in the above selected countries in southern Africa. The total number of female students in almost all universities has surpassed that of male students apart from Zambia where the male student population is higher than that of the female population. It can equally be stated that in the above selected countries as a whole, the population of female students is higher than that of male students. And even in Zambia, the total number of female students in Private universities is higher than the total number of male students and also predicted that there is a high likelihood that the number of female students would surpass that of male students in the public Universities in Zambia in the coming few years.

However, there is a clear and wide gender inequality in the programmes such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. However, observations in all Universities are that even in these programmes (STEM), there are a number of female students and that this number has been increasing over years and there is a likelihood that in some countries. For instance, in Zimbabwean Colleges and Universities of Science and technology, there are fairly high percentages of female students represented in the science and technology courses.

The factors attributed to increase in female students in universities are many and the major one is the continued campaigns for female education particularly in countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. For decades, the education of girls from primary to tertiary levels were the main concerns of many local NGOs and international organizations which increased awareness levels and put in measures for the retention of girls in schools without corresponding interventions on the education of boys. This lack of gender balanced approach which was sustained for decades could be responsible for gender inequalities which currently show the increase in the number of female students in colleges and universities. There have been no effective and wide spread interventions on the education of boys while EFA goals, MDGS, and SDGS all have interventions which have emphasize the importance of girls’ education at different levels of education.

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