

---

## New Frontiers of Exclusion: Private Higher Education and Women's Opportunities in Kenya

Ibrahim Ogachi Oanda\*

---

### Abstract

The semi-privatisation of public universities and the growth of private universities have been two important developments affecting higher education in Kenya in the last decade. The trend towards the privatisation of university education has been in tune with global neo-liberal policies that Kenya embraced from 1986. The policies were touted, among other things, for their potential to broaden opportunities to hitherto excluded groups. In higher education, private universities and programmes claim to offer more opportunities for women and a higher transition from college to employment. A close analysis however reveals that these claims are of limited validity. Rather than expanding opportunities for women, private universities in Kenya tend to create new subtle arenas for exclusion. This article analyses the ways in which the logic and practical working of private universities accentuate women's marginalisation in terms of access policies, academic cultures and disciplinary orientations.

### Résumé

Au cours de la décennie passée, l'enseignement supérieur kenyan a été affecté par deux éléments majeurs : la semi-privatisation des universités publiques et l'essor des universités privées. Cette tendance à la privatisation de l'éducation universitaire est dans la logique des politiques globales néo-libérales menées par le Kenya dès 1986. Les politiques ont été vantées, entre autres, pour leur capacité potentielle à offrir davantage d'opportunités aux groupes jusque-là exclus. Au niveau de l'enseignement supérieur, les universités et programmes privés prétendent proposer davantage d'opportunités aux femmes ainsi qu'une meilleure transition de l'université au monde du travail. En effectuant une analyse précise, l'on réalise que ces

---

\* Educational Foundations Department, Kenyatta University, P. O. Box 43844 Nairobi GPO 00100, Kenya. E-mail: [iboanda@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:iboanda@yahoo.co.uk)

affirmations sont d'une validité restreinte. Au lieu d'agrandir le champ d'opportunités des femmes, les universités privées kenyanes ont tendance à créer de nouveaux et subtils domaines d'exclusion. Cet article analyse la façon dont la logique ainsi que le fonctionnement pratique des universités privées accentue la marginalisation des femmes, en termes de politiques d'accès, de culture académique et d'orientations disciplinaires.

### Introduction

Neo-liberal policies implemented by developing countries in the last two decades have tended to accentuate the exclusion of certain social groups from accessing entitlements. Women have been severely affected by these processes, despite the fact that every development initiative claims the potential to broaden access and widen the delivery of social services. In most of Africa, neo-liberal reforms in education and other social sectors in the last decade led to a shrinkage of opportunity and a deterioration in the quality of the services. In the last two decades, the 'second wave' of democratic transitions in Africa energised the politics of women for empowerment. Conducted within the Women in Development (WID), and Gender and Development (GAD) discourses, the politics of women and gender empowerment sought to increase women's access to socioeconomic rights. At the same time, however, much of the spaces into which women sought inclusion were 'privatising' or were being privatised, occasioning a counter-process that marginalised most women in underpaid informal economic activities. This therefore created and continues to create a contradiction in respect to the wider question of women's empowerment. Privatisation as an aspect of liberalisation continues to be presented to developing countries as having the capacity to create more opportunities, especially for women. Studies have however suggested the opposite of this possibility, with the shrinkage of opportunity, heightened forms of informalisation, and the intensification of exclusion and vulnerability. For example, in the 1980s and part of the 1990s, African countries embraced Structural Adjustment Programmes as a panacea to economic decline, with the hope of renewed growth and the redistribution of the benefits to all social groups in society. A decade or so later, studies revealed that the policies had not brought any meaningful growth, but in most social sectors had occasioned more exclusion, especially of groups that were meant to benefit in the first place. Cornia et al. (1989) study, 'Adjustment with a human face' attested to the failures of policies that in the name of protecting the vulnerable – children and women – had brought more exclusion from social entitlements for the same groups.

Despite the above evidence, both national governments and the international community continue to promote aspects of liberalisation, especially pri-

privatisation, as the solution to most of the development problems of the Third World. From the 1990s, higher education in Africa has been the new focus of privatisation. As was the case when privatisation of public enterprises was promoted as the cure to Africa's economic decline, privatisation of higher education is presented as the continent's cure for unmet social demand, increasing the institutions' relevance to their societies, and ensuring their survival (Douglass 2005; Samoff and Bidemi 2003; Teferra and Altbach 2004; Teferra 2005). Policies for privatisation and private Higher Education proclaim their capacity to expand access and address equity issues. In Kenya, increased access by female students and the ability to prepare students for the job market are cited as important milestones in the evolution of Private Universities. However, is this the case, or like the liberalisation policies of the last decade, has private higher education only opened new and subtle arenas of exclusion? Are more women accessing higher education and the labour market as a consequence of privatisation? Moreover, are female students from social backgrounds and regions that were not accessing higher education equitably now able to do so? In a word, does private higher education signify an era of increased female access to higher educational institutions and more women-friendly higher education environments? This article reflects on these issues based on the dynamics of private higher education in Kenya.

