

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION NOWADAYS AND SOME RELATED FACTORS

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ABSTRAK : *Perempuan dan laki-laki idealnya memiliki hak yang setara dalam segala aspek kehidupan, termasuk dalam akses terhadap pendidikan, khususnya pendidikan tinggi, yang selama ini masih didominasi kaum adam. Hal ini menyebabkan ketertinggalan perempuan sehingga mereka cenderung dimarginalkan, dilecehkan, serta terperangkap dalam jenis-jenis pekerjaan dengan upah rendah. Faktor yang sering menjadi penghalang akses perempuan terhadap pendidikan tinggi adalah budaya yang patriarkis, kebijakan yang kurang adil gender, serta kemiskinan. Perempuan yang telah memiliki akses pendidikan tinggi pun masih cenderung terkonsentrasi pada bidang-bidang tertentu seperti pendidikan, kebidanan, dan ilmu-ilmu social. Masih ada kesan yang kuat bahwa bidang-bidang tertentu seperti ilmu-ilmu pasti dan information technology adalah milik laki-laki saja. Sehingga jenis pekerjaan dengan upah yang lebih tinggi masih menjadi dominasi laki-laki.*

Kata Kunci : *Perempuan dan Pendidikan*

Women should have the same right as men in every facet of life, such as; access to public facilities, to be involved in planning, enjoying the result of, and controlling the national development, and to education. The absence of those things would result in a wide range of women's injuries, both mentally and physically, such as being marginalized, abused, discriminated, and trapped in dead end and demeaning jobs with a low wage. In terms of women's rights, Billson

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and Lobban (2005, 410) describe that one of the global standard of female welfare constitutes equality in educational access.

Access to higher education as one of women's rights has been an important gender issue today. According to Schewentker (2006), it is not questionable to say that gender issues need to be integrated into the whole areas of development. Otherwise, the development will fail to accommodate and facilitate all members of society. I am inclined to say that integrating gender issues in the development needs actors who really have adequate gender consciousness. Therefore, the policy makers should be made sensitive to any gender-related problems.

Higher education also seems to be considered the main pathway to get out of poverty, to enhance women's social class, and an important tool to provide women and men with equal opportunities in society.

The United Nations has launched some programs related to the effort of increasing women's participation and/or access to education, one of which is the Education for All (EFA). The emergence of EFA in 1990, unfortunately, seems not to make any significant difference between the past and the current condition of women's access to higher education, although one of its goals is the equality to education for men and women. It still works in the level of primary education, but not in the tertiary one.

This essay firstly displays some data about women's participation (as students) in higher education as an embodiment of women's access to it and trying to take a closer look at some influential factors, especially those which constitute barriers, related to the women access to higher education, namely, the gender-related policies, culture, and poverty which retard women from obtaining their right in education.

The Fact of Female Students Enrolled in Higher Education

Many countries face the problem of women's access to higher education. Even a number of developed ones have the same matter.

Cook (2006) mentions that in USA, female workforce constitutes 60% of the low-wage workers related to the lack of a college education. Thus, tertiary education, which is commonly less accessible for women, seems to be very pivotal factor to have better job, or even career. Indeed, it is clearly implied that women in the USA also have less participation rate in higher education compared to men. These data are supported by Morris (2006) who identifies that many females in the USA cannot completely afford higher education due to economic reasons.

Stromquist (2001) states that Latin American women have less access to schooling than men do. Similarly, Bangladesh has lower percentage of women in higher education access, namely about 20% and 80% respectively in 1991 and dropped to about 4% in 1997 (Sutana and Karim 2005, 83). It is caused not merely by poverty but also the villagers' perception of educated women who tend to oppose the local tradition, and that female should be homemakers. Consequently, they must be well-skilled in domestic chores rather than academic disciplines.

In Indonesia, one of the developing countries, women and men have equal participation rate in primary education, but in higher education, women's inclusion is less than men's. Regardless the validity of the data due to the numerous criticisms on it, the Center of Statistic Bureau or *Badan Pusat Statistik* (BPS) in its report on achievement progress in Indonesian Millenium Development Goals (MDG), mentions that women's participation rate ratio to men is 92.8% (BPS 2002, 45). It means that higher education have more male students than female ones.

