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Levelling the playing field for female academics to access scholarships and research funds

Executive Summary

Although the balance of male to female academics in environmental health in Africa has improved over the years, there is still inequity between the academic genders. Recent evidence suggests that female academics are often found on a lower grade and salary on the University hierarchical scale compared with their male and slightly younger counterparts. To achieve equity in research and knowledge management of female environmental health issues in Africa, it is imperative that gender balance is achieved within academic practice. Lifestyle and work patterns of male and female academics require to be taken cognisance of by donor agencies when determining the eligibility criteria to apply for scholarships to study for higher degrees. Female academics often have to withdraw from the academic field for childbirth, child rearing in the first few years. In addition to fulfilling their role as mothers they are also the care givers within the family they are still expected to undertake the usual domestic chores of a wife and care for elderly relatives, unlike their male counterparts in comparison. All of which places female academics at a disadvantage in status upon return to work. After extensive consultation with both male and female academics working in the field of environmental health in Africa, the Africa Academy for Environmental Health (AAEH) advocate three recommendations for funding bodies and higher education institutions to adopt in their policies: (1) Increase age restrictions in donor scholarship and funding applications for female academics to accommodate their maternal and domestic responsibilities; (2) Scholarship awarding bodies should actively promote funding of split site and home based postgraduate studies. This would provide an equal opportunity for female academics to attain quality qualifications irrespective of their maternal and domestic commitments and ensure research is gender balanced and specific to the African context; and (3) Universities should implement effective mentoring schemes in place to support the needs of junior academics and develop their research and teaching skills.

Background

As well as being institutes of higher learning, universities in Africa also house the bulk of the continent's research capability and technical expertise. However, there remains a tendency for female academics in the field of environmental health (EH) to be found at lower level on the University hierarchical salary scale compared with their male counterparts. As a result of their additional maternal and domestic responsibilities as the primary caregiver in the household their opportunities to excel in academia are not as fair and equitable as in the developed world.

As a result of childbirth, motherly and domestic responsibilities, especially in the first few years of child birth, female academics lose their competitive advantage. Upon return to the workplace they often

find themselves competing with younger male academic staff on the same salary scale and above the cut-off age for scholarship applications.

National and international donors need to take cognisance of these factors to ensure that the availability of scholarships is gender balanced and equitable. The exclusion of female academics from the research agenda will restrict specific environmental health issues faced by women and girls in Africa from being addressed in an African context. These hurdles often mean that female academics are prevented from equitable access to higher degree study. With the resultant lack of research skills and knowledge associated with study for a higher degree this prevents female academics from excelling in academia and obtaining higher office. In the attainment of the

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) both female participation and environmental health developments are integral to all eight MDGs.

Nevertheless, environmental health receives a low profile, and despite most health issues affecting the female gender, their participation in EH research and development in Africa is minimal. If the basis for higher education and research is to offer a framework for African policy development, then there must be a balance of gender perspectives within the research.

Why are women not accessing the research field.

A questionnaire and dialogue with 56 EH academics (23 male and 33 female) from in East, West and Southern Africa was undertaken in 15 higher education institutions in 11 countries, coordinated by the Africa Academy for Environmental Health through the Association of African Universities MRCI programme.

1. Position and workload

Whilst the results indicated that the number of female academic staff has increased over the last 5 years, most females still remain in the lower level positions within departments and universities. 70% of females were in lecturer or below positions compared to 58% of their male colleagues. In addition, teaching loads of female academics were also found to be higher with an average of 12.5 hours compared to 9 hours for male colleagues. These factors are compounded with the traditional issues of male dominance in African society and lack of willingness on the part of senior staff to involve and mentor junior staff in their research areas. As such, difficulty in accessing existing scholarship and research programmes and development of personal research can be demoralising for female academics.

2. Lifestyle and socioeconomic factors

For a number of the female academics involved, the location, and time required to complete postgraduate studies in other countries were in direct conflict with their family commitments. 20% of female academics vs. 0% of male academics indicated that they had declined scholarship offers due to their commitment to their family.

3. Poor skills base and support network

It was felt by only female academics that they lacked the skills base to write proposals or conduct research. This may have been a reflection of their academic level and support received from their department and institution. This lack of mentoring and self-belief in combination

with time constraints due to other work commitment is preventing a number of females from sourcing research and scholarship funds. Poor orientation and subsequent support and mentoring were consistently raised as issues in group dialogue.

AAEH Example Interventions

The AAEH through the AAU MRCI funding has been working with female academics to identify ways to address these issues. As such the Academy has developed and facilitated the following areas:

- Workshops for the development of a career in research attended by 27 female academics from 12 countries. Materials from workshops available on AAEH website.
- Implementation of elementary electronic mentoring system for female academics preparing research proposals and peer reviewed publications.
- Development of generic staff orientation materials for departments and institutions to adapt accordingly.
- Advocacy with funding bodies and institutions to change policy in terms of funding cut off ages and location of study.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increase or remove age limits associated with scholarship applications.
2. Funding bodies should actively promote and fund the uptake of split site and home country postgraduate studies for academics.
3. Higher education institutes, faculties and departments therein should develop and implement effective orientation and mentoring schemes for academic staff.

References and further reading

- Masangwi, S., and Kambala, C. (2011) Report On The Status Of Gender Equality In Environmental Health Courses And Research In Southern And Eastern Africa. www.ifeh.org/afa
- Trust Africa (2011) Strengthening and Transforming Higher Education in Africa. http://www.trustafrica.org/documents/higher_education_policy_brief.pdf

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