

Achieving Gender Equity at the Workplace: the experiences of working students of the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract: The study sought the experiences of working students of the Zimbabwe Open University on ways of achieving gender equity at the workplace. The research was qualitative as the questionnaire used as a data-gathering instrument had open-ended sections that yielded qualitative data. The research employed the descriptive survey design. In this study, a sample of 206 working distance education students was extracted using the stratified random sample in which departments and gender formed the strata. The study found out that gender equity at organisational level could be achieved by creating a gender sensitive environment, attitudinal changes, gender responsive culture, and full participation of women. Above all gender issues at organisational level must not be treated in isolation, but must include empowerment policies, human rights and H.I.V.AIDS. The working students went further to prescribe a gender friendly curriculum, equality before the law and unlimited access to gender sensitive information. The study among others recommended that wide access to gender friendly literature, extensive outreach programmes targeting all sexes, women advancement programmes and a participatory environment at the workplace must be put in place to enable gender equity to prevail at the organisational level.

Keywords: Zimbabwe Open University, workplace, gender equity, human rights.

BACKGROUND

We are now in some thirty years since the birth of gender in the mid 1970s. An increasingly high profile has been given to women's issues and gender issues within development policies, programmes and projects. The birth of gender was very much influenced by the wave of feminism in the West, which had emerged in the wake of the civil rights and anti-colonial struggles of the 60s [1].

It is easily accepted in these times that development must be informed by gender analysis [2]. In the same manner distance education as a corner-stone of empowerment must be guided by gender principles and practice. In the same vein the perceptions and attitudes of distance education students can go a long way towards enhancing gender principles in society.

Gender issues should be commonplace rather than radical, they must be shared rather than forced on society. Gender is still a central part of the understanding and the objective of development, providing a unique lens with which to deconstruct social institutions and processes [2]. Gender has provided the building blocks for comprehending the reality of women's lives and the gendered nature of

economic, social and political processes [1]. Thus students studying at a higher level must not lag behind on such critical matters. This becomes imperative considering that Zimbabwe Open University's core ideology is:

To develop a best-practice-enterprise-culture-based open and distance learning university focused on influencing development and change (ZOU Strategic Plan 2005).

Present day thinking is advocating for the establishment of a society free from discrimination and exploitation based on caste, class or gender. Gender is an area in which students should pay special attention for them to remain compliant on topical issues. The idea of gender equality has become mainstream, at least in most western countries. In spite of this, we are still leaving in a man-defined world to which women have adapted brilliantly[3]. The workplace is one such area in which gender issues must be addressed. This research is a small attempt to address this.

Better articulation of women's needs can only take place if enlightened people like workers are enlightened on these issues. Research has shown that gender roles affect attitude towards some thing [4]. One

of the main factors contributing to women's heightened activism has been their increased access to educational opportunities[5].

Some pertinent gender issues at the workplace

The Domestic Violence Bill (2006) is a form of legislation that had noble intentions some of these are:

- Mutual respect in families.
- Non-violent resolution of conflicts in families.
- Promoting and espousing the duty of caring for and protecting each other.

It has to be seen if the working students of the Zimbabwe Open University are enlightened on such noble issues.

The Standard of 24 September 2006 carried a story in which a young boy and his two brothers, aged five and eight, watched as their father battered their mother to death. This followed a domestic dispute. The experiences of the three boys was a clear testimony of the terrifying effects of gender based violence and spells out why gender is indeed a topical issue for all workers.

In Zimbabwe inflation in 2008 was hovering around 10 000 (Independent 2008), the biggest in the world. The resulting economic hardships have seen individuals chasing every opportunity that arises; no matter how unethical or immoral it may be, in order to survive. This can see an upsurge in extra marital affairs. As infidelity can come in the foe, the noble intentions of the various legislations can be impaired and the workplace becomes a critical arena in which such issues can be addressed.

Despite the much talked about marginalisation of women, there are some positives to talk about. For instance, the African Woman's Leadership Institute addresses three broad areas that can benefit woman at the workplace in southern Africa. They look at three broad areas in which woman are adversely affected. These are:

- Structural factors such as social, economic, political and cultural systems on a macro level.
- Barriers such as violence, discrimination and harmful practices against woman which are experienced at a personal or community level.
- The issue of women's personal consciousness based on knowledge, experience, awareness and understanding of gender issues [6].

In Zimbabwe the activities of the Girl Child Network, the police Victim Friendly Unit and the Victim Friendly Court are some of the well talked about gender issues that may not escape the attention of

workers who are students in a university even if they are at a distance the true picture need to be known.