The fact tells us that even women's access to higher education in developed countries is not always equal to men's. Moreover, there is a trend that women tend to concentrate on certain fields such as social disciplines, nursing and medicine. Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro

(2005) from Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in its trend report on International Higher Education Monitor in nine western countries, namely Australia, Austria, Finland, Flanders, France, The Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and UK, give information about the proportion of female students at the diverse kinds of higher education institutions and the changing phenomena which have existed from 1995 to 2002. Below is the more complete information about it.

Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro (2005) contend that Flanders and Germany have shown the rate of much under the other western countries mentioned above, namely 41% and 38% respectively. They also mention that in Flanders, the rate of female taking part in agriculture added up by 25% and in economics and technical science the rate has fallen 9% and 11% respectively from 1995 to 2000, and in Germany, especially in *Fachhochschulen* women have the biggest share in the humanities and social sciences disciplines.

In 2002, Australia had 50% female taking part in Australian universities in general with the phenomena that the highest women participation rate was in the area of pedagogy and medicine, and the participation of women in the technical science discipline was rising from 18% in 1995 to 21% in 2000. (Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro (2005). Similar indication comes from The Netherlands with nearly 50% women participating in higher education in a time period of 1995-2003 and certain disciplines such as the humanities, medicine, natural science and technical science made up the highest female inclusion (Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro (2005).

Likewise, Austria and Finland have over 50% women participating in higher education, but they make a little bit difference, Austria female's participation rate in higher education was increasing between 10% to 12% in general, whereas, there is not any significant

changes in that of Finland over the 1995-2003 time-period (Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro (2005).

French, Sweden and UK have had more or less similar rate of women enrolling in higher education during the 1995-2003 period of time, namely about 55% (Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro 2005). In French the lowest percentage of women has been in engineering by 25% and the highest has been in health and social college by 84%, Sweden shows the women participation rate increasing by 5% in both the general and professional program with the highest participation in medicine (85% in 2002) and in UK, the trends in the various disciplines indicate considerable growth of female participation in agriculture, law and technical science (Kaiser, Hillegers and Legro 2005).

Canada has approximately an equal number of women and men having masters degrees. However, like in any other places, females tend to concentrate on such traditionally-perceived female specialties as nursing, education, and social sciences (Hooks, Leclerc, and Beaujot 2005, 112). Similarly, Croatia has 52% graduates that were women in 1997, but at MA degrees the percentage becomes as low as 46% in 1996, and in PhD degrees it is even smaller by 36% at the same time (Barilar, Jelavic, and Prlenda 2005 172).

Interestingly, there is a trend that female outnumbered male in higher education in Iceland although the gender-related choice of field of study seems to exist in which women focus on education sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, and health (Einarsdottir 2005, 196).

Although in some developed countries women have equal access to higher education, gender disparities in choosing disciplines of study exist regardless of certain category of countries or culture. Thus, it seems to be universal and patterned that mostly women tend to enroll in non-natural sciences which are assumed as male field.

Gender-Related Educational Policies

Education plays a prominent role in achieving sustainable human development. Governments should establish coherent education policies which enable its people, regardless of their sex, to access education, especially the higher one which is believed as an important tool for social status mobility. UNESCO can supply needed technical and programme design assistance.

To be able to produce fair policies in terms of gender equality, government should make sure that the ministries and those who have influential positions are sensitive to gender issues. In terms of women's access to higher education, it is necessary for government to, for example, provide grants for poor women and train lecturers and or teachers to have gender consciousness to combat gender stereotypes in the classrooms. The emergence of numerous gender equality movements would not give significant change to women's access to development, especially education, without support from governmental policies that legitimate the affirmative action for immediate changes.

However, it seems that government often does not consider gender equality in making policies, although there has been a global agenda or international appeals on gender equality such as those coming from the Convention of the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Interagency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (IACWGE), and an autonomous organization closely related to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) called the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

American federal policies regarding welfare reform and student financial aid have more and more restricted economically poor women to have access to higher education by welfare's work first agenda (Marx 2006). The fact that college enrollment among welfare

recipients decreased twenty percent indicates that the policies have really restricted women's access to higher education. Adair (2006) asserts that the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) *work requirements dramatically restricted low-income women's access* to post secondary education programs while having grant from the state. It demands the recipients work full-time which, consequently, does not enable them to have access to higher education. This kind of policy must come from policy makers who are not aware of the need to really open pathway out of poverty.