### **Higher Education and the Politics of Women's Opportunities in Kenya**

There is a sense in which the politics of women's opportunities in Kenya entail a simultaneous process of inclusion and exclusion. If development normatively entails the expansion of human freedoms, the rise in people's incomes, and the development of the capacities to realise personal aspirations, then women in Kenya account for the majority that are excluded from this process. Women account for slightly half of Kenya's population, but over 70 per cent of those who work for long hours in rural agriculture and live in poverty. In such circumstances, education, especially higher education, plays an important role in both offering greater opportunities that enable women to secure employment in the modern wage sector, and to engender institutional cultures. Policies to increase the number of female students in school systems have sometimes been accompanied by other developments that ultimately limit the degree to which schooling facilitates women's empowerment. It is therefore important that programmes that claim 'gender responsiveness' work within certain benchmarks that can be used to gauge the extent of women's inclusion or exclusion. This is especially critical for higher education institutions that should be socially responsive to the needs of the societies in which they are located.

Three issues are pertinent in discussing the politics of gender and women's opportunities with regard to various levels of education. First is the extent to which broadening of access is accompanied by policies to transform gendered institutional cultures. Second is the degree to which policies that broaden access benefit women across all social strata. Third are the indicators that higher education institutions have in place to benchmark for gender inclusiveness. These issues are important in discussing the responsiveness of private higher education institutions and programmes aimed at increasing women's opportunities.

First, have the politics of increasing women's access to higher education been accompanied by deliberate policies to transform the gendered culture of the institutions? Over the last decade or so, the politics of gender in developing countries like Kenya have been carried out within the context that women deserved better in terms of numerical representation. The thrust of the approach has been to count the number of girls in and out of school to determine the extent of gender imbalances in the provision of schooling. The problem of women's opportunities has, however, not been limited to physical accessibility. The conditions that excluded women from educational opportunities went beyond access, and included deeply rooted but mostly unacknowledged gendered institutional and school cultures. The access of women to schooling should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means through which women can enhance their capacities and realise their aspirations.

Framing the politics of women's opportunities as a quest for access limits and most of the time also devalues the rights of women to 'equal institutional treatment'. Getting a few more women into institutional cultures that are gendered and unsympathetic to women's aspirations is counterproductive to the quest for women's empowerment. It is an example of the many subtle ways through which women are allowed in to embrace structures that dampen the chances of their emancipation.

Two examples from Kenya illustrate this contention. One of the achievements of the government in this area has been the introduction of 'free primary schooling' that has among other things led to near-parity in primary school enrolment. The increased number of girls entering schools is however being confronted with a gendered curriculum and other features of the school environment that considerably lower their motivation to achieve as highly as boys. Every other year, there are two stories told about girls and primary schooling. The first one is that the gross enrolment ratio of girls is almost at par with boys, at 49 per cent. This achievement is always attributed to the government's policies in targeting an increase in the number of girls and women at school. The second bit of the story, however, concerns the lower performance of girls, es-

pecially in science and mathematics. The girls are somehow blamed for this situation, and encouraged to try harder. Mention is not made of the failure of government policies in this area, the very sexist curriculum, and the many other hurdles that girls have to confront which have a negative bearing on their performance. The true picture is that for many girls and women, school cultures have not changed much to accommodate their aspirations. Therefore, a girl's life at school becomes a constant affront to her freedom. School curricula have not been informed by a gender approach and girls must accommodate content and teaching approaches that entail the subtle assumption that they will adapt to a masculine culture. School curricula need to be 'inclusive and gender-friendly' for women if policies of broadening access are to be transformative.

The issue of institutional culture is critical as it pervasively captures the new ways through which private higher education silently works to limit the pace of women's empowerment. Rather than changing cultures, there has been an assumption that just admitting more women as students and faculty will translate into positive gains. Private universities and programmes continue to advertise themselves on the basis of the relatively higher number of female students that are enrolled in the programmes. Private universities such as USIU point out that in a culture that discriminates against women, private universities have managed to enrol more women students (USIU Data Elements report 2005). For their part, public universities cite the fact that their private programmes have managed to enrol more women students in professional courses such as medicine (Kiamba 2003). On the face of it, these claims are true when analysed from the perspective of parity. Female students accounted for 54 per cent of students in all the private universities in the 2003/04 academic year, while at the university of Nairobi, female students constituted 45 per cent of the MBA students and 55 per cent of medical undergraduates under the private programmes within the same period (Oanda, Fatuma and Wesonga 2006; Republic of Kenya 2004). There is no evidence however from the operation of the programmes to show if these admissions are accompanied by a transformative process of gender equity that addresses embedded obstacles and structures of power, domination and exclusion.

