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**A Case for Development of Minimum Gender Responsive Curriculum Development Standards for Zimbabwe's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)**

## **Introduction**

The quality of teaching across all levels of education has a significant impact on academic access, retention and performance of male and female students and is essential to achieving sustainable development. The quality of teaching includes an investment in developing standard guidelines as well as lecturer training and support. A three year long study of Zimbabwean Universities with an in-depth case study of Women's University in Africa, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) established that there are no Minimum Gender Responsive Curriculum Development Standards and yet lecturers in Universities in Zimbabwe do not all undergo a structured training programme on pedagogy. An analysis of the existing induction programmes has revealed a significant gap on gender responsive pedagogy, "yet many teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, conditioned by patriarchal values in their communities, employ teaching methods that are not conducive for equal participation of both girls and boys. Neither do these methods take into account the individual needs of learners" (FAWE, 2018 pp 1). Given the need for accelerated efforts not only for women and girls' access, but also their retention and progression through University education, there is renewed interest in addressing systemic issues affecting retention and progression, through investments in quality teaching and learning. This policy brief therefore seeks to contribute to greater fulfilling learning experiences and educational impacts for male and female University students through proposing gender responsive pedagogy in all Universities in Zimbabwe.

## **Status of Gender Responsive Pedagogy in Zimbabwe's Universities**

A number of Universities in Zimbabwe have put in place measures to eliminate gender disparities in education. Some of these include curriculum reviews to include a gender lens, introducing compulsory gender modules and stand alone gender degree programmes, creating gender-responsive campus environments, having gender responsive infrastructure and facilities, recruiting more female lecturers and administrators to act as role models among others. The result has been an increase in the numbers of women entering different disciplines in Universities. However, little attention has been given to the quality of teaching that is fulfilling to both male and female students. No formal programme targeting lecturers has been developed to build their capacity in gender responsive pedagogy. Some Universities have introduced Postgraduate diploma programmes in education while others have introduced certificates in higher education, and yet others through their teaching and learning centres have introduced lecturer induction programmes. Others have not done anything, yet poor pedagogical practices reinforce gender inequalities. This is compounded by the fact that the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education has also not developed and shared Minimum Gender Responsive Curriculum Development Standards for guidance.

Lecturers' perceptions of students' abilities can sometimes affect how they teach, assign roles, and engage with their students, especially where they have not undergone any induction or training programme. There is no common direction among tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe to build the capacity of lecturers in gender responsive pedagogy, hence most of the lecturers had not received gender-sensitive pedagogy training at any point. In 2018, the World Bank collected data on most institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. A draft report which was produced by the Bank in May 2019 identified several gaps in higher education in Zimbabwe which include the

one on lack of training of academics. The World Bank then made a host of recommendations some of which included: training of academics, consolidating quality assurance mechanisms, implementing curricular and pedagogical innovations.

Regarding curricular and pedagogical innovations, gender responsive pedagogy can make a big difference for male and female students' learning experience in the lecture rooms. It promises that all learners have equal opportunities to learn while at the same time eliminating gender stereotypes. INASP (2021) suggests that lecturers' use of gender responsive pedagogy has several benefits that can lead to empowerment and quality education outcomes for both male and female students including prevention of gender stereotyping, and improvement of active classroom participation for both female and male students. When students are encouraged to engage in learning equally and actively, their performance and attainment and ability to teach themselves improves.

Studies in East and West Africa (INASP, 2021) revealed that teachers trained in the gender responsive pedagogy were reportedly able to create inclusive and learner friendly environments that allowed for students to be more engaged in the classrooms and highly motivated to learn. Introducing elements of gender equality in education in teacher training colleges in Mali, resulted in an increase in the completion rates among female students as well as a reduction in the repetition rates of women in the institutes. Teachers trained in gender responsive pedagogy demonstrated their skills in how they handled large classrooms, how to provide an inclusive learning environment, how to teach science and mathematics with a gender sensitive lens, how to analyze classroom practices and how to design and develop new gender-sensitive curricula (Atangana-Amougou, 2017). Beyond their own personal transformation, teachers observed improved learning outcomes for their students when they applied the GRP strategies for a gender-inclusive classroom.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Without proper training and “unlearning” gender-biased beliefs and behaviours, lecturers continue to apply teaching methods that do not address the specific needs of female and male students, draw upon gender-insensitive materials and reinforce gender stereotypes and ultimately affects the achievement of sustainable development goals. This policy brief recommends that ZIMCHE develops Minimum Gender Responsive Curriculum Development Standards for guidance of Universities in the development and review of curriculum. Those in charge of reviewing regulations for new programmes will use this instrument in assessing materials for gender responsiveness. This policy position will ensure that no new programme will be approved for roll out without clear cut steps included on gender responsive pedagogy. This process will also include old courses being re-designed for significant learning and transformation as well as planning effective learning experiences. Additionally, the brief recommends that ZIMCHE includes gender responsive pedagogy in its quality assurance capacity building programme for quality assurance directorates. Quality assurance directorates will then cascade the training to academic staff in their respective Universities. The training can cover among other things, how gender should be introduced to the curriculum and how it can be incorporated, course content, resources and pedagogy, gender balance in examples used in class; invitation of female speakers where there are few books authored by women; language used in class; classroom management and

set up, that is, where people sit and how they interact; making sure that in each group there are female students, avoid females sitting alone and away from male counterparts; equal participation in class; make females leaders in group discussions; ensure active involvement and participation of female students in class; use of blended learning activities to bring understanding.