In addition, the Woman Development Savings and Credit Union with its motto: "A woman is the anchor of the nation" also targets woman aged 18 years and above. Woman included in the target group among others include the following:

- Women entrepreneurs owning and managing macro and small-scale enterprises.
- Urban and rural women Poor woman with micro small enterprises employing up to five people.
- Businesswoman with high growth potential enterprises.
- Women in different economic activities including manufacturing, trading, agriculture and services.
- Women needing start-ups especially those diversifying into non-traditional enterprises.
- Women entrepreneurs operating within a radius of 75 km from Woman Development Savings and Credit Union (WDSCU) office of operation.
- Women able and willing to save with Women Development Savings and Credit Union (WDS&CU). (The Standard 29-10-2006:17)

With such facilities at the disposal of women, it is important for working students to create a gender friendly environment at the work place. There are also other organisations like the Self Help Foundation that assists rural women to uplift themselves. Such information, if available at the workplace can be of value.

Women's University in Africa is a multi-disciplinary institution offering degree programmes targeting mature women. Such information is important considering that the goal of the university is to enhance women's capacity through the provision of education that will enable them to fulfil leadership, social, political and economic roles. Do working students benefit from such noble ideas? This is one of the questions this research seeks to address.

Sister Namibia was founded in 1989 on the eve of Namibia's independence in 1990. The organisation is a feminist non-governmental women's organisation that aims to give woman a voice in the building of a democratic post-colonial society. In 1998, Sister Namibia conducted a research that culminated in a workshop that recommended 50% women candidates on a 'zebra-style' party lists that alternate women and men on the lists. Thus the 50-50 campaign was born [7]. Thus it is also important to note that some new democracies have made strides in the emancipation of woman. Such knowledge is important to a distance education student.

In South Africa, when the country achieved independence in 1994, the new rights based constitution provided significant opportunities for reforming laws that discriminated against women. The Gender Research Project at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALs), University of the Witwatersrand, was formed and became part of a network of women's organisations that mobilised to oppose the claims of traditional leaders for cultural autonomy. The battle was bitter but was eventually resolved in favour of democracy[8].

In Zimbabwe, the Criminal Law Codification 2006 also went through similar trends and such information is important for distance education students.

Some horrifying reports in the media make gender a topical issue that must be addressed at the workplace. Some of the stories are, (Herald 7 November 2006.:

- Businessman rapes daughter at gunpoint.
- According to the girl child network, at least 515 cases of rape involving children were reported countywide between May and September 2006.
- In Esigodini, an 82-year old granny was raped by an unknown man at her homestead and lost a tooth as the assailant struck her to induce submission.
- In Mount Darwin two men took turns to rape a nine-year-old grade four pupil.
- A self-styled prophet in Kuwadzana has been slapped with an effective nine years' imprisonment for raping the wife of one of his church members.

Such horrifying incidences make gender issues topical and indispensable for the workplace.

Women and Aids Support Network says an average of 3000 Zimbabweans are dying every week, many of them due to preventable and treatable HIV/AIDS-related opportunistic infections. These people lack access to both information and medication [9] gender and H.I.V./Aids on this note may be indispensable at the workplace. This can also be happening to working distance education students if the workplace is not gender responsive.

Women appear to have a dual career. Kazembe [10] notes that women have to juggle between career and family obligations. This may lead women to see professional obligations as secondary to their traditional roles. This idea is ably articulated by Njoroge and Dube [11] who see a woman's work as overloaded, undervalued and invisible.

Breaking through the glass ceiling is also an issue at the workplace. Peters say that women are still struggling to break through the glass ceiling. Peters

defines the glass ceiling as invisible and artificial barriers to entry, promotion or equal salaries faced by women who aspire for similar levels. This being the case, it is critical that women break the glass ceiling in the organisations they work for. This research is one such attempt to ensure gender equity at the work place[12].

Studies by the United Nations show that women are poorly represented in the ranks of power, policy and decision making. In 1998 they made up less than 5 percent of the world's heads of State, heads of major corporations and top positions in international organisations [13]. Studies in the Zimbabwe Open University on distance education students' knowledge of gender issues found out that there is indeed a wide gap that needs to be filled in terms of knowledge of gender issues[12].

Against this background, this research seeks to find ways of ensuring gender equity at the workplace from the experiences of working students of the Zimbabwe Open University.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought to determine ways of engendering the workplace as perceived by working distance education students. It also sought to find out the prominent gender issues that are important for the worker in the workplace.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Gender based violence coupled with the ravaging work of HIV/AIDS have torn the cultural fabric apart. One reason for its escalation is that the workplace has not been engendered. If working students who are a more enlightened class work under an environment that is male dominated, that becomes a problem. Such organisational climate means that the working students may not benefit from initiatives such as the Domestic Violence Bill (2007), Women's Trust etc. Lack of knowledge of pertinent gender issues at the work place may threaten the cultural fabric and more so the advancement and participation of women may be threatened.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study generated the following research questions:

1. What are the pertinent issues in relation to engendering the workplace?
2. What can be done to engender the students through knowledge?
3. What practices threaten the process of engendering the workplace?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study was basically qualitative. The questionnaire used had open-ended sections that yielded

qualitative data. The research employed the descriptive survey design.

