

The World Bank's Higher Education Report and its Implications for Women

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Higher Education: Lessons of Experience. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1994, 173 pp.

Among the spaces education offers for social reproduction and change, unquestionably that afforded by higher education is the most coveted. Today's official discourse has become much more sensitive to issues of equality—in terms of social class, gender, and ethnicity. In this twofold context, the recent book by the World Bank on higher education acquires crucial importance as an opinion-setting document. The document focuses on the issues of quality, responsiveness, and equity; I would like to examine its treatment of equity from a gender perspective.

The book states that women are underrepresented in higher education, as they constitute 25 percent of the enrollment in Africa, 35 percent in Asia, 36 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, and 47 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. It also notes that although women are enrolled in postsecondary education, they attend universities in smaller proportions than other postsecondary institutions. It further observes that women are concentrated in traditional fields of study such as nursing, teaching, and clerical professions. On the basis of this diagnosis, the World Bank argues that problems affecting women at higher levels of education are primarily those of access and narrow selections of fields.

The World Bank identifies four generic solutions to the university crisis: (1) creating differentiated postsecondary institutions (to include universities, short-term careers, distance education, technical institutions, and polytechnics); (2) cost-sharing, with government financing pegged to performance; (3) redefining the role of government in higher education, to include adoption of policies that recognize different types of higher education institutions and inform students about these schools; and (4) decentralizing universities to give them more autonomy, one of the mechanisms for which is to be block grants.

Assuming for a moment that access is the most important concern, what does the World Bank propose? It correctly notes that many problems affecting women at the university level originate at earlier stages of schooling and

thus should be addressed at those levels. It advises that during secondary schooling, girls should be exposed to and provided with career information, flexible models of attendance (part-time, short courses), and separate facilities appropriate to cultural practices. Two problematic issues appear at this point. One is that the World Bank policy document dealing with pretertiary practices (*Priorities and Strategies for Education*, 1995) actually says very little about how to intervene in school environments. The other is that recommendations proposed for those levels are instances of accommodation into the existing hierarchical system, in which women occupy the disadvantaged positions. By asking for part-time programs there is an accommodation to the demanding traditional roles of women that are so time consuming; by invoking short courses, there is accommodation to low-prestige occupations that will perpetuate women's subordinate statuses.

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Several recommendations are made, all of which proceed through the logic of the successful example. Since the examples in the book are few, we present all of them below:

1. "In India open universities and distance education have benefited women" (p. 77). The reader may ask, in which other countries has distance education been tried? In what ways have these programs "benefited" women?

2. "Women's participation in higher education has increased significantly through scholarships in Papua New Guinea" (p. 78). What was the value of these scholarships? How many women were so reached? What was the actual percentage of enrollment growth?

3. "Boarding facilities have increased [women's] access in India and Yemen" (p. 78). Again, how many women were reached and what was the actual enrollment growth?

4. “Philippines tried relaxing rigorous admission requirements for poor and rural students, gave them financial support and remedial instruction if needed. There was student failure regardless of assistance” (p. 78). The subtext in this example advises against trying affirmative action for it does not work. A further subtext indicates that even remedial education is not sufficient because some (read: stupid) people will fail.

5. “In India, constitutionally mandated efforts to increase representation of scheduled caste and tribal students through scholarships and reserved seats schemes have had a strong impact on higher educational enrollments. Nonetheless, after four decades of positive discrimination in education and employment, scheduled caste and tribal groups remain seriously disadvantaged” (p. 78). The argument here is that even if equity in higher education works, equity in society will fail. The subtle message seems to be not to waste resources on minorities and women.

Proceeding with the gender-oriented recommendations, the World Bank argues that, “Minor adjustment in admission requirements is unlikely to affect the quality of entrants, but while the representation of particular groups may increase, their distribution across fields of study cannot be changed as easily,” as shown in Uganda (p. 78). This is a confusing statement. What is the point here: women’s access or representation in fields of study?

The World Bank document states that “The most direct way to increase representation in higher education of disadvantaged groups is to use meritocratic criteria, which includes relaxing requirements, awarding bonus points on entry examinations, imposing admission quotas, and using a combination of these devices” (p. 78). Not only is the specificity of women gone but the reference to meritocratic criteria is puzzling. Merit usually means intellectual ability, not special support. So it seems that the World Bank is proposing some form of affirmative action. But no. The following sentence reads: “These criteria are fraught with difficulties. Especially when the quality of higher education is highly variable, they can involve high efficiency costs.”

The document does not analyze the possible incongruence and conflict between its generic recommendations and those that should be in place to foster women’s participation in higher education. Some of the possible conflicts are the following: (1) Since one of the solutions recommends removing government subsidies, how do the subsidies implicit in the scholarships for girls fit with the elimination of subsidies? (2) Since the World Bank has also offered strong recommendations for reliance on cost-sharing and user fees, how do these recommendations

match the notion that boarding schools may be a good measure? If boarding schools must be paid, would parents do so for girls? (3) One of the key recommendations calls for differentiated institutions of higher education, with greater emphasis on open- and distance education. How will women—who are already devalued in society—benefit from having a devalued education through distance education and open university? (4) Another recommendation argues for autonomy for universities via the provision of block grants. Under conditions of marginality for women, what assurance is there that local educational administrators will develop and implement gender equity policies? (5) How is the privatization strategy—where tuition price controls are to be eliminated because they act as “disincentives”—going to promote an egalitarian system of higher education? If higher education is to expand its private, for-profit side, what mechanisms will be in place to protect education as a public good and the existence of interventions to ensure women’s access to quality and prestigious education? How will user fees improve women’s participation in higher education? How would income-contingent loans protect women’s equity when women’s education continues to be seen by others as consumption rather than investment? How would getting loans encourage families to enroll daughters in higher education?

The World Bank document says very little about the role of universities in the process of social transformation in developing countries. It is silent on the issue of knowledge production, yet universities should affect lower levels of education through teacher training and curriculum development. How can the university help to modify gender ideologies, including the dismantling of the firm belief of men’s superiority and almost exclusive right to control? Under the context of global economy, what roles are left for the universities in the Third World to play? What roles can the universities create for themselves and what kinds of roles can they enable women to create?

The document ostensibly reviews World Bank experience in higher education, yet it alludes not to a single formal evaluation of projects funded during 30 years and after an investment of \$5.7 billion. Gender is not addressed as a set of asymmetrical power relations but only as women; moreover, it does not consider women as a separate group for equity policies but presents women as embedded in poverty and ethnicity. The failure to address gender issues in a profound way unfortunately happens too often in statements by both international agencies and governments. The commonality and persistence of these shallow and inconsistent analyses reflects the vulnerable condition of women and contributes to sustaining it.