The second issue in discussing women's education and empowerment relates to the degree to which such politics have addressed the circumstances that affect the totality of the female constituency. It is true that women account for a higher percentage of the underprovided and marginal in most developing countries. However, it is also true that not all women face the same circumstances. Some women, and they are the majority, need access to education more than others because it represents their only avenue to social mobility and

empowerment. African politics is riddled with groups of women who have enjoyed relationships of kin and patronage with the political establishment. While these groups are faced with the gendered realities of the environment in which they work, their level of disempowerment is not as critical compared to the majority of women who have had to confront gender and socioeconomic inequalities. The politics of women's empowerment through education should therefore seek to expand opportunities horizontally to reach the most vulnerable women. The vertical approach to this issue has, over time, led to a situation of too great a policy focus without qualitative change in the lives of most women. Private higher education institutions in Kenya that have claimed to offer more opportunities for women should therefore show that this expansion is accompanied by some consideration of the social background of the students. This does not assume that private universities work in the context of a social contract that binds them to adopt affirmative action strategies. Rather it is an appreciation of the fact that even in a 'market' system, such affirmative gestures, targeting the marginal, are part of institutional corporate social responsibility. This is as important to the survival of the institutions as is the drive to maximise profits.

The last key issue is that of institutional benchmarking for gender and equity. Universities that claim to have broadened access for female students need to have equity policies in place to back up such claims. Achieving institutional gender equity or broadening opportunities for women should not be a chance happening. Institutions need to spell out their targets in this area, the resources deployed, and the admission procedures implemented. However, universities in Kenya that make such claims do not operate within specific benchmarks that can show the extent to which the claims are true. Institutions operating without benchmarks especially in an era of 'commercialisation' may actually be masking tendencies towards exclusion that remain undetected.

Below, an analysis is made of how these three issues manifest themselves in Kenya's private universities. The analysis is based on the conceptualisation that promoting equity in private universities is an important imperative for the institutions to be socially responsive. It is also an important aspect in measuring the quality of programmes at the institutions, an aspect that private universities and programmes in Kenya have laid claims to promoting.

### **Private Universities and the Expansion of Women's Opportunities in Kenya**

The expansion of opportunities is analysed here with respect to two indicators. The first indicator concerns the number of female students at private universi-

ties. The second is the potential of the academic programmes to increase the transition of students to the labour market, which in turn is a mark of the quality of the programmes. Private universities and their programmes in Kenya claim to have made progress with respect to these two indicators. With the privatisation and internationalisation of higher education, private universities are increasingly taking a higher percentage of net university enrolments. They therefore act as key conveyor belts between higher educational institutions and opportunities for formal employment. The issue of expanding women's opportunities cannot therefore be divorced from the functional characteristics of these institutions.

In Kenya, the operation of public universities with regard to increasing access was identified as a major indicator of their inefficiency. The policy decision to allow the operation of private universities was partly justified on this ground. The expectation of the government was that self-financing, private universities would operate in a manner that broadened access to university education while reducing social inequities that had been exacerbated by solely public provision. Private universities have embraced this vision, often claiming to address gender inequalities in access by opening up more opportunities. The major concern here is the extent to which private higher education addresses issues like inequitable access that have in the past characterised public institutions. The gains that have been made in primary and secondary schooling in terms of increased female enrolments need to be harnessed by a higher education system that defines gender equality as a core responsibility.

Private universities have been in operation in Kenya for over a decade. Although their specific contributions to increasing the number of women as students and as employees are inconclusive, available evidence shows regressing trends in key indicators. The campaigns for women's empowerment through increased access to education and the labour market have not changed the situation much. Despite women comprising slightly over 50 per cent of Kenya's population, the share of women participating in sectors that require formal educational qualifications has stagnated or declined over the last decade. The share of women engaged in subsistence and smallholder agricultural production has remained at about 70 per cent in the same period (Republic of Kenya 2004). However, revenues from agriculture plummeted during this time. This has affected the majority of women who depend on revenue from agriculture to pay for the education of their daughters. The composition of women in the rural agricultural workforce shows that the number of women moving from the rural informal sector to the modern wage economy has not been significant. The percentage of women employed in the modern wage sector, for example,

was 29.3 per cent in 1998. By 2003, this had declined slightly to 29.8 per cent (Kenya Economic Surveys 1998 and 2003). The fall in income from agricultural production where most women work indicates a decreasing capacity for women to generate the money that is critical to supporting girls' schooling, especially in the rural areas. The continued stagnation of the percentage of women employed in the modern wage sector raises suspicions about the claims of private universities to increase access of women as students and as workers.