Babbie [15] says,

“Descriptive survey is a method of research that describes what we see over and beyond”.

Thus the researchers chose this method as it allowed students to say exactly what they felt about their knowledge of gender issues. Borg and Gall cited by [16] say descriptive surveys are excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population as was the case in this study. One of the characteristics of the descriptive survey method is to investigate the present status of the phenomenon. This was the primary goal in this study.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The target population for this study was all the working 2000 students for Masvingo Regional Campus of the Zimbabwe Open University for semester two of 2007.

THE SAMPLE

A sample of two hundred and six (206) working students was extracted using the stratified random sample. Departments and gender formed the strata as shown in table 1 below.

Table : Showing the sample of the study.

Attribute	Frequency	%
PROGRAMME		
Education	19	20,7
Natural Sciences	12	13
Commerce	15	16
Social Science	42	45
Arts	4	4,3
GENDER		
Male	69	75
Female	23	25

The 206 selected subjects were believed to be knowledgeable about the engendering the workplace as they practiced this in the various fields where they are employed. Consent was sought. Each individual who took part in this research was consulted and agreement was reached on what data to be collected and included in the research. The privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was upheld and guaranteed in this research.

DATA GATHERING

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. This instrument was pilot tested to 20 randomly selected students. Items that were not clear were eliminated. The questionnaire was preferred because it is cheaper to construct and administer, while the processing and analysis of data is less complex than in the case of observations[17]. The 206 students were

given the questionnaire to complete and return. 220 questionnaires were administered. 14 questionnaires were declared defunct after they were not returned on time.

DATA PRESENTATION

The issues raised in the questionnaires are presented here using the thematic approach as they were coded into themes.

Inputting the right material in the organisation

The organisational inputs were seen as critical in ensuring a gender sensitive environment. A lot of interesting data was generated and prominent were: ‘To ensure gender equality at the workplace depends to a large extent on the recruitment policies of the organisation.’

‘There must be an open door policy coupled the need for equal opportunity employment.’

‘What is brought in the organisation, is critical eg the literature that support or demean the woman’

Attitudinal changes

A key issue that was raised by the working students is attitudinal changes and commitment at the highest level in the workforce. The following statements substantiated this:

‘The management must show commitment to the development of gender sensitive policies.’

‘Positive attitudes about developing and nurturing the potential of women alongside their male counterparts must be prioritised.’

‘There are some people amongst us who still believe the roles and status of women relative to man are something natural, normal and constant.’

The issue of participation and involvement

Involvement of women in all organisational committees was emphasised. The following are some of the substantiating statements:

‘Involve women in committees such as the promotional committee.’

‘It is important that women take part in formulating organisational policies.’

‘Do not decide what is gender appropriate, women must take part in decision making at all levels.’

‘Put in place mechanisms for giving women the support they need to fully participate in all organisational issues.’

Equality of the sexes

Equal treatment of all people regardless of gender was a concern for the students.

The working students were adamant that segregation can lead to more problems in the workplace. They advocated for equality of the sexes. Some of the substantiating statements are:

'There is need to consider all workers as equal partners.'

'The euphoria for gender sidelines man. This can be lead to fresh problems.'

'Fair minded people want to see equality of treatment for all people.'

'Women must be treated equally with men.'

Engendering the workplace through human rights

The students in the sample stated that women rights are human rights with the following statements being raised:

'The rights of the women must be respected at the workplace.'

'There must be equal rights.'

'Uphold the equality of man and women on domestic affairs.'

Gender sensitive training curriculum

The study also discovered that working students want their curricula to cover contemporary issues. Some substantiating statements are:

'Gender issues must be part of our studies.'

'Give students lessons or handouts on gender related issues.'

'Introduce courses on gender related issues.'

'It must be a component of the curriculum so that interest in the issue is enhanced.'

'Incorporate gender issues in the courses that we study so that we treat them with the seriousness they deserve.'

The power of information

The students also followed up their earlier responses by claiming that they need more information on gender related issues at the workplace. Below are some qualifying statements:

'We need more information on the contents of the domestic violence bill (2007).'

'Engendering the workplace begins with information.'

'Hold workshops and improve communication on gender related issues.'

'Our programmes must have gender related topics.'

Gender sensitive personnel department

It was also established that the personnel department must be gender sensitive in order to sensitise workers students on gender related issues. Some relevant advice given was:

'Radio and Television is letting us down organisations must chip in.'

'Clarity is not coming out in media coverage especially on the domestic violence Bill (2006). Human resources must act.'