Fortunately, despite the governmental policies that are not advantageous for poor women, some non-governmental organizations focusing on social justice and/or gender equality usually actively encounter them. Morris (2006) in her article *Low Income Women and the Higher Education Act Reauthorization* writes that the National Initiative for Women in Higher Education (NIWHE) provides more access for poor women to higher education. She also mentions that the Higher Education Act Reauthorization should take into account the needs of ever-changing student body, whose majority are female, and the needs of nontraditional women students (those who may be older than the average students, parenting or financially independent) as well. In order to achieve the goals, it has to establish several policy options such as providing loans and grants even if they only enroll in classes one at a time (due to the limited class schedules, number of classes, and class choices for the non-traditional students), allowing students to lock in low, fixed interest rates on their loans, providing adequate amount of aid to complete school, designing campuses to be more child-friendly, and offering night and weekend classes to enable the nontraditional students to enroll in more classes, or even offering online classes for students who cannot attend classes physically.

Indeed, such advantageous policy options seem to be affordable just for rich developed countries, but not the developing

ones. I am much convinced that developing countries tend to focus their programs and development on economic areas. As a developing country, for example, Indonesia only provides less than 10% of the national budget or *Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Negara* (APBN) which is actually much less than the minimum amount determined by the 1945 National Constitution or *Undang Undang Dasar 1945* (the highest constitution in Indonesia) that mentions at least 20% of the national budget should be allocated for education (www.hukumonline.com 29 August 2006). This policy seems not to have any relation with gender equity, but when the budget for education is so limited, it can be predicted that gender equity-related policies in education will not be established. This is in line with the writer's several years of observation which lead to the conclusion that Indonesia has not got significant gender equity-related policies which enable poor women to have access to higher education. The gender mainstreaming program in Indonesia also does not really make any significant changes in policies produced, because those who were assigned to attend the program were staff with no influential position in the working place. Even an appeal of providing a special room for breastfeeding in governmental offices and in campuses is responded as something funny at which they laugh.

In global level, it is article 4 of the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty First Century that constitutes a special section concerning women in their access to higher education. It enhances women's participation and promotes their role.

(a) Although significant progress has been achieved to enhance the access of women to higher education, various socio-economic, cultural and political obstacles continue in many places in the world to impede their full access and effective integration. To overcome them remains an urgent priority in the renewal process for ensuring an equitable and

non-discriminatory system of higher education based on the principle of merit. (b) Further efforts are required to eliminate all gender stereotyping in higher education, to consider gender aspects in different disciplines and to consolidate women's participation at all levels and in all disciplines, in which they are under-represented and, in particular, to enhance their active involvement in decision-making. (c) Gender studies (women's studies) should be promoted as a field of knowledge, strategic for the transformation of higher education and society. (d) Efforts should be made to eliminate political and social barriers whereby women are under-represented and in particular to enhance their active involvement at policy and decision-making levels within higher education and society (UNESCO, 1999).

This declaration sounds excellent and promising. However, it seems that many countries still have their cultural and other barriers comprised of gender-biased norms. The government of such countries and the related agents should have active role in trying to change them, although it would take times. Government plays an important role in this case, because it has authority to tell people what to do, to obey, or to avoid in order to achieve a more egalitarian society so that women have equal access to development, including education. For the sake of change initiation to the more equal access for all regardless of the sex, in my opinion, legal affirmative actions, including governmental policies, are needed..

Culture

Women are often disadvantaged by culture, especially patriarchal one in which they are expected to handle the domestic chores, which people believe as having no need of high level of education. Some societies with their own cultural values have made

women underestimated and marginalized so that they do not have or have but a little access to higher education. Yuarsi (1997, 244) believes that different treatment to women and men happens since the time of child rearing in which female children are taught to be able to do household and are restricted by a variety of norms related to feminine identity that must be obeyed but male are allowed to have fun activities as they want and have much less restrictions.

