A review of major obstacles to women's participation in higher education in Kenya

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Abstract

The paper provides a comprehensive review of the major obstacles that hinder the participation of girls and women in higher education in Kenya. This is on the basis that their low participation in this level of education is a key constraint to the development of the country. While it is reckoned that girls' and women's education is inextricably linked with other facets of human development, the focus in the paper is on educational issues. Among the major obstacles identified include policy framework, in which it is seen that since the colonial period in Kenya, gender was an important determinant of educational provision. Women's subordinated position arising from colonial economic structures coupled with traditional cultural practices determined the extent to which they could participate in education; such that by the last decades of colonialism, a very small proportion of girls attended primary and secondary schools. It is also seen that while on the whole independence increased women's educational and employment opportunities, gender inequality has remained persistent. The government is called upon to promote female education through legislative and policy reform. There should be an entitlement to good-quality primary and secondary education for all. While secondary education is the gateway to women's higher education, government policies have often forced girls to attend poor-quality secondary schools. The effect of poor-quality secondary education for girls is reflected in their serious under-representation in more competitive courses, such as medicine and engineering in the public universities. It is suggested that some affirmative measures be adopted in university admissions to increase the participation of women as well as mounting bridging courses in the sciences and technology and allowing for credit transfers in university admissions for students from technology-based tertiary institutions.