'There is need for campaigns during weekend classes and other ceremonies'

'Workers must be made aware of gender related issues through the internet, newspapers and radio.'

Gender and empowerment

The study further established that empowerment is a topical issue as well. The following statements qualify this:

'Gender without empowerment is empty talk.'

'Empowerment of women in rural areas is important.'

'Promote women in their places of work.'

'Tackle cultural issues that look down upon women especial without financial muscle.'

Sexual harassment

It appears sexual harassment is an issue at the workplace as a sizable number of the students referred to it as a threat to engendering the workplace.

'There is need to put a lid on sexual harassment.'

'Stopping sexual harassment is a stride towards engendering the workplace.'

'Harassment is a form of abuse that must be nipped in the bud.'

Recognising women efforts

It was the students' suggestions that the work done by women must be recognised. Some supporting statements are:

'Hold in high esteem the work done by women.'

'Women need to be recognised alongside their male counterparts.'

'Recognition is a motivating factor.'

Isolation of gender issues at the work place

The worker students in this study were of the contention that gender issues at the workplace must not be treated in isolation if equity has to be assured. There was a marked awareness that gender discrimination or prejudice is, just like racial discrimination an evil that must be tackled as a matter of urgency. They gave examples of H.I.V./Aids and racism as some of the evils that need attention together with gender issues. Some of the substantiating statements are:

'Gender and H.I.V./Aids are inseparable issues.'

'Racism is as evil as gender segregation they must not be separated'

'Contemporary gender issues at the workplace must embrace H.I.V./Aids.'

'There is need to bring HIV/AIDS information into the working place because sound health is essential for achieving economic security'

Organisational culture

The working students in this research further cited the organisation culture as an area that must be gender responsive if gender equity is to be assured. Some supporting statements are:

'The culture in the organisation must be sensitive to gender issues.'

'The organisational culture must be such that power is evenly distributed between men and women'

'A climate of tolerance between the sexes must prevail.'

'We need to value tolerance, respect, norms and practices that promote equality of the sexes.'

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Several issues appear to emerge from this study one of these is that students want their workplaces to be hubs of gender related information. They want more information for themselves and for others. This idea is upheld in the assertions by Tripp [5: 29] that "... when a door has been opened for one person, that person should put her foot down there and let the door remain open until all the others are in.... to bring the others forward."

It also emerged from the study that there is need to look at both sides of gender. At the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women, the Beijing Declaration committed participating governments to encourage man to participate fully in all actions towards equality. Further, at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 2004 the emphasis was that the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality is indispensable. Ruxton [18] sums this up by saying, leaving out man and boys in interventions for gender equality is a recipe for disaster.

The issue of HIV Aids was also raised in the research. This appears to be a critical area if not a grey area. Grange in Ruxton [18] says the majority of the people who are killed with the AIDS pandemic, are between the ages of 15 and 35-parents and workers, our future. Ironically the majority of the respondents in this research are in that category. Thus an entire generation is slowly disappearing.

The issue of information also came out in this study. Distance education students are not getting enough information on gender issues. Yet information is empowering. Tripp [5] reported in the anatomy of deception that a more educated women tried to take advantage of rural women and used them for her own good. Thus without information that is current at the workplace, workers will be left behind.

Equality of treatment was an issue raised. The workplace must a place for equality of treatment. The idea will be to contribute to reducing the significance, or even abolishing the identities, of men and women, or

as Deetz in Billing and Alvesson [19] expresses it, to make the gender distinction irrelevant at the place of workplace.

It was the finding of this study that gender must not be treated separately from other social evils such as H.I.V./Aids and racism. UNICEF [13] says that it is surprising that many black Zimbabweans who are themselves victims of racism fail to see gender issues as a problem in Zimbabwe. Thus some people who perceive racism as an abominable evil, they regard the situation of the woman as normal.

Gender sensitive organisational culture was cited as important. This is also supported by UNICEF [13] that gender equity demands the willingness to learn as well as commitment to the process of change. It is through the implementation of gender sensitive practices that gender equity will ultimately improve in an organisation with immense benefits spreading to the entire community, the country and the world as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Access to media can be the missing link in promoting gender equity at the workplace issues.
2. Extensive outreach programmes targeting every worker, moulded in the form of the H. I. V. and AIDS campaigns should be launched to sensitise workers on gender issues.
3. Interventions for gender equality must involve men and women alike. Leaving one sex out may be a recipe for disaster.
4. A participatory environment must be created to educate the entire workforce on gender related issues.
5. Ensure that knowledge skills and attitudes that are gender sensitive prevail in the organisation.
6. Putting in place mechanisms for giving women emotional, moral and material support they need to rise along the ladder.
7. Organisations must create gender sensitive and responsive organisational cultures that will immensely benefit the entire workforce.

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