As several observers have noted, culture not only shapes perceptions but also the allocation of resources. It can be seen in societies which are very much influenced by fundamentalist religious beliefs, culture tends to create norms that restrict women's physical and mental space. Stromquist (2001) identifies that regardless of the social classes, women tend to have less physical mobility than men therefore less freedom to move to larger cities or to go overseas to pursue higher level of education. Not to mention, the concept of femininity and masculinity usually does not allow them to have a wide range of choice of fields of study and this automatically gives impact on their choice of occupations. To quote Stromquist (2001), "Women receive less remuneration for their years of education than men. Finally, women tend to aspire to political positions of less prestige and responsibility than men".

Fiske (1995, 18) reports that in Cambodia the division of labor is well-established as women do the domestic chores and men go out to earn money for the family. From the very young age, women have to be responsible for heavy household tasks such as carrying water and taking care of younger brothers or sisters. They are also demanded to behave as ideal women such as having soft and slow movement and voice and industrious meaning well-skilled in household chores and financial management. These kinds of non-productive skills are considered not requiring higher education. That's

why when a family have limited budget, they tend to prioritize their sons rather than their daughters.

Cultures across the countries seem to give less chance for women to have access to higher education because most women are demanded to just be well-skilled in domestic tasks and this does not require high level of education.

Poverty

According to Charles and Campling (2000, 116), an issue of poverty which has been emphasized by feminist research identifies that the world resources are unequally spread to males and females. This leads to the poverty of women in common. They also adds that there has been numerous later research explaining that females have less admission than males to all kinds of resources, in labour market, household , and in the form of welfare. This has an effect on the huge number of women suffer poverty (Charles and Campling 2000, 216).

The low-income women are prone to face certain barriers which alienate them from having adequate education, whereas, higher education seems to be an important ladder for people to get out of poverty. Then how they can escape from it if they remain poor and are trapped into low-wage jobs for the rest of their life. No higher education is free, so at least those who want to pursue it, must work hard for grant, if there is, to afford. Marx (2006) in her article *A Smoother Path to Higher Education: Constructing Policies and Programs that Support Low-Income Women* mentions that 2000 statistics from the U. S. Census Bureau illustrates that 25% women were the breadwinners in below or at poverty level families. If this is so, then the women will never have access to higher education without any grant that allows them to focus on their study with less number of hours of work required for it.

Poverty seems to be a seriously high and thick border for women to have access to education, especially the higher one, because what happen in societies (almost) all over the world is that women should do the bulk of domestic tasks, and this will be more energy and time consuming when there is no electricity available for them. This kind of sexual division of labor, in my opinion, is considered a fundamental importance in most cultures in the world. Parents would think that if their girls go to school, who will do the domestic chores while there is no money to afford modern electric appliances which are much less time and energy consuming. This condition, in the writer's long observation in Indonesia, has changed a little bit especially for the younger generation, because many poor and less educated women go overseas to take menial jobs or (some) to engage in prostitution with the wage much higher than when they work for the same kind of jobs in Indonesia. As a result, some of them are able to send their daughters (and sons) to pursue high education for their better life. But some of them just use the money for paying their loan, building their house, buying motorcycle, and others. This is usually due to their less awareness of the importance of education for their daughters and sons future life.

Similarly, in Latin American context, Stromquist (2001) states that poverty tend to make people move from rural to urban or overseas to have jobs, usually as unskilled workers, or some as prostitutes. This has made women to have wider mobility to earn money for their and their family better life, often without requiring high level of education.

Conclusion

In many countries there are less women enrolled in higher education compared to men. Interestingly, although some countries such as Australia, Austria, Finland, UK, Sweden and Canada have

equal (even more) percentage of women than men enrolled in higher education, there is a trend that females tend to choose social sciences, educational disciplines, nursing, medicine, and arts and humanities rather than natural sciences. Whereas, more males participate in natural sciences.

The less number of female students in higher education have close relation with some barriers, namely; first, the unfair-gender-related policies even though there have been global agenda on eliminating gender discrimination that's why it is a must to make ministers and influential decision makers sensitive to gender issues, second, disadvantageous gender-biased culture demanding women to be home makers, and third, poverty which has been mostly overrepresented by women.

I am sure, trying to change them is not impossible, although it would take times. Governments should seriously play their important role in this case, because they have authority to arrange the design of their development in order to achieve a more egalitarian society so that women have equal access to the development, including education. For the sake of change initiation, in my opinion, legal affirmative actions, including governmental policies, are unquestionably needed.

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