More recently, the Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) has shown that between 1993 and 2003, Kenya regressed in key women empowerment indicators by negative points (-28) – the only country in the East African region that registered such a decrease, as Uganda and Tanzania increased by 125 per cent and 18 per cent respectively (Unterhalter et al. 2004). The GEEI has been developed to assess women's access to education, their retention, and the possible impact that the schooling experience has on their future in terms of health and income. Using this measure, it is possible to show not only the quantitative increase in the number of female students, but also to gauge the extent to which school cultures have been made more gender responsive so as to have had an effect on women's achievement levels and future incomes. The above statistics point to some dissonance between the campaigns for gender equality and women's empowerment and actual accomplishments, and more specifically the claims that have been made by private universities. In a sense, if the percentage of women moving to formal wage employment has remained static over the last decade, and key indicators of women empowerment have regressed, then it is reasonable to conclude that initiatives in this area have occasioned more exclusion than inclusion. However, this trend has remained obscure due to a policy environment that measures achievement in terms of simple indicators of access.

Since education, especially higher education, is critical in increasing individual chances for formal employment and a rise in incomes, it is important that the role of private universities in this area be analysed. In Kenya, like most of Africa, current trends in higher education entail the privatisation of public universities and the licensing of private university institutions. Private universities have claimed to be achieving equity in enrolments. They also claim to offer high quality market-driven courses, with the result that most of their graduates are employed at graduation or soon thereafter. Private universities and programmes therefore cite gender equity as one of their strong operational characteristics. Most private universities started operating in Kenya from the 1980s, a time when the pressure for women's increased access to education was strong. There has also been excess demand for higher education by women from all social backgrounds. The claims of the private universities should there-

fore translate into an increased access of female students who qualify for university, a greater percentage of women who enter formal wage employment, and an increase in women's incomes.

This expectation is not unreasonable. Increasingly as the world embraces private higher education as an alternative to public provision, there are policy concerns that such privatisation should simultaneously address equity concerns with respect to the social background and gender of their students. The 1998 UNESCO Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century sees greater access to higher education as increasing individual student capacities. The Declaration also frames policies that enhance the access of women and other underprovided groups to higher education as important yardsticks that define the quality and social responsiveness of the institutions. Even when they have been set up as private commercial concerns, private universities need therefore to develop benchmarks that define their commitment to broadening access and to the empowerment of women as a matter of social responsibility.

If private universities claim to address the gender issue more proactively, what are some of the policies and benchmarks they have in place? What share of qualifying female students is admitted to private universities and programmes? Have private universities and programmes gendered their institutional environments to the extent that women as students are given equal opportunities to achieve? Why do indicators for women's empowerment continue to regress despite the rhetoric from institutions and groups? Is it the case that underneath all these claims there are silent exclusion dynamics that hold women back?

### **Aspects of Women's Exclusion at Kenya's Private Universities and Programmes**

Private universities came onto the Kenyan higher education scene officially from 1989, when the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) accredited The University of East Africa, Baraton (UEAB), and the United States International University (USIU), to operate as such. Currently there are seventeen private universities in Kenya, six accredited, six registered and five operating based on letters of interim authority. The six public universities also have started admitting privately sponsored students who pay full tuition fees as a way of generating operating revenues. In order to accommodate the growing number of fee-paying students, public universities have capped the number of students on government sponsorship to 10,000 annually. There are also a few students enrolled in other degree-awarding institutions such as the African Virtual University (AVU). In general, the total number enrolled as private students at Ken-

yan universities is higher than those on public or government scholarships (Oanda, Fatuma and Wesonga 2006).

The increased enrolment may not imply the universities are responding to critical equity issues in higher education such as gender. An analysis of the various components that constitute an institution's culture is pertinent to make conclusions on the extent the operations of private universities have integrated a sustainable vision of gender and social equity. It will also uncover any subtle dynamics through which the institutions operate to deepen the exclusion of women as students and later as workers. This analysis is based on the implied social responsibility of higher education institutions. Universities committed to women/gender empowerment should therefore have mechanisms and policies in place to ensure not only those more qualified women get in, but also that institutional cultures are made gender responsive to facilitate their academic achievement. Based on these premises, the remaining part of this article discusses some of the processes operating in private universities ostensibly on behalf of women, but that silently contribute to deepening their exclusion as students and as future workers. These indicators are the dynamics of access and transition to employment, the missions of the universities, the nature of curricula, and the accreditation process of private universities.

#### ***(a) Dynamics of access***

What percentage of qualifying female students gain access to private universities and programmes in Kenya? What mechanisms do the institutions have in place to broaden access to female students?

Since their establishment, private universities have, as noted, claimed that one of their strengths is their contribution to gender equity in higher education as their percentage of female students has always been higher than male students. This is true. Between the 1997/98 and 2003/2004 academic years, female enrolment in all the private universities averaged 53.4 per cent (CBS 2004). The figure for public universities averaged 30.8 per cent in the same period (CBS 2004). Based on the statistics, one obviously concludes that the private universities were more responsive to gender equity imperatives. Statistics can however mask the reality of the total situation. To unravel this issue, one needs to look at the annual population of female students who qualify for university and the dynamics through which female students have come to constitute a higher percentage of students in private universities.

Over the years, the number of female candidates who qualify for university in Kenya has been increasing. Female students accounted for an average of 46 per cent out of an average of 200,000 students who have been sitting for the Form Four university qualifying examination between the years 2001 to 2004

(Kenya National Examination Council). The public universities have capped their intake to 10,000 students per year, and this figure translates into about 3,500 female students (33 per cent). The combined absolute intake of students to private universities has averaged 7,000 in the last four years, about 4,000 of whom are female (53.4 per cent). However, not all of these women are from the cohort that seeks transition from high school to university. Some are adult working students seeking opportunities for continuing education. Since they have the capacity to pay, they are more attractive to institutions that have been established with profit as their key motive. The public universities also admit more female students under the private degree programmes.

The critical aspect in the statistics above is the ratio of female students that are admitted annually to private universities as a percentage of qualifying students. First, it has to be pointed out that with an annual enrolment of about 7,000 students, private universities constitute a small percentage of university enrolments in Kenya. According to statistics from the public universities Joint Admissions Board (JAB), public universities admit about 20 per cent of students who qualify for university, while the private universities admit about 6 per cent (JAB Statistics for various years). Hence, about 74 per cent of students from high school who obtain university entry scores are not actually placed. The capacity of private universities to accommodate these students is not only low, but the share of female students who are admitted to these institutions is negligible.

What this means then is that despite the rhetoric, the numbers of qualified female students straight from high school who do not access either public or private university education in Kenya are in the majority. Their situation has been made worse by the focus of the private universities and programmes on working students who are able to pay fees. This is where the nexus between private universities and the new frontiers of exclusion comes in. As traditionally understood, social inequities and exclusion are captured at the point of access. Institutions that can demonstrate that they have more members of the perceived excluded group can say that they are operating in a manner that promotes tendencies towards inclusion and diversity. In Kenya, however, private universities and programmes have opened new frontiers of exclusion in two respects. By courting more female students based on their ability to pay, they end up enhancing the position of women who are already at an advantage, and exclude young female students from school to whom higher education is the only promising avenue to income and empowerment. This kind of empowerment is vertical, sometimes benefiting women who have always been there, instead of moving horizontally to reach a new generation of women. Secondly, privatisation becomes a new frontier of exclusion for women to the extent that

the percentage of female students involved here is small compared to the total number of female students in need of university education. Insisting on their superior female enrolment as a core strength is in this sense deceptive. What the private universities have achieved is parity in enrolments, not equity.

Private universities could back their claim to broadening the access of women if they profiled their students based on gender, region and socioeconomic status, and also operated within certain benchmarks. Data on these issues do not however exist, either for the private universities or the private programmes of public universities. It is true that there are slightly more female students enrolled in the private universities and programmes. However, data are not available to allow conclusions about the contribution of this situation to broadening opportunities for women. One can speculate that since the private universities and programmes peg their admissions based on a student's ability to pay, female students, especially from poor rural backgrounds may not be accessing these opportunities. The restricted access of female students from Kenya to private universities is accentuated by the fact that the universities admit students from outside the country. This means that the quota of Kenyan female students is lower than the statistics at face value project.

Granted that female students constitute a higher percentage of students in private universities and programmes, my research into this area indicates that it is not a consequence of any proactive institutional policies. None of the private universities has in place a gender and equity policy governing the admission of students. Female students happen to enrol at these institutions for two reasons. First, most private universities offer a humanities-based curriculum that is more in line with the 'traditional feminine curriculum'. In so doing, private universities work against the integration of more women into the professions. As will be argued shortly, this is another new frontier of exclusion. Second, is the fact that female students happen to be the majority who are left out through the rigid admission policies to public universities. For example, the KCSE results for 2005 show that out of 68,030 students who qualified for university, 432 boys scored an A grade compared to 179 girls. Grade A students get automatic admission to public universities and professional courses of their choice. This compares to 14,539 boys and 10,823 girls who scored a grade C+, which does not qualify a student at university for government sponsorship. The volume of female students who qualify for university increases as grades tend towards the cohort that fails to obtain government sponsorship, and this fact partly explains their high number in private universities. This is also true for the private programmes of public universities where female students are almost on a par with males.

Operating without any equity policies, private universities cannot claim to be enhancing women's opportunities in higher education. Private universities and programmes function on a commercial basis and have no formal mechanisms to address the issue of equity in admissions. The mission of the private universities is first and foremost commercial, and claims to any form of equity should be read in perspective. Knowing that it is more fashionable to lay claim to gender equity, private universities are using this principle to tap the resources from wealthier families whose children did not qualify for state support at public universities – a majority of whom happen to be female. It is therefore insincere for the institutions and programmes to seek public approval on this score as it almost amounts to a form of public deception. Logic demonstrates that only rich families can afford to register their daughters in these institutions and programmes. The few who belong to the 'female majority' who are admitted to private universities are paying more to attain higher education and enhance the status of the institutions. By popularising their programmes on a narrowly conceived gender equity perspective, private universities and programmes are contributing to gender inequities in terms of human capital endowment. They cause this by channelling women to academic and professional courses that do not give them an edge in the labour market (in terms of both the relative perception of the value of knowledge and of wage structures).

A related issue to access is that of transition to work. As noted, despite the perceived increase in the number of female students accessing higher education in Kenya, their ratio in the labour market has remained unchanged for the last decade. Private universities have made claims to the effect that since their programmes focus on skills that are in high demand in the labour market, most of their students, who happen to be female, enter employment faster. There are no statistics to back up this claim, and most of the information is at best derived from proxy indicators. A presentation of alumni, for example, and a collaborative arrangement with industry for purposes of industrial attachment for students in the case of USIU, are used as evidence to back up this claim. Caution should however be exercised here. If there were high transition rates from university to employment, the composition of the labour markets would have been drastically changed in the last decade. Statistics still portray a general lack of opportunity in the labour markets, even for those women with college degrees. As noted, the percentage of women in the labour force has stagnated at 29 per cent for the last decade. Even this percentage sometimes tends towards regression. About 70 per cent of these women fall within the lower income bracket (CBS 2004). This is evidence of the under-employment of women with college-level education.

The stagnation in the percentage of women in the labour force may however point to the restricted entry of women graduating from college. The statistics provided by private universities and programmes may indicate more the changed profile of university students that has tended towards those that are working. At Kenyatta University for example, about 65 per cent of all private students, half of whom happen to be women, are serving teachers. The collaborative arrangement between USIU and industry means that a majority of firms send their workers there for further education. This scenario does not therefore represent a new group of women joining the workforce. There is not a significant number of new women joining the labour force but perhaps an improvement in the income of those already working.

***(b) Mission statements and visions of private universities and programmes***

The mission statements and visions of institutions are important as they reflect what universities are doing and how they are doing it. They define the core values and mandates of institutions and suggest an institutional commitment to achieve the aspirations of the societies in which they are located. The key indicators that have tended to be included in the mission statements and visions of institutions are social equity, quality and relevance. The conceptualisation of these indicators has also been broadened in recent years to ensure they are not narrowly conceived in a manner that results in exclusion processes. Social equity in particular emphasises that institutions acknowledge the limitations that individuals and social groups face because of deprivations that are occasioned by their gender and social background. Quality and relevance entail qualitative measurements that include diversity and the extent of inclusion with respect to curricular experiences and responsiveness to a broad array of social problems.

The issue of women and gender globally has become integral to the work and focus of institutions. While some institutions have subsumed the concern for these issues under quality and equity, it is important that such commitment be spelt out more explicitly so that all the practices of the institutions are carried out with a gender perspective.

An analysis of the mission statements and the visions of the private universities in Kenya reveals that none of the institutions has integrated a broad commitment to promoting social equity and none explicitly mentions gender or women in their mandates. The only technical exception to this is the Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology. Kiriri is however a university for the future as it is still establishing itself and its student population is small. The real concern is what is happening in the large private universities and

programmes that are already chartered. Student populations here are large, such that they can make either a positive or a negative impact on the issues of gender depending on how they define their mandate and how they actually operate.

The four chartered private universities that are important in this respect are The United States International University (USIU), the Catholic University of East Africa (CUEA), Daystar University and University of East Africa, Baraton (UEAB). These institutions account for about 90 per cent of students at private universities in Kenya. With the exception of USIU, the other three universities were established by Christian organisations. Their mission statements and visions emphasise this religious orientation. None of the universities has included reference to social equity, women or gender as part of their objectives in any way. The focus of the institutions is to offer education based on certain Christian principles to the youth, and this is emphasised as part of their mission statements, visions and objectives. To the extent that the institutions' operations are governed by these statements, some forms of exclusion, based on religion, gender and age, are bound to occur.

USIU on the other hand is the largest of the private universities in terms of volume of students and infrastructure. Its mission emphasises the training of a community of learners and provides them with a high quality broad-based education that fosters global understanding and cooperation. USIU has a proviso that spells its commitment as an equal opportunity institution, but it is not clear why a firm commitment specifically to women and gender equity is not included as part of the institutional vision. This is all the more puzzling given the origin of USIU in the United States where issues of equity and empowerment of women are part of the ingrained cultures of higher education. This issue is critical as private universities may be operating using different benchmarks depending on the countries and context of their operation. Hence, institutions originating from the developed world may be operating based on a strict equity and gender criteria in their home countries but may discard these criteria once they operate in the developing countries.

Private universities are not the exception in this regard, however. The private programmes of public universities that now enrol slightly more students compared to those on public sponsorship operate without any equity standards. Like the private universities, the aim of the private programmes of the public universities is to generate money. Operating with a singular commercial objective in a society where social inequities are so pronounced is counter-productive both to the commercial objective of the institutions and to the development of those societies. By focusing on profits, and defining their man-

dates narrowly, the universities and programmes exclude those who are more deserving of higher education – the majority of whom happen to be women.

**(c) *The nature of curricula***

Curriculum reform in Kenya's education system has been problematic and tardy. The major problem in Kenya's education system as regards women's education has been their low participation and achievement in mathematics and science subjects. This has had a negative impact on the percentage of women joining well-remunerated professions in the sciences and information technology. One reason for this situation has been the masculine culture that pervades professions and academic disciplines considered non-traditional for women. Institutions claiming to be sensitive to issues of women and gender should not focus on the narrow issues of access, but equally address such masculine cultures implicit in the academic disciplines, and the general environment of the institutions. Increasing the percentage of women in science and technology courses without reforming curricula will not therefore have the desired effect. Studies in the past have focused on counting women's participation rates as a measure of gender responsiveness. Institutions have tended to embrace this aspect in order to appear academically 'trendy'. This leaves the masculine culture still dominant in the professional disciplines and strongly inhibits the capacity of women to perform both as students and as workers. Another way of looking at this is that institutions that profess gender responsiveness in terms of admitting more women to these academic disciplines without reforming the masculine aspects of the curriculum are engaged in tokenism and exclusion at the same time.

The curricula of private universities and programmes in Kenya have been influenced by two factors. One has been the concern to offer courses that are perceived to be market-driven. These courses include Commerce, Business Administration and Computer Sciences. These courses focus on vocational skills that are in demand in the market and therefore claim to enable graduates to secure jobs within a short period of their graduation. The second factor has been the need to offer courses that are cheap to mount. This has led private universities to concentrate on humanities and business studies, and to refrain from offering core science and technology courses.

The focus on market-driven courses tends to exclude value-adding courses such as Gender and Women studies in the curricula of the institutions. Yet the value-adding courses are critical in changing attitudes and the institutional culture that marginalises women as students, staff and in terms of epistemological representation. Mounting courses based on the cheap cost of running them also continues to exclude the few women who access these institutions in

order to be able to seek high paying jobs that can improve their income and life chances dramatically. The current situation in Kenya's private university education sector is that women are being admitted to traditionally feminine disciplines in the humanities that do not attract high remuneration on the job market. The emphasis on market-driven courses ends up to the advantage of men, as women have traditionally been marginal as both students and workers in these areas. In a few instances, private universities have offered courses in information technology, but the level of skills targeted is low.

The most crucial issue is, however, the transformation of curricula in both the Humanities and Sciences to include feminine experiences or to be gender neutral. No such process is underway in both the public and private universities in Kenya. Both the culture and the practice of private higher education is indicted by this omission. By focusing on the commercial logic of market-driven programmes, the conceptualisation of the relevance of such programmes is reduced to technical components. This leads to a situation where academic institutions claim to focus on women, while implicitly the curricula and academic cultures of the institutions ensure that women are excluded by courses that are not inclusive and gender-friendly. Curricular approaches need to acknowledge women and gender, and avoid a gender bias in both the content and presentation of the curriculum by recognising the alternative experiences brought, especially to science disciplines, by women. Institutions can do this by developing gender-friendly benchmarks in such areas as inclusive teaching methods, classroom interaction, inclusive content, language use and images.

***(d) The accreditation requirements for private universities and programmes***

Accreditation bodies are important in ensuring that private universities integrate the country's development discourse into their operation. The Commission for Higher Education in Kenya (CHE) has been tasked with this responsibility. As already mentioned, the issue of restricted opportunities for women is part of Kenya's development challenge. Since higher education institutions are critical in any country's development, it is expected that certain benchmarks be developed that could be used to evaluate the extent to which the institutions are contributing to meeting these challenges.

CHE has developed guidelines that private universities have to satisfy before they are chartered. The guidelines do not however include any requirement that the institutions develop equity profiles that are going to guide their operations. Benchmarking for equity and diversity is almost an accepted practice for both private firms and government departments globally. Higher education institutions should not be left out. The spread of the private university

phenomenon should be accompanied by deliberate efforts to change cultures and attitudes, both as a show of institutional commitment to socially responsible knowledge practices, and as a contribution to solving the development problematic of developing countries.

CHE's accreditation process focuses on technical inputs and omits the qualitative life of the institutions and course content that so much exclude women. Gendering the admission of students and the teaching-learning process is not a requirement. Insisting that the institutions develop equity profiles as an aspect of the accreditation process would contribute towards gendering the academic disciplines and, subsequently, the labour market.

### **Conclusion**

Private universities and programmes are increasing their share of university students in Kenya. In this respect, they can act as an avenue for social transformation by critically expanding women's opportunities beyond gender blind statistics to gendering the academic cultures and disciplines in higher education. Contrary to the claims of private universities and programmes, women do not constitute the critical majority at higher education institutions. The narrow focus of the private universities on the few female students from rich backgrounds who are able to pay is making the quest to broaden access to universities to a higher number of women a forgotten agenda.

The institutions also do not seem to conceptualise the issue of gender equity beyond blind statistics. The few women who are admitted to the institutions are confronted with gendered cultures that inhibit the students' level of achievement and limit their entry to high-income professional careers. Private universities in this respect have not been socially responsive. Their curricula tend towards the humanities and the academic disciplines are still presented in a manner that leads to the theoretical and epistemological exclusion of the female gender. The agenda of gendering the disciplines and operationalising mechanisms to admit more women into the professions is missing from the missions and visions of these institutions.

Access policies need to move beyond numbers to a focus on under-represented groups. Academic disciplines need to be gendered as a way of influencing change in the labour market. More importantly, institutions that lay claim to gender responsiveness need to operate within specified benchmarks and profiles. This does not undermine the autonomy of the institutions as private commercial entities. It is a long-term investment in the development of the female human capital on which the future of the institutions in large part depends.

## References

- Central Bureau of Statistics, Kenya, 2004, *Economic Survey*, Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Cornia, G. A., Jolly, R., and Stewart, F., 1989, *Adjustment with a Human Face: Protecting the Vulnerable and Promoting Growth*, UNICEF, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Douglass, John, A., 2005, 'All Globalization is Local: Countervailing Forces and the Influence on Higher Education Markets', *Research and Occasional Paper Series*, Center for Studies in Higher Education, Berkeley: University of California.
- Joint Admissions Board (JAB), '2000–2004 Admission to Public Universities Statistics', Nairobi.
- Kenya National Examination Council, 2005, 'Analysis of the 2003 and 2004 Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Examination Results', [www.examsCouncil.or.ke/results](http://www.examsCouncil.or.ke/results).
- Kiamba, C., 2003, 'The Experience of Privately Sponsored Students and Other Income Generating Activities at the University of Nairobi', Case study prepared for the Regional Training conference on 'Improving Tertiary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa; Things that *Work!*', Accra, September, 23-25.
- Oanda, I.O, Fatuma, C., and Wesonga, D., 2006, 'The Implications of Privatization and Private Higher Education on Access, Equity and Knowledge Production in Kenya', Research Report Submitted to CODESRIA, Higher Education Transformations in Africa Programme, Dakar, Senegal.
- Republic of Kenya, 1998, *Kenya Economic Survey*, Nairobi: Government Printer.
- Republic of Kenya, 2004, 'Kenya Review and Appraisal; Final Report on the Implementation of Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing +10), 1994-2004', Nairobi.
- Samoff, J, and Bidemi, C., 2003, *From Manpower Planning to the Knowledge Era: World Bank Policies on Higher Education in Africa*, UNESCO Forum occasional paper series, No. 2, Stanford University.
- Teffera, D., and Altbach, Philip, 2004, 'African Higher Education: Challenges for the 21st Century', *Higher Education* 47: 21-50.
- Teffera, D., 2005, 'Ethiopia: The Current Landscape', *International Higher Education*, The Boston College Center for International Higher Education, 40: 9-10, summer.
- UNESCO, 1998, *World Declaration on Higher Education in the 21st Century: Vision and Action, and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education*, Paris: UNESCO.
- Unterhalter, E., et al., 2004, *Scaling up Girls' Education: Towards a Scorecard on Girls Education in the Commonwealth*, <http://kl.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efs/GenderEduDev/>
- United States International University (USIU), 2005, 'Data Elements (DE) to Support the Capacity and Preparatory Review Report', Nairobi: